

THE PLACE OF THE PERSONAL ESTIMATE IN THE
CRITICAL THEORIES OF CERTAIN NINETEENTH-
CENTURY CRITICS

by

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The thesis covers the critical theories of eight English critics of the nineteenth century: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Arnold, Pater, and Wilde. I have first defined the personal estimate as "that estimate of art in which the nature of the critic as an individual man has influenced his judgment." I recognize that all criticism must have something of the personal estimate in it, but the true critic will, as much as possible, cleanse his criticism of it in order to reveal the nature of the work of art as in itself it really is. I have then analyzed the theories of Wordsworth and Coleridge in order to indicate that the basis on which they established Romantic criticism is one of personal emotion - first in the poet, and then in the reader - and personal pleasure. In the theories of Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey I have traced the development of impressionism in Romantic criticism, and the degree to which that impressionism leads these three men to a personal estimate of literature. In Arnold's theories I have analyzed his concept of poetry as a criticism of life, and indicated the way in which that concept leads Arnold to a recognition that although the critic must first feel the emotional effects of poetry, his ultimate aim must be to see the object as in itself it really is. I have then turned to the theories of Pater and suggested that although

he bases his theories on impressions he recognizes that the experiencing of impressions alone is not the critic's sole aim: the critic must contemplate his impressions in order to arrive at a perception of the essence of a work, and, in the case of a great work of art, a perception of the ideals of life which it embodies. And I have last considered the theories of Wilde who also builds on impressions, but believes the end of criticism to be - like poetry itself - the communication of one man's emotional response, in this case the critic's response to a work of art: whether or not that response represents a balanced appreciation of the work itself does not matter.

From the survey of the theories of these eight men I have arrived at the conclusion that all follow the right path when they recognize the importance of the personal response in criticism. Some, however, lose sight of their duty as critics when they allow their own experience of life to colour their response and offer a purely personal estimate of a work as criticism. The greatest of the eight - Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Arnold - recognize that in criticism we must see the poet's poem and not our own. Only by doing so can we arrive at a real estimate.

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The Personal Estimate

Of all the tasks which man undertakes in life there is probably none more rewarding though more difficult than that of perceiving clearly and appreciating fully the true nature of poetry. Poetry at its greatest offers " . . . the echo of a great soul,"¹ and he who would hear that echo in all its richness, all its depth, all its power, must exert himself as for no experience other than that of communion with God. In his Fifth Ennead Plotinus describes the state of being which man must achieve before he can know the mystical awareness of God, the Supreme, the One, the First:

. . . let the soul that is not unworthy of the vision contemplate the Great Soul; freed from deceit and every witchery and collected into calm. Calmed be the body for it in that hour and the tumult of the flesh, ay, all that is about it calm; calm be the earth, the sea, the air, and let heaven itself be still. Then let it feel how into that silent heaven the Great Soul floweth in.²

Although Plotinus speaks here of the union with God, the state of being which he describes is also that which man must achieve before he can know full union with the poet. Poetry has much in common with religious faith: it " . . . is to be thought of as a life-giving power, as a radiance of light illuminating all existence, as an energy stimulating all action, as a spirit of beauty giving greatness

1 Longinus, On the Sublime, IX, 2, transl. W. Rhys Roberts, Cambridge University Press, 1899, p. 61.

2 The Essence of Plotinus: Extracts from the Six Enneads and Porphyry's Life of Plotinus, transl. Stephen MacKenna, ed., Grace H. Turnbull, Oxford University Press, 1934, p. 155.

to all repose."¹ To know the power, radiance, energy, and beauty of poetry man must prepare himself as he does to know God. He must achieve the same calmness of the flesh and the spirit, and he must free himself from every deceit and every witchery. When he achieves this state of tranquillity and cleanliness of being, this calm receptivity of spirit, then, and then only, can he hope to know the ecstasy of that union in which the soul of the poet becomes one with his.

To experience the full effect of poetry man must rise above anything within him that may shadow the illumination with which the poem can brighten his being, and stand, not as a man in the dark forest of the actual world, but as Man on the high, clear plane of reality. However, it is a regrettable but undeniable fact that the achieving of this plane is an unattainable ideal. All men are limited beings, and their limitations - of the flesh, the heart, the mind, the spirit - must keep them from rising completely out of themselves, and so from perceiving the true nature of poetry; all that men can achieve is, at best, an imperfect perception. Nevertheless, if we are willing to make the great effort necessary to achieve the fullest possible perception we can come close to that true nature, that essence, even though we can never know it fully.

The task of the critic of literature is, above all else, to perceive and reveal that essence of poetry as clearly as he can. All men who seek the illumination of poetry must try to perceive it, but the

¹ Bailey, John Cann, Poets and Poetry, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1911, p. 16.

critic must make doubly certain that he has come to it as close as possible. He must keep ever in mind that he holds the place of a guide in the world of literature: other men will listen to him, and some will heed what he says. To the extent that he allows his own limitations as a man to colour his interpretation and estimate of a poem he fails those men who have placed their trust in him.

The personal estimate in criticism is nothing more than that estimate of art in which the nature of the critic as an individual man has influenced his judgment. All criticism has something of the personal estimate in it. The response to art must be personal: each of us must establish his own relationship with the poet, the painter, the sculptor, the composer. When I hear Mozart's Jupiter I listen as an individual being, not as mankind. All art comes from the heart of a man and goes to the heart of a man. Each of us must make his own response to the artist's communication. However, we must keep in mind that the artist has something to tell us, and if we hope to know what that something is we must be prepared to submit fully to his suggestions. He will have made these as clear as he possibly can, but since art deals in the intangible emotions of humanity these suggestions cannot have the hard clarity of scientific fact. They do, however, have sufficient clarity that a man of sensibility and intelligence can follow their lead and eventually know the artist's intention. Edna St. Vincent Millay has left us a little epitaph:

Heap not on this mound
Roses that she loved so well;
Why bewilder her with roses,
That she cannot smell?
She is happy where she lies
With the dust upon her eyes.

On the surface these words reveal no more than that the poet does not wish roses strewn on the grave of her friend; roses would bewilder that friend because she cannot smell them; she is happier with the dust of the grave in her eyes. On the surface the words say that much. Beneath the surface, however, the suggest much more, and to know fully what Edna St. Vincent Millay wants us to know we must accept their suggestions and contemplate them until we experience the emotions which the poet wishes us to experience. With contemplation we come to see that the dead friend was one who loved life: in life roses were a joy to her; she drank deeply of their beauty, their fragrance. Now that she is dead and can no longer know the riches of a rose we are but merciful if we refrain from disturbing her rest with the shadows of a beauty she can no longer know. Let the kindly dust of the grave blind her; she is happier blind. An awareness of these suggestions in the poem, these implications, is absolutely necessary if we are to appreciate the poem fully. Each of us must make his own effort to follow these suggestions and so to know the emotional response which the poet intends him to know. We must constantly be alert, however, to the danger of allowing our individual natures to disturb the effect of the poet's suggestions on our beings. The poet speaks to each of us as an individual man, but he conveys something which he wants all men to know, and all men can come close to knowing it if they will rise above their personal limitations and stand as Everyman. They must achieve a state akin to the Plotinian calmness; they must forget their partisan interests; they must recognize that much in their natures does not

have its counterpart in the poet's nature, and must, therefore, be submerged for the moment. If they can do these things, then, and then only, they can follow the poet's suggestions and grasp what the poet has to offer. If they cannot do these things their judgment of poetry will remain a personal estimate.

The critic must rise above interests of party, class, colour, and creed. If he is a man of tolerance and wisdom he can do so. He does not have to believe as Milton believes to appreciate Paradise Lost, but he does have to accept Milton's beliefs while reading the poem. If he rejects it because his beliefs are not Milton's he indulges in a personal estimate. He is free to reject it if he finds that it fails as a poem - if it fails to move him to an acceptance of what Milton has to offer - but he is not free to reject it because it does not agree with his own biases or prejudices. He must not base his criticism of the poem on these.

He must rise, too, above his own nature as an individual man. Criticism which conveys no more than the response of an individual man without regard for the validity of that response represents an estimate fully as personal as that coloured by interests of party, class, colour, and creed. When the critic " . . . isolates the work with himself, considers it in its form and pressure as printed on him,¹ and attempts no judgment of the validity of its effect on him he is again indulging in a personal estimate. Merely because as Pater looks at the Mona Lisa his fancy brings to him suggestions of the vampire, divers in deep seas, Leda, and Saint Anne, he is not at

1 Saintsbury, George, A History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe, New York, Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1906, vol. 3, p. 195.

liberty, as a critic, to offer these as values in da Vinci's painting. They are values only if he is sure that these suggestions lie within the painting itself, and not within his own fancy. The critic must constantly keep in mind that his own response to art is but a means to an end, that of seeing the artist's work as in itself it really is. He must not allow his over-active fancy to read into the work matter which does not already lie there. When he does let it do so he merely reveals that he has not achieved the calm receptivity necessary to a perception of the artist's intention. There is no limit to the depths of great art, and the critic is free, even obliged, to peer into those depths. He is not free, however, to offer as the artist's riches the riches of his own fancy. When he does so he offers not a real, but a personal estimate, and such an estimate can be most dangerous in criticism if it blinds the eyes of others to what the poet has sought to express.

The great problem facing the critic is simply this: poetry appeals to the human heart, and makes its effect through an intense excitement of the human emotions, but the critic must endeavour to achieve the balance necessary to determine whether or not his emotional response is in keeping with the poet's suggestions. And balance where the emotions are concerned is very difficult.

The question of a just personal response to art is not one which suddenly appears in the nineteenth century in English criticism. It received much attention in the eighteenth century, and even in the seventeenth in the writings of Bacon and Hobbes (although here as part of investigations into the general nature of knowledge). In The Great

Instauration, for example, Bacon writes:

. . . the mind when it receives impressions of objects through the sense, cannot be trusted to report them truly, but in forming its notions mixes up its own nature with the nature of things.¹

He recognizes that each man's nature responds in a unique way to the new matter acquired through the senses. Our experience of sounds, sights, tastes, and smells is inevitably relative to our state of being; even so is our experience of the sounds and images of poetry.

In the Leviathan Hobbes stresses that we have no control over the associations which follow upon our perception of anything:

All fancies are motions within us, relics of those made in the sense; and those motions that immediately succeeded one another in the sense, continue also together after sense; insomuch as the former coming again to take place, and be predominant, the latter followeth, by coherence of the matter moved, in such manner as water upon a plane table is drawn which way any one part of it is guided by the finger. But because in sense, to one and the same thing perceived, sometimes one thing, sometimes another succeedeth, it comes to pass in time that in the imagining of anything there is no certainty what we shall imagine next; only this is certain, it shall be something that succeeded the same before, at one time or another.²

Our associations are personal, depending upon our past experience, and they will rise freely about our perceptions. The poet offers all of us the same image, but the response of each of us to that image will be unique because each of us will associate with it different ideas and emotions.

When we turn to literary criticism before 1800 we find three important developments leading to the nineteenth-century emphasis on the

1 Burt, Edwin A., ed., The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill, New York, Random House, 1939, p. 18.

2 Ibid., p. 137.

personal response. The first of these is the re-discovery of Longinus. Before the nineteenth century English criticism was, for the most part, a matter of testing literature by certain widely accepted laws. Drawing from Aristotle, Horace, and the Italian commentators on Aristotle, critics had determined a number of rules of poetry - the dramatic unities, type characterizations, the metres appropriate to the various forms of verse, the "imitation of the ancients" - and their great concern was not so much, did the work please?, as, had it the right to please? Did it accord with the rules?¹ In 1674, however, Boileau published in France a translation of a work on the nature of the sublime in literature, and from this date we can trace the development of a new attitude towards the function of criticism. The work was Longinus' On the Sublime. Although possibly written as early as the first century A. D., it offered what was a new concept of the critical activity for neo-classical France and England. Longinus stresses that the effect of great literature is not persuasion, but transport. By rousing our emotions to a keen intensity poetry elevates us, carries us irresistibly to " . . . the region of vastness and mystery."² It achieves its effect through an overwhelming stimulation of the entire human being.

At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer.³

1 Sherman, Stuart Pratt, Matthew Arnold, How to Know Him, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1917, p. 151.

2 Roberts, ed., Longinus on the Sublime, Introduction, p. 32.

3 Longinus, op. cit., I, 4, p. 43.

Now the transport which the sublime in literature can bring is an emotional experience, and must, therefore, be personal. Each of us must experience it in his own way. When we accept the sublime as an effect of poetry, therefore, we expose ourselves to the danger of personal estimates of literature. We can never be absolutely certain that the intense emotion which we feel in the presence of poetry is the result of the poet's own work, and not merely the result of some unique quality within ourselves responding to that work. Moreover, when the critic attempts to express his sense of the sublime he cannot avoid speaking in a markedly enthusiastic tone, speaking almost as a poet as he conveys his own response to sublimity, and there is a great danger than in his expression of delight in that sublimity he may lose sight of his obligation as a critic to ensure that what he feels about a poem is a valid response, available in kind to all men of equal sensibility and knowledge.

In the years between Boileau's translation and the coming of Wordsworth and Coleridge, Longinus' doctrine of the sublime played little part in English criticism. Pope does refer to it in the Essay on Criticism,¹ and reveals an awareness of the value of Longinus' teachings, but the concept of the sublime, and the enthusiastic appreciation of poetry to which it led, were not to become a dominant force in criticism until the rise of the nineteenth-century Romantics.

1 III, ll. 116-121.

Thee, bold Longinus! all the Nine inspire,
And bless their Critic with a Poet's fire.
An ardent Judge, who zealous in his trust,
With warmth gives sentence, yet is always just;
Whose own example strengthens all his laws;
And is himself that great Sublime he draws.

Then, however, they were to play a very considerable part.

The second development anticipating the nineteenth-century emphasis on the personal response was the rise of the eighteenth-century "School of Taste," a group which included men like David Hume, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Hugh Blair, and Archibald Allison. In general, the members of this school believed that taste in art is the capacity of man " . . . to relish and feel the beauties of the great masters "¹ It is a capacity grounded in his likes and dislikes. Through an intensive study of the great masters he can achieve "correctness" of taste, cultivating his own sensibility to the point where he naturally likes what he should like. He has then reached that state of development in which he intuitively perceives the beautiful in art. His appreciation of art remains personal, but since it is founded on "correct" taste it is also just, and it is the appreciation which all men of correct taste will know. Correct taste is not, therefore, a capricious thing, varying with the individual, but rather,

Its foundation is the same in all human minds. It is built upon sentiments and perceptions which belong to our nature, and which, in general, operate with the same uniformity as over other intellectual principles. When these sentiments are perverted by ignorance and prejudice, they are capable of being rectified by reason. Their sound and natural state is ultimately determined by comparing them with the general taste of mankind. Let men declaim as much as they please concerning the caprice and the uncertainty of taste, it is found, by experience, that there are beauties, which, if they be displayed in a proper light, have power to command lasting and general admiration. In every composition, what interests the imagination, and touches the heart, pleases all ages and nations. There is a certain string to which, when properly struck, the human heart is so

1 Reynolds, Sir Joshua, Fifteen Discourses Delivered in the Royal Academy, Discourse VI (1774), in Odell Shepard and Paul Spencer Wood, ed., English Prose and Poetry: 1660-1800, Boston, etc., Houghton Mifflin, 1934, p. 684.

made as to answer.¹

For this school, taste is both a personal and a universal faculty. Each man has it, and he has it in common with all other men. Correct taste, taste developed through a study of great art, can enable us to arrive at sound judgments, common and acceptable to all men of similarly correct taste. However, despite its uniformity in men of culture, taste remains a personal matter, and despite its "correctness," the response of the man of taste is a personal response.

The third development in literary criticism which must be mentioned is the rise of the Pre-Romantics. In the work of men like Young, the Wartons, and Hurd, we find the seeds of nineteenth-century Romanticism. We find these critics laying great stress on the power of poetry to move the hearts of men, rather than on the mere adherence to the rules of composition. In his Ode to Fancy (1746) Joseph Warton expresses their general feeling when he writes:

O queen of numbers, once again
Animate some chosen swain,
Who, fill'd with unexhausted fire,
May boldly smite the sounding lyre,
Who with some new, unequall'd song,
May rise above the rhyming throng,
O'er all our listening passions reign,
O'erwhelm our souls with joy and pain;
With terror shake, with pity move,
Rouse with revenge, or melt with love.
Oh, deign t' attend his evening walk,
With him in groves and grottoes talk;
Teach him to scorn with frigid art
Feebly to touch the unraptur'd heart;
Like lightning, let his mighty verse
The bosom's inmost foldings pierce;

1 Blair, Hugh, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (1783), Lecture I, quoted in Arthur Beatty, William Wordsworth, His Doctrine and Art, Madison, University of Wisconsin, 1927, pp. 39-40.

With native beauties win applause,
Beyond cold critics' studied laws.¹

We have here a clear recognition of poetry as a primarily emotive activity, and of the fact that to appreciate the power of poetry we must respond to its emotional stimulation. We have, in other words, a direct anticipation of Wordsworth and Coleridge: they, too, recognize that the emotional power of poetry is of far greater importance than "cold critics' studied laws," and that the true poet does "o'er all our listening passions reign , " and their recognition of this leads them to establish their critical theories upon an essentially personal basis. Because the poet speaks to the heart our response must come from the heart, and it must, therefore, be personal.

In such a work as Joseph Warton's Essay on Pope we find the result of this personal attitude towards poetry. Here we find a critic who recognizes Pope's greatness, but who cannot personally accept him as a poet of the very highest rank. Warton finds that his own response to Pope is not sufficiently intense to allow him to place Pope on the top rung, and he allows that response to guide him, even though in doing so he runs against the tide of his age.

Now we should note one thing about both the School of Taste and the Pre-Romantics. In the works of the men of these two groups we find clear anticipations of the Romantics' personal criticism. However, it is highly improbable that any of these men - Blair, Reynolds, the Wartons, Young, and the rest - fully appreciated what they were doing when

1 ll. 129-146.

they began laying stress on the personal response to art. They certainly had no suspicion that their work was to lead eventually to Wilde's purely personal estimate. All that we can say of them is that they felt that the criticism of art must be based on more than rigid rules, and that the critic must have a strong awareness of the emotional effect of a work of art before he can undertake a judgment of it. None of them, however, consciously advocates a purely personal estimate.

With the nineteenth century and the appearance of Wordsworth and Coleridge we come to the great age of the personal response in English literary criticism. In the critical theories of every one of the eight men whom I shall consider in this survey the personal response - personal emotions and personal pleasure - occupies a prominent place. Some of these men - like Arnold - see its potential dangers; others - like Wilde - accept it whole-heartedly. In the chapters which follow I shall try to indicate what place each of the eight allows it, and to what degree they permit it to pass into the cloudy regions of the personal estimate. In trying to determine that degree I take as an initial truth that criticism is more than " . . . a description of the critic's private sensibility."¹ No matter what else we may ask of a critic, we must surely demand first that he try to see as the poet has seen.

A perfect Judge will read each word of Wit
With the same spirit that its author writ²

1 Read, Herbert E., Wordsworth, London, Jonathan Cape, 1930, p. 15. *Italics mine.*

2 Pope, An Essay on Criticism, II, ll. 33-34.

II

The Essentially Personal Basis of Romantic Criticism: Words- worth and Coleridge

For any clear understanding of the place of the personal estimate in nineteenth-century criticism we must turn first to the poetics of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Here we find the base on which the impressionistic critics of the century were to erect the structure of their intensely personal concept of criticism. Despite the fact that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge advocated anything like " . . . the clouds of unchecked sensibility and unexamined interpretations . . . " ¹ which were later to pass for criticism, but, rather, recognized that the aim of any valid critical theory must be " . . . to enable the spectator to judge in the same spirit in which the Artist produced . . . , " ² they did offer a concept of poetry and a critical approach which underlay the highly personal criticism of later impressionists.

The whole of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetics rests firmly on what was for them an essential and obvious truth: poetry springs not from the functioning of a man's deliberative, rational powers, but from his emotional experience, and it directs itself primarily not to the stimulation of another man's deliberative powers, but to

¹ Richards, I. A., Coleridge on Imagination, London, K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1934, p. 230.

² Coleridge, S. T., On the Principles of Genial Criticism, (1814), ed., J. Shawcross, included in Shawcross, ed., Biographia Literaria, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1907, vol. 2, p. 222. Coleridge makes no mention of it, but a couplet in Pope's Essay on Criticism (II, ll. 33-34, which I have already quoted on p. 13) makes precisely the same point.

the rousing of a pleasurable state of excitement in that other man's emotional being.

. . . poetry must awaken some dominant emotion that . . . [will] flood sensation, metaphysical affirmation, and spiritual aspiration with radiance. At the moment when the chosen feeling thus illuminates one's entire being, then poetry performs its essential function.¹

For them, emotional excitement is the essence of poetry. The world of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton is not a world of the cool, logical intellect, but a world of strong, intensely experienced emotions: we do not turn to Othello for intellectual enrichment - although we may find such enrichment there - but for a pleasurable stimulation of our emotional beings.

The moment that we accept such a concept of poetry as an emotional activity we must accept also that criticism of that activity will necessarily be to a degree personal. We can criticize and evaluate works of the hands and the intellect by means of objective standards and tests. We can all agree on the flaw in the finish of a mahogany cabinet, or the fallacy in the logic of a philosopher's argument. We can agree because personal emotional responses play little or no part in our consideration of such works: we have the evidence of our senses or our intellects. When, however, we come to criticize and evaluate works which not only spring out of their creator's emotional response to life, but also aim directly at stimulating our emotions to a state of pleasurable excitement, we cannot depend wholly upon any such objective standards. Each of us must

1 Campbell, Oscar James, "Wordsworth's Conception of the Esthetic Experience," in Earl Leslie Griggs, ed., Wordsworth and Coleridge, Princeton University Press, 1939, p. 46.

tread his own path in criticizing and evaluating poetry because in each of us poetry will rouse different emotional responses.

Wordsworth and Coleridge recognized that poetry was a personal thing, and they recognized that the criticism of poetry must allow for the critic's personal response; but they recognized also that valid criticism must stand firmly on certain artistic principles. Criticism for them is more than a matter of personal impressionism, impressionism which may give a clearer indication of the nature of the critic's prejudices and whims than of the nature of the poem under consideration. It is not enough that the critic create a new work of art to express his own emotional response to a poem. For Wordsworth and Coleridge the critic's task lies not in the mere communication of his own impression of a work, but in the sensitive and disinterested analysis and evaluation of that work in terms of his impression. Criticism certainly allows for the personal impression, but it demands more.

[The critic's] . . . ability to enter into the spirit of works in literature must depend upon his feelings, his imagination and his understanding, that is upon his recipient, upon his creative or active and upon his judging powers, and upon the accuracy and compass of his knowledge, in fine upon all that makes up the moral and intellectual man.¹

The critic must not only feel: he must know, he must think, he must judge. Poetry rises in the heart and speaks to the heart, and much of the critic's worth will depend upon his capacity to feel, but, as Wordsworth and Coleridge both recognize, the true critic will be more than a man of sensibility: he will be a man of sufficient knowledge,

1 Wordsworth, William, "Upon Epitaphs" (2), (1810), in Nowell C. Smith, ed., Wordsworth's Literary Criticism, London, Henry Frowde, 1905, p. 116.

understanding, imagination, objectivity, and judgment to analyze and evaluate his own emotional reactions to poetry.

Despite the fact, however, that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge would agree with Oscar Wilde's concept of the critic as an artist creating new works of art out of his personal impressions of existent works, they did leave a theory of poetry and criticism which allows much room for the purely personal response. Turning first to Wordsworth, let us analyze this theory to see in what ways it leads to the personal estimate in criticism, and in what ways Wordsworth and Coleridge sought to prevent anarchy, the great danger to criticism when it bases its decisions on the personal estimate.

As we have already noted, the source of poetry for Wordsworth is emotional excitement. No matter how much thought, how much knowledge may appear in a poem, the source of that poem is the poet's experiencing of some intense emotion:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition gradually begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on¹

When we undertake the analysis of any poem, therefore, we are undertaking the study of a unique object. It is an object which owes its existence to a man's feelings, and since the poet, like all other men, can never feel quite the same about any object at more than one moment in time, he cannot - if he would - ever duplicate the moment of his

¹ Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 35.

creation of that poem. At a certain time in his life Milton was intensely moved by the heartless persecution of a religious community in Piedmont. Deep in the womb of his indignation was conceived a sonnet:

Avenge O Lord thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold,
Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old
When all our fathers worshiped stocks and stones,
Forget not¹

That sonnet is unique: no one but Milton could have written it; Milton himself could have written it at only one moment in his life. And the reason that it must remain unique is that no one can ever again feel as Milton felt when he heard of the persecution of the Waldenses, "For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings"²

Now all that we have said thus far has had to do with the source of poetry, but does not much of it hold as well for our reading of poetry? Is not the reading of a poem accompanied by an "influx of feeling," and will not that influx be "modified and directed" differently in the being of each individual reader? If we agree that Milton's sonnet sprang out of a particular modification of a particular influx of feeling at a particular moment in time, does it not follow that the influx of feeling that I know today when I read that sonnet will come under a different modification when I read the sonnet tomorrow or the next day, or when anyone else reads it at any time at all?

1 "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," ll. 1-5.

2 Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 15.

. . . every object that meets the mature eye or ear assumes its place in an intricate pattern of sensations, memories, and ideas The meanest flower that blows, if it but sojourn with memory and contemplation, thus becomes a center which radiates passion through all the channels of a lively apprehension of multitudinous relationships.¹

Even as the moment of emotional excitement which sees the conception of a poem is unique, so is the moment of stimulation which the individual reader knows as he reads, and both experiences are unique because they are intensely personal.

Equally personal is the end which Wordsworth sees for poetry:

The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man.²

If a poem arouses pleasure it has achieved its end. Now it is true that by pleasure Wordsworth means more than unthinking enjoyment.

He draws his distinction in his "Letter to John Wilson:"

It is plain from your letter that the pleasure which I have given you has not been blind or unthinking; you have studied the poems, and prove that you have entered into the spirit of them. They have not given you a cheap or vulgar pleasure³

and he elaborates on it in the "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" when he hopes for his poems " . . . that, both in words and things, they will operate in their degree, to extend the domain of sensibility for the delight, the honour, and the benefit of human

1 Campbell, op. cit., p. 30.

2 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 25.

3 (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 3.

nature "1 Nevertheless, the end of the poetic activity remains pleasure, an entirely personal feeling, and if Scott's "Proud Maisie" brings me pleasure it has - for me - achieved its end as poetry.

Poetry for Wordsworth is, then, an essentially personal activity, having its origin in the emotional experience of one man, and its end in the rousing of pleasure, as a result of emotional stimulation, in another. Without going any further in our analysis of Wordsworth's poetics we must see that any criticism of poetry will have to work from the critic's own response, his own emotional stimulation, and his own pleasure. Wordsworth frankly accepted this personal basis of criticism, and even advocated it, when he wrote in his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800,

One request I must make of my reader, which is, that in judging these poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgement of others. How common is it to hear a person say, I myself do not object to this style of composition, or this or that expression, but, to such and such classes of people it will appear mean and ludicrous! This mode of criticism, so destructive of all sound unadulterated judgement, is almost universal: let the Reader then abide, independently, by his own feelings, and, if he finds himself affected, let him not suffer such conjectures to interfere with his pleasure.²

The basis of all criticism must be our own feelings while in the presence of the poem. For criticism to have any value it must be sincere: the man who praises Hamlet merely because he thinks that he should praise it, and not because he himself has found it an intensely moving work, is not a critic; he is a hypocrite. As we shall see, Wordsworth demands

1 (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 202.

2 Smith, op. cit., p. 38. Italics mine.

more of the critic than sensibility alone, but the critic must build his interpretation and estimate of a work on a sincere feeling for that work.

Here we reach a central point in Wordsworth's critical attitude, the point from which the impressionist can work if he choose to call Wordsworth as a witness in his defence. In our criticism we are to abide by our own feelings and judge from them, but those feelings will result from what the words of the poem call up in each reader's mind: " . . . his mind is left at liberty, and even summoned, to act upon . . . [the] thoughts and images"¹ of the poem. Who is to say where that liberty becomes license? Who is to decree that the reader's mind shall range thus far and no farther? Has the dull-witted reader any right to declare that his imaginative fellow is indulging in unjustifiable raptures when he finds untold riches in a poem which leaves the dull-witted unmoved?

Wordsworth himself was a man of keen sensibility and great imagination. In the third of his essays "Upon Epitaphs" he has left us a singularly fine example of the emotional response which a few unimportant details in life can call up in such a man as he. The details here consist of no more than an unknown name, and two insignificant dates, but note what these meant to Wordsworth, the associations they aroused, and the feeling they excited:

In an obscure corner of a country church-yard I once espied, half overgrown with hemlock and nettles, a very small stone laid upon the ground, bearing nothing more than the name of the deceased with the date of birth and death, imputing that it was an infant which had been born

1 Wordsworth, Preface to Poems, (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 155.

one day and died the following. I know not how far the reader may be in sympathy with me; but more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing, were imparted to my mind by that inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a tombstone.¹

What would have been to many men no more than another gravestone to be treated with perfunctory respect was for Wordsworth a profoundly moving sight in which was embodied the whole compass of the joy and sorrow, hope and despair of mortality, the inexplicable miracle of birth and the unfathomable tragedy of death. Who will say that his impression of that stone was unjustified? But who will deny that that impression reveals a hypersensitive, highly imaginative reaction to an external object? Once again, here as in our criticism of poetry, where does liberty of interpretation become license?

Wordsworth saw the danger inherent in his personal approach to poetry. He saw that although poetry is by its very nature evocative, seeking to rouse associations - and thereby emotions - in the reader's mind, it is at the same time an expression of one man's emotional experience. It is, moreover, the expression of a man " . . . endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind " ² He saw that although the reader must be prepared to contemplate and savour the matter of poetry if he hopes to know the stimulation and delight which it has to offer, and although in the

1 (1810), in Smith, op. cit., p. 140.

2 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 23.

process of contemplation and savouring a mass of associations will inevitably accumulate to enrich the bare matter of the poetry, the reader must always keep in mind that he seeks the stimulation and delight which the poet has to offer, not that which he himself can arouse by letting his mind wander at will over the field of his own personal recollections, dreams, and aspirations. The poet is no ordinary man:

He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.¹

The experience of such a man is worth knowing; the delight which he has to offer is worth seeking. When we allow our own purely personal associations to come between us and the poet we rob ourselves of an invaluable gift. By all means, Wordsworth implies, let associations enrich poetry for us, but let them be associations which have their origins in the poet's work. Let them be associations of the sort Wordsworth himself knew as he gazed on the child's gravestone, associations rising spontaneously under the stimulation of the object contemplated.

To ensure as fully as possible that our associations shall be of this sort we must approach poetry with an open mind. We must cleanse ourselves of preconceptions and prejudices. Wordsworth clearly recognized the need for open-mindedness in the critic, and again and again in his prose writings we encounter warnings against

¹ Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

attitudes and beliefs which stand in the way of a full appreciation of poetry. Of these the most fundamental is a misconception in the critic's mind of what constitutes poetry. Because Wordsworth was very much aware that his work represented something radically different for men schooled in the neo-classical tradition of the eighteenth century, he laid great stress on the need for a broadly inclusive concept of poetry, and in the Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads (1798) he writes,

It is desirable that . . . readers, for their own sakes, should not suffer the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that, while they are perusing this book, they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favourable to the author's wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy of our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.¹

The critic must be willing to alter his concept of poetry if that concept has no place for those works which rise out of the passions of man and bring pleasure to man. If he is not willing to do so, but, rather, clings to his mistaken principles, he joins that class of critics whose judgments are

. . . the most erroneous and pervers. For to be mis-taught is worse than to be untaught; and no perverseness equals that which is supported by system, no errors are so difficult to root out as those which the understanding has pledged its credit to uphold. In this Class are contained censors, who, if they be pleased with what is good, are pleased with it only by imperfect glimpses, and upon false principles; who, should they generalize rightly, to a certain point, are sure to suffer for it in the end; who, if they stumble upon a sound rule, are fettered by misapplying it, or by straining it too far; being incapable of perceiving when it ought to yield to one of

1 Smith, op. cit., p. 1.

higher order.¹

In this class are men like Thomas Rymer who finds fault with Shakespeare's Iago because although a soldier he is " . . . a close, dissembling, false, insinuating rascal instead of an open-hearted, frank, plain-dealing soldier, a character constantly worn by them for some thousands of years in the world."² Because Iago's character does not agree with the "rule" of type characters, Rymer cannot accept him as a successful poetic creation.

Closely related to the unwillingness of many men to accept as poetry those works which do not agree with their preconceptions of what constitutes poetry is the human tendency to favour the familiar over the strange:

. . . all men feel an habitual gratitude, and something of an honourable bigotry, for the objects which have long continued to please them: we not only wish to be pleased, but to be pleased in that particular way in which we have been accustomed to be pleased.³

The great effect which this tendency can have on one's approach to poetry was brought home to me most vividly during the past winter. As an essay topic I suggested to my class in Freshman English the title, "Two Poems I Like," and left the students free to select any two poems from the prescribed text and to treat them in any way they wished. Among the essays I received was one from a girl of considerable intelligence and admirable frankness who prefaced her paper with a note

1 Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to the Preface," (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 174.

2 A Short View of Tragedy, (1693), Chapter VII, in Odell Shepard and Paul Spencer Wood, ed., English Prose and Poetry: 1660-1800, Boston, etc., Houghton Mifflin, 1934, p. 192.

3 Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 40.

that although, as required of her, she had written on two poems, she could not honestly say that she liked them because she liked no "modern poetry." Her reason was that she believed that poetry should deal only with beauty, and the poetry we had studied - most of which was written in the present century - dealt with ugliness. (She referred specifically to the works of Wilfred Owen and T. S. Eliot.) For her the finest poem she knew was Shelley's Ode to the West Wind because it was a beautiful treatment of a beautiful theme. During her school years this girl had apparently familiarized herself with nineteenth-century "nature" poetry, poetry extolling the loveliness of earth. She had found such poetry pleasing. Now, confronted with works which dealt with human hatred, frustration, inadequacy, doubt, waste - with all that makes up the tragedy of our century - she was disturbed by what was to her unfamiliar material for poetry. Because it was unfamiliar she could not appreciate poetry dealing with it. A personal prejudice against the unfamiliar stood between her and much of the finest poetry of her own time.

The true critic must rid himself of such prejudice, even as he must rid himself of any other prejudice against the matter of poetry:

. . . it is the privilege of poetic genius to catch, under certain restrictions of which perhaps at the time of its being exerted it is but dimly conscious, a spirit of pleasure wherever it can be found, - in the walks of nature, and in the business of men.¹

The world of poetry is a world of "comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling,"² a world that embraces all that can move the heart of man. False delicacy of any sort must not pervert the critic's judgment.

1 Wordsworth, "Letter to Friend of Burns (James Gray, Esq., Edinburgh)," (1816), in Smith, op. cit., p. 213.

2 Wordsworth, "Letter to John Wilson," in Smith, op. cit., p. 8.

Speaking of Burns' Tam O'Shanter, Wordsworth points out that although men like Tam may be " . . . to the rigidly virtuous . . . objects almost of loathing . . . , "1 Tam O'Shanter is still a great work of poetry because Burns, " . . . penetrating the unsightly and disgusting surfaces of things, has unveiled with exquisite skill the finer ties of imagination and feeling "2 If the poet treats his theme in such a way we should ask no more of him: ugliness or beauty, the strange or the familiar, all can be matter for poetry.

An even more serious prejudice, and one more difficult to overcome, is that based on one's religious convictions. Wordsworth recognized that many men, as they grow older and more serious in their attitude towards life, turn to poetry for religious purposes, seeking in it an expression and an enforcement of their religious beliefs. If they find in a poem disagreement with their own beliefs, or even outright rejection of them, they find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept the work at its true artistic value. If they find in it a confirmation of their convictions they tend to over-estimate it. "They come prepared to impart so much passion to the Poet's language, that they remain unconscious how little, in fact, they receive from it."3 In his consideration of this prejudice Wordsworth reveals a remarkably perceptive understanding of the source of the confusion in the minds of these people.

The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried on but by a process where much is represented in little, and the Infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity. In all this may be perceived the affinity

1 Wordsworth, "Letter to Friend of Burns," in Smith, op. cit., p. 214.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to Preface," (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 172.

between religion and poetry; between religion - making up the deficiencies of reason by faith; and poetry - passionate for the instruction of reason; between religion - whose element is infinitude, and whose ultimate trust is the supreme of things, submitting herself to circumscription, and reconciled to substitutions; and poetry - ethereal and transcendent, yet incapable to sustain her existence without sensuous incarnation. In this community of nature may be perceived also the lurking incitements of kindred error; - so that we shall find that no poetry has been more subject to distortion, than that species, the argument and scope of which is religious; and no lovers of the art have gone farther astray than the pious and the devout.¹

In their manifestations, poetry and religious faith are very closely linked: both lead to a human search for finite expression of the infinite and inexpressible, for sensuous representation of a supersensory experience. But both, too, depend upon Man's willingness to surrender himself wholly to a single power. Both demand submission: as the bride must submit willingly and joyfully to the bridegroom if she is to know the ecstasy of consummation, so must Man submit to God if he is to know the radiance of faith, and to the poet if he is to know the illumination of poetry. However, even as worldly knowledge can often inhibit Man from submitting entirely to God, so can firm religious convictions often inhibit him from submitting entirely to poetry. The devout Christian may well have difficulty in accepting Swinburne's Garden of Proserpine because of the totally un-Christian thought in the stanzas:

From too much love of living,
From hope and fear set free,
We thank with brief thanksgiving
Whatever gods may be
That no life lives for ever;
That dead men rise up never;

1 Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to Preface," (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 173.

That even the weariest river
Winds somewhere safe to sea.

Then star nor sun shall waken,
Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
Nor any sound or sight:
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.¹

Christ has promised life everlasting to those who will follow Him; Swinburne gives thanks that we can see an end to life. The difficulty of accepting such a work is very real for many men of strong faith. The only way in which they can overcome the difficulty is to recognize that the matter of poetry is secondary: what concerns the reader is that the poet should have "unveiled . . . the finer ties of imagination and feeling."² As a believer in God, the reader may well quarrel with Swinburne the thinker, but as a reader of poetry he need have no quarrel if he can find in Swinburne's poem the emotional stimulation and delight which Wordsworth demands of all poetry. Let the reader of poetry hold fast to his religious convictions, but let him make every effort to ensure that those convictions do not blind him to the light which the poet has to offer.

All the prejudices colouring criticism which we have thus far considered have had one rather admirable characteristic in common: each has resulted from some firmly held conviction in the reader's mind. Even when we disagree with a man's beliefs, even

1 ll. 81-96.

2 Wordsworth, "Letter to Friend of Burns," in Smith, op. cit., p. 214.

when those beliefs anger us, we do have a grudging respect for the man who, in the face of attack, can hold fast to his convictions. There are, however, other prejudices which Wordsworth considers which have a meaner origin, man's love of self. In his "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" (1815) Wordsworth writes:

There is extant a small Volume of miscellaneous poems, in which Shakespeare expresses his own feelings in his own person. It is not difficult to conceive that the Editor, George Steevens, should have been insensible to the beauties of one portion of that Volume, the Sonnets; though in no part of the writings of this poet is found in an equal compass, a greater number of exquisite feelings felicitously expressed. But, from regard to the Critic's own credit, he would not have ventured to talk of an act of parliament not being strong enough to compel the perusal of those little pieces, if he had not known that the people of England were ignorant of the treasures contained in them: and if he had not, moreover, shared the too common propensity of human nature to exult over a supposed fall into the mire of a genius whom he had been compelled to regard with admiration, as an inmate of the celestial regions - "there sitting where he durst not soar."¹

We can conceive of perhaps no baser sort of criticism than this, the revelling of a little man in the supposed momentary weakness of a great. Here is the sort of criticism which Wordsworth himself has suffered at the hands of those who see all too clearly the admittedly ridiculous lapses of those works, like The Thorn, in which he held too strictly to his theories of diction, and forget the inspired power of Tintern Abbey and the Ode on the Intimations of Immortality, those who keep reminding us of Annette Vallon and ridicule the purity of the Lucy poems. Poetry is a demanding activity, both in its creation and in its reading. During his moments of highest creation the poet partakes of divinity, and we must do him reverence. In approaching his work we must rise as close to his level as we can. As he casts off

1 Smith, op. cit., p. 179. Italics mine.

the meanness of mortality for a moment, so must we. If we can say honestly that his work has failed to move us, then we are justified in finding fault with it as poetry. But we must guard against our weakness as self-loving creatures, seeking merely to exalt ourselves by felling the reputations of those greater than we.

Wordsworth was, then, very much aware of the danger of such preconceptions and prejudices as these which we have considered: he saw that the critic who allowed his judgment to be swayed by such purely personal attitudes could not offer dependable verdicts as to the value of literary works. His decisions would be merely personal estimates, valuable only as revelations of the nature of the critic himself. For a critic to have any real value he must - at least for the duration of his study of the work he is criticizing - rid himself, as best he can, of personal prejudice, and approach poetry with an open mind.

Now although it is very easy to say that we must rid ourselves of prejudice, and keep an open mind, it is quite another matter to do so. Nothing is more difficult than bringing ourselves to admit that a cherished conviction is an undesirable prejudice and tossing it away. Nevertheless, difficult as the task may be, Wordsworth leaves us in no doubt that we must undertake it if we are to appreciate poetry. In the "Letter to John Wilson" he writes:

You begin what you say upon The Idiot Boy, with this observation, that nothing is a fit subject for poetry which does not please. But here follows a question, Does not please whom? Some have little knowledge of natural imagery of any kind, and, of course, little relish for it; some are disgusted with the very mention of the words pastoral poetry, sheep or shepherds; some cannot tolerate a poem with a ghost or any supernatural agency in it; others

would shrink from an animated description of the pleasures of love, as from a thing carnal and libidinous; some cannot bear to see delicate and refined feelings ascribed to men in low conditions in society, because their vanity and self-love tell them that these belong only to themselves, and men like themselves in dress, station, and way of life; others are disgusted with the naked language of some of the most interesting passions of men, because either it is indelicate, or gross, or vulgar; as many fine ladies could not bear certain expressions in The Mother and The Thorn, and, as in the instance of Adam Smith, who, we are told, could not endure the ballad of Clym of the Clough, because the author had not written like a gentleman. Then there are professional and national prejudices for evermore. Some take no interest in the description of a particular passion or quality, as love of solitariness, we will say, genial activity of fancy, love of nature, religion, and so forth, because they have [little or] nothing of it in themselves; and so on without end. I return then to [the] question, please whom? or what? I answer, human nature as it has been [and ever] will be. But, where are we to find the best measure of this? I answer, [from with]in; by stripping our own hearts naked, and by looking out of ourselves to [wards men] who lead the simplest lives, and most according to nature; men who have never known false refinements, wayward and artificial desires, false criticisms, effeminate habits of thinking and feeling, or who having known these things have outgrown them.¹

To enter wholly into the spirit of poetry we must rise above considerations of self, class, nation, and creed, and stand as men, simple and natural. When we have so cleansed ourselves we shall have taken the first step towards becoming true critics.

Wordsworth's critic, however, must have more than simplicity and naturalness. Although these qualities are fundamentally necessary, they alone will not make a critic.

Whither then shall we turn for that union of qualifications which must necessarily exist before the decisions of a critic can be of absolute value? For a mind at once poetical and philosophical; for a critic whose affections are as free and kindly as the spirit of society, and whose understanding is severe as that of dispassionate government? Where

1. Smith, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

are we to look for that initiatory composure of mind which no selfishness can disturb? For a natural sensibility that has been tutored into correctness without losing anything of its quickness; and for active faculties, capable of answering the demands which an Author of original imagination shall make upon them, associated with a judgment that cannot be duped into admiration by aught that is unworthy of it? - among those and those only, who, never having suffered their youthful love of poetry to remit much of its force, have applied to the consideration of the laws of this art the best power of their understandings.¹

The true critic, he in whose judgment we can with fair security place our trust, will be a man of innate sensibility and of disinterestedness, but also a man whose native qualifications have been channelled by training. As well as an instinctive feeling for poetry he will have acquired that

- . . . accurate taste . . . which can only be produced by severe thought, and a long continued intercourse with the best models of composition. This is mentioned not with so ridiculous a purpose as to prevent the most inexperienced reader from judging for himself; but merely to temper the rashness of decision, and to suggest that if poetry be a subject on which much time has not been bestowed, the judgment may be erroneous, and that in many cases it necessarily will be so.²

The true critic, then, is a man of feeling and of taste.

For Wordsworth, however, taste was something more than it had been for the eighteenth-century "School of Taste." Like the members of that group he believed that it was acquired by an intensive study of earlier masters, and that it sought to detect

. . . the presence in every poem, or painting, or piece of sculpture, of unity or uniformity, and its contradictory quality, variety; of similitude or resemblance, and dissimilitude.³

1 Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to Preface," (1815), in Smith, op. cit., pp. 173-174.

2 Wordsworth, Advertisement to Lyrical Ballads, (1798), in Smith, op. cit., p. 2.

3 Beatty, Wordsworth, p. 44.

Like them, moreover, he believed that it depended upon the association of ideas: our highly complex concepts of beauty and sublimity develop out of the linking and fusing of simpler elements in the mind which, in turn, come from elements of our experience.

This is to say that our aesthetic emotions depend on our ideas of things through association, and so are modified and directed by our ideas in an aesthetic product, the ideas in such cases being "ideas of emotion."¹

Now all three of these principles, which underlie the eighteenth-century concept of taste, are in a sense passive. To them Wordsworth added the principle of an active exertion of a power in the reader's mind, a power which was essential if the reader of poetry was to know the profound, the exquisite, the pathetic, and the sublime in poetry. He recognized that the metaphorical use of the passive word taste was not appropriate if the faculty were expanded to embrace such an active exercise, but he recognized too that taste must include this exertion of power.

Proportion and congruity, the requisite knowledge being supposed, are subjects upon which taste may be trusted; it is competent to this office - for in its intercourse with these the mind is passive, and is affected painfully or pleasurably as by an instinct. But the profound and the exquisite in feeling, the lofty and universal in thought and imagination; or, in ordinary language, the pathetic and the sublime; - are neither of them, accurately speaking, objects of a faculty which could ever without a sinking in the spirit of Nations have been designated by the metaphor Taste. Because without the exertion of a co-operating power in the mind of the reader, there can be no adequate sympathy with either of these emotions: without this auxiliary impulse, elevated or profound passion cannot exist.²

The true man of taste is for Wordsworth one who is willing and able to

1 Beatty, op. cit., p. 50.

2 Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to Preface," (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 197.

exert this power in his reading of poetry.

I have said earlier that knowing poetry is similar to knowing God in that both require absolute submission of self. The submission to God is not, however, a passive thing: it requires of us the greatest spiritual effort of which we as men are capable. A voice summons us, "Rise, clasp My hand, and come!"¹ We, frail and doubting in the weakness of mortality, must rouse ourselves to the highest pitch to answer that summons. The act for which we prepare ourselves is purest joy; the effort which we must make to bring ourselves to the act is, because of our weakness, agony. What Wordsworth means by the exertion of power in artistic taste is very similar to the exertion which we must make to know God. If we are willing to co-operate with the poet in making this exertion - as with God in preparing for our communion with Him - we find ourselves immeasurably enriched:

Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honour and benefit of human nature. Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe: or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. What is all this but an advance, or a conquest, made by the soul of the poet? Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind, like an Indian prince or general - stretched on his palanquin and borne by his slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspired by his leader, in order that he may exert himself; for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight. Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power, of which knowledge is the effect²

1 Thompson, Francis, The Hound of Heaven, l. 176.

2 Wordsworth, "Essay Supplementary to Preface," (1815), in Smith, op. cit., p. 198.

The poet widens the horizons for mankind, and the critic, as a man of taste, must exert to the utmost his inner power if he hopes to follow the poet, to stand with him " . . . upon a peak in Darien,"¹ and, in turn, to guide his fellows to that peak.

We can now draw some conclusions from our analysis of the personal basis of Wordsworth's concepts of poetry and criticism. The source of poetry is one man's personal emotional excitement. The end of poetry is another man's - the reader's - personal pleasure. That pleasure will result from a stimulation of his emotions, the stimulation, in turn, having resulted from the associations which the poet's thoughts and images have roused. On this emotional response the reader must eventually base his judgment of the poem. He must, however, recognize that certain purely personal prejudices and associations may hinder his appreciation of the poem as it really is, and lead to an unjustified estimate of its value. To avoid such errors in judgment the true critic must be more than a man of sensibility; he must be a man of knowledge, understanding, judgment, and taste. As must be obvious we have here an essentially personal concept of poetry and criticism. The origin, the end, and the judgment of poetry all depend upon the personal natures of individual men. Even the great check on rash decisions is, in essence, a personal faculty, taste, which depends upon our past experience of art and life.

When we turn to the poetics of Samuel Taylor Coleridge we find,

1 Keats, John, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer," l. 14.

as we should expect, a number of points of identity with the theories of Wordsworth. For Coleridge, as for Wordsworth, the source of poetry is intense emotional excitement, and its immediate end is pleasure.

All the fine arts are different species of poetry
The common essence of all consists in the excitement of emotion for the immediate purpose of pleasure through the medium of beauty; herein contra-distinguishing poetry from science, the immediate object and primary purpose of which is truth and possible utility.¹

As for Wordsworth, therefore, the origin and the effect of poetry are essentially personal, and we must recognize that a critical approach to poetry based on such a theory will, in turn, be fundamentally personal. The concern of poetry is "the response of passion,"² and passion is a personal experience in both poet and reader.

To understand fully the intensely personal nature of Coleridge's poetics, however, we must recognize that his whole doctrine of art - like his concept of the relationship of man to man, of man to God - is rooted firmly in man's awareness of self, in the power of man to declare with conviction, I AM. If we are to grasp the full significance of this fundamental declaration we must trace its place in Coleridge's theory of the imagination, a theory which is of the utmost importance in all Coleridge's criticism.

In his childhood Coleridge had found in the wonderful world of fairy tales and the Arabian Nights - that world of spells, and witches, and giants, and genii - a sense of the vast in life, "a love of the Great and the Whole."³ As he grew older, however, the

1 Coleridge, On the Principles of Genial Criticism, in Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 220-221.

2 Powell, A. E., The Romantic Theory of Poetry, New York, Longmans, Green, & Co., 1926, p. 120.

3 Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 1, p. xii.

childish delight in the mere awareness of some "whole" encompassing him and all about him ceased to satisfy:

. . . his intellectual and spiritual need became clarified to his mind, into a need to understand the Vast, the Whole, and to find the universe not a mere conglomeration of particulars, "a mass of little things," but a related whole. He sought for a center in the universe, a center in himself.¹

He sought an understanding of the unity which he felt must underlie all life if that life had any significance.

In the course of his quest for the unity of life Coleridge read deeply and widely, and the influence of many men is apparent in the Biographia Literaria. Above all others, however, one, a third-century philosopher and mystic, helped Coleridge to find some understanding of the unity he sought. This was Plotinus, whose Neo-Platonic conception of a unity embracing the universe and deriving from the One above all became the basis of both Coleridge's own doctrine of unity, and his theory of the imagination. For Plotinus, Nature and the soul of man were united in their direct relationship with the One, from which each shared in divinity. "Nature and the soul of man are therefore fundamentally divine, and one in the unity of their source; between them is the deep relationship of a common origin."² They are united, too, in that both the world of matter (Nature) and the souls of men are forever being shaped by the dynamic Ideas which are the thought of God. Unlike the Platonic Ideas, which are but forms existing in the mind of God, Plotinian Ideas are active, vital, working

1 Sherwood, Margaret P., Coleridge's Imaginative Conception of the Imagination, Wellesley, Mass., Hathaway House Bookshop, 1937, p. 9.

2 Ibid., pp. 10-11.

constantly in Nature and in Man to bring the component parts of the universe into a greater harmony with each other and with their divine origin.

All being, in both the material and the immaterial worlds, therefore consists of the outflowing divine, and of the striving upward of all that is - the soul of man more strongly, nature more dimly, toward their divine source
. . . .¹

The divine Ideas are constantly performing their shaping operation, bringing matter into form; and this operation is performed not only in nature, but also in the soul of man.

In Plotinus Coleridge found what he sought, a closely reasoned interpretation of life based on a doctrine of vital unity. He accepted Plotinus' belief in a divine force uniting all life and all matter, and he accepted Plotinus' belief in change as the manifestation of the operation of the divine Ideas in Man and Nature. The faith which he found in Plotinus in " . . . a living unity throughout the universe, 'and in the mind of man,' found fullest expression in his theory of imagination; it was the center of his thought of imagination, as of his whole metaphysical system."²

In Plotinus we find that in the organization of the divine unity the first division takes place in the mind, where we find established a duality of thought and being, of consciousness and objects. Following Plotinus very closely, Coleridge establishes the duality of the Sum of the Subjective and the Sum of the Objective.³

1 Sherwood, op. cit., p. 11.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, (1817), ed., J. Shawcross, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1907, vol. 1, p. 174. (Chapter 12)

By the first of these he means the self, or the intelligence; and by the second, Nature, embracing all the phenomena by which we know the world about us. Now before we can have any positive knowledge there must be what Coleridge terms a "reciprocal concurrence"¹ of the intelligence and Nature, of the conscious being and that which is in itself unconscious. There must be a fusion of the two before we can fully know anything, before we can know that " . . . the heavens and the earth . . . declare not only the power of their maker, but the glory and the presence of their God "2

Before the fruits of this interaction of the two can be sound, however, man must establish some absolute truth from which positive knowledge can develop. He must seek

. . . for some absolute truth capable of communicating to other positions a certainty, which it has not itself borrowed; a truth self-grounded, unconditional and known by its own light. In short, we have to find a somewhat which is, simply because it is.³

And where is he to find this truth of truths? For Coleridge he could find it in only one thing, in the fundamental principle which manifests itself in the SUM, or I AM, in man's awareness of his own spirit, in his consciousness of his own self as distinguished from the world about him.

In this, and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing are identical, each involving, and supposing the other It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 174. (Chapter 12)

2 Ibid., p. 176.

3 Ibid., p. 181.

and subject 1

And, as Coleridge goes on to demonstrate, this fundamental truth of the I AM, the spirit, the self-consciousness, is nothing more than a repetition in the human mind of the divine creation:

Whatever in its origin is objective, is likewise as such necessarily finite. Therefore, since the spirit is not originally an object, and as the subject exists in anti-thesis to an object, the spirit cannot originally be finite. But neither can it be a subject without becoming an object, and, as it is originally the identity of both, it can be conceived neither as infinite nor finite exclusively, but as the most original union of both. In the existence, in the reconciling, and the recurrence of this contradiction consists the process and mystery of production and life.²

Aware of the truth of this one principle, the I AM, man can safely proceed to erect the structure of his knowledge. With this absolute truth as his measure of all things he can work through the Understanding to a grasp of the material world, and through the Reason to an apprehension of the reality which is God. "We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the SELF, in order to lose and find all self in GOD."³

When we understand that the imagination is for Coleridge the faculty which first enables us to grasp this basic truth of the I AM, we begin to appreciate the importance of the imagination in both his psychology and his metaphysics. Quite apart from its other functions, the imagination is " . . . the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and . . . a repetition in the finite

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 183. (Chapter 12)

2 Ibid., p. 185.

3 Ibid., p. 186.

mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."1 It is, in other words, " . . . a faculty enabling man to differentiate his consciousness from the sensible world without; a declaration of individual existence, distinct from all else."2 With the awareness of his own self which the imagination as the "prime agent of human perception" brings him, man has the basic truth on which to build: " . . . the self-consciousness is the first point, to which for us all is mortgaged and annexed "3

The power of the imagination to enable us to perceive the world about us and to appreciate our existence as individuals apart from that world is what Coleridge means when he speaks of the Primary Imagination. This aspect of the imagination is relatively passive. As a rule, we do not consciously try to perceive the world about us; it impinges upon us. The Primary Imagination is the agency through which we receive our perceptions of the world from the senses. There is, however, a second aspect of the imagination which is active. This is what Coleridge terms the Secondary Imagination:

The Secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the . . . [Primary Imagination], co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.4

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 202. (Chapter 13)

2 Sherwood, op. cit., p. 12.

3 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 186. (Chapter 12)

4 Ibid., p. 202.

With this power of the Secondary Imagination to unify a multitude of disordered elements we come to the very core of Coleridge's concept of the imagination. It is this power which he has in mind when he speaks of the esemplastic function of the imagination:

"Esemplastic. The word is not in Johnson, nor have I met with it elsewhere." . . . I constructed it myself from the Greek words . . . meaning to shape into one; because, having to convey a new sense, I thought that a new term would both aid the recollection of my meaning, and prevent its being confounded with the usual import of the word, imagination.¹

And it is this same power which he has in mind when he exclaims, "How excellently the German Einbildungskraft expresses this prime and loftiest faculty, the power of co-adunation, the faculty that forms the many into one - In-eins-bildung!"²

All men have the power of the Primary Imagination: through it we proceed to a perception of the world without, and through it we appreciate that we have our individual existences. All men, too, have the power of the Secondary Imagination, but not all have it in equal degree. All of us are capable of that unifying function which underlies the fusion of such general feelings as pity, concern, hope, desire, and companionship into love for a fellow human-being, but only the poet is capable of the fullest forms of fusion and unification. Only he can take the accumulated matter of the mind, dissolve, diffuse, and dissipate it, and then bring the elements together into a new harmony, a new form, a new unity. Only he

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 107. (Chapter 10)

2 Coleridge, Anima Poetae, ed., Ernest Hartley Coleridge, London, William Heinemann, 1895, p. 236. (From Chapter 7, 1810)

. . . brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of the faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power, first put into action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference, of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgement ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry.¹

Here is the power which distinguishes the Shakespeare, the Milton, the Wordsworth from the rest of mankind, the power that permeates the greatest of their works, and in those works " . . . forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole."²

We have here a concept of the imagination as the very fountain of the poet's power. Through the functioning of the Secondary Imagination the poet "forms the many into one,"³ but to achieve such a fusion, such a perception of the unity of life, he must - for Coleridge - have built all upon the basic truth of self-awareness, the I AM:

Imagination guided by the "sacred power of self-intuition," is to him a power through which, if mind, feeling, will are rightly directed, one may understand the thought of God as expressed in the visible, audible, tangible world; is veritably an agency between the world of sense and the world of spirit.⁴

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 2, p. 12. (Chapter 14)

2 Ibid., p. 13.

3 Coleridge, Anima Poetae, p. 236. (From Chapter 7, 1810)

4 Sherwood, op. cit., 19.

On this intensely subjective base the poet erects the structure of his work, offering an imaginative representation of the source of his stimulation, a representation in which the poet's entire state of being at the moment of inspiration is offered to us in communicable form. When the imagination has fully performed its function the result is a true work of art, a work of organic unity, of homogeneity. Oedipus Rex, Othello, Paradise Lost, Coleridge's own Ancient Mariner - all these are works possessing such unity, even as any truly great work possesses it.

In what way, however, does Coleridge's concept of the imagination and its all-important place in the creation of poetry affect the critic? For Coleridge it has a very real effect if the critic is to perform his task properly. Because poetry is an imaginative creation, presenting in a state of fusion the mass of elements entering into the poet's being, the critic must be prepared himself to approach poetry imaginatively. Poetry for him is not something which can be known from externals: we cannot read it as we read a scientific text; we cannot judge it as we judge a machine, by various mechanical tests and measurements. Even as Wordsworth sees that we must submit to the poet, so does Coleridge see that we must submerge ourselves in the poetry. The poet has blended the colours of the spectrum of multitude into the white radiance of unity; the critic must endeavour to work from that radiance back to the spectrum in order to reveal to those of us less sensitive than he the richness, the depth, the significance of the poet's creation. For

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Coleridge the critic of poetry must be " . . . a poet, at least, in posse,"¹ and Coleridge himself was a critic of this sort:

. . . his highest achievements are in his penetrating analyses of Shakespearean characters and in his profoundly imaginative re-creations of the full impression which Shakespeare may make in a mind more sensitive, more just and experienced, and more intelligent than the minds of normal men.²

Thomas Raysor has suggested three great qualities of Coleridge as a critic: reflectiveness, delicate sensitivity of poetic imagination, and profound insight into human nature,³ and these qualities are as important in the poet as in the critic. Even as the poet must have them if he is to pierce through the shifting shadows of actuality to the unchanging light of reality, so must the critic have them if he is to pierce through the matter of poetry to the illumination of the poet's inspiration. All these qualities, however, are personal, and all rise out of that same power of self-intuition, the I AM, which underlies Coleridge's concept of the imagination. The result is that as a practising critic, "Coleridge . . . does not judge by rules, but by a Principle, a criterion - the criterion of his own identity" ⁴ For him, as for Wordsworth, criticism is fundamentally personal.

The critic, then, must aim at an imaginative perception of poetry, a perception in which he must call upon all his own powers

1 Coleridge, Anima Poetae, p. 128. (From Chapter 4, 1805)

2 Raysor, Thomas M., ed., Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism, London, Constable & Co., Ltd., 1930, vol. 1, p. xlviii.

3 Ibid., p. lxi.

4 Potter, Stephen, Coleridge and STC, London, Jonathan Cape, 1938, p. 143.

as a man. Each of us is, however, an individual being; each of us has powers widely different from those of his fellows:

The razor's edge becomes a saw to the armed vision;
and the delicious melodies of Purcell or Cimarosa
might be disjointed stammerings to a hearer, whose
partition of time should be a thousand times subtler
than ours.¹

There are few things in music that I find more intensely moving than Wagner's Tristan, but I have heard a man with a very real appreciation of music declare that it reminded him of the rumbling of his stomach. Our perception of anything must be personal and, therefore, relative. Coleridge himself admits as much when he writes in the Principles of Genial Criticism (1814):

I am conscious that I look with a stronger and more pleasureable emotion at Mr. Allston's large landscape, in the spirit of Swiss scenery, from its having been the occasion of my first acquaintance with him in Rome.²

Coleridge here is merely revealing the same awareness which we have noted in Wordsworth, that some personal associations are unavoidable in criticism. Also as we have noted in Wordsworth, however, Coleridge recognizes that such associations, preconceptions, and prejudices can hinder the critic in his effort to arrive at a just estimate of a work, and he warns against the " . . . fantastic intrusion of the accidental and the arbitrary " ³ As best he can the critic must endeavour to follow the path of associations down which the poet means to lead him; he must constantly turn to the " . . . thoughts and images which the poet himself has . . .

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 81. (Chapter 7)

2 Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 237.

3 Coleridge, "Fragment of an Essay on Beauty," (1818), in Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 250.

presented."¹ He must keep his gaze fixed firmly on the object of criticism, the poem.

[Coleridge's own] . . . criticism is not like the lovely description by Pater of the Mona Lisa, which may indeed be read for its own sake, like all criticisms of the first rank, but manifestly forgets its subject. However far he may sometimes fall into the inevitable illusion of criticism and read himself into Shakespeare, Coleridge never substitutes for criticism the lyrical impressionism which seeks to create a new work of art, only nominally inspired by its subject and essentially independent.²

As Coleridge was very much aware, many readers - including a number of those who pose as critics - make little effort to see a work as it really is.

In times of old, books were as religious oracles; as literature advanced, they next became venerable preceptors; they then descended to the rank of instructive friends; and, as their numbers increased, they sunk still lower to that of entertaining companions; and at present they seem degraded into culprits to hold up their hands at the bar of every self-elected, yet not the less peremptory, judge, who chuses to write from humour or interest, from enmity or arrogance, and to abide the decision (in the words of Jeremy Taylor) "of him that reads in malice, or him that reads after dinner."³

Altogether too much of the criticism of Coleridge's own time - and, for that matter, of any time in the history of literature - was written "from humour or interest, from enmity or arrogance," and Coleridge well appreciated that the man who could not shed his prejudices could not be a just critic. All that he could possibly give would be a totally self-interested estimate. As an extreme illustration of this, Coleridge, in the Principles of

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 2, p. 104. (Chapter 22)

2 Raysor, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 1-11.

3 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 1, p. 41. (Chapter 3) Italics mine.

Genial Criticism, tells the hypothetical little story of Milton and "some stern and prejudiced Puritan"¹ contemplating the front of York Cathedral. Milton admires the beauty of the front. His Puritan friend, firm in his convictions, objects: this is not the beauty of holiness; it is not useful; it represents the " . . . wanton vanity of those cruel shavelings, that wasted the labor and substance of so many thousand poor creatures in the erection of this haughty pile;"² the money it represents might better have been spent building more churches and maintaining more clergymen; the magnificence keeps alive "the pride of the prelates" and the popish and carnal spirit"³ of the people. Milton agrees with all that his companion says, but still insists that the Cathedral is beautiful:

. . . I did not call it good, nor have I told thee, brother! that if this were levelled with the ground, and existed only in the works of the modeller or engraver, that I should desire to reconstruct it.⁴

Goodness or badness is not the question. What matters for Milton here is the beauty of the Cathedral:

The Beautiful arises from the perceived harmony of an object, whether sight or sound, with the inborn and constitutive rules of the judgement and imagination: and it is always intuitive. As light to the eye, even such is beauty to the mind, which cannot but have complacency in whatever is perceived as preconfigured to its living faculties. Hence the Greeks called a beautiful object . . . calling on the soul, which receives instantly, and welcomes it as something connatural.⁵

1 Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 242.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Loc. cit.

4 Ibid., p. 243.

5 Loc. cit.

Where the Puritan's prejudices blinded him to the beauty of the front of the Cathedral, Milton's open-mindedness, his ability to rise above personal interests, enabled him to appreciate that beauty to the full.

Despite his awareness that literary criticism must allow for the personal response, Coleridge had no place for criticism of the sort offered by Milton's Puritan friend. In the Biographia he heartily condemns this same sort of criticism in the Edinburgh Review of his own day. There he finds men, posing as critics, who base their judgments not on the work they pretend to be criticizing, but on considerations of " . . . NATIONAL, PARTY, and even PERSONAL predilection or aversion . . . ;"¹ men who judge a work on what they know of its author's private life; men who subject to criticism

. . . works neither indecent nor immoral, yet of such trifling importance even in point of size and, according to the critic's own verdict, so devoid of all merit, as must excite in the most candid mind the suspicion, either that dislike or vindictive feelings were at work; or that there was a cold prudential pre-determination to increase the sale of the Review by flattering the malignant passions of human nature;²

and men who indulge in

. . . arbitrary and sometimes petulant verdicts, not seldom unsupported even by a single quotation from the work condemned, which might at least have explained the critic's meaning, if it did not prove the justice of his sentence.³

Here is the personal estimate at its very worst, unjustified by the one thing that can so much as begin to justify it, the critic's real

1 Biographia, vol. 2, p. 89. (Chapter 21)

2 Loc. cit.

3 Ibid., p. 90.

feeling for the work itself.

But how is the critic to avoid judgments based on preconception, prejudice, or unjustified association? As does Wordsworth, Coleridge recognizes that the difficulty here is very great, but, again as does Wordsworth, he falls back on the development of personal taste, to be acquired - as it was for both Wordsworth and the eighteenth-century School of Taste - by a study of earlier masterpieces, a very limited acquaintance with which " . . . will suffice to form a correct and even a sensitive taste "1

We have noted that Wordsworth widened the concept of taste from a purely passive faculty to include the active exertion of a co-operating power in the reader. Coleridge, too, considers taste to be both a passive and an active faculty, and links its function in the critic very closely to the function of the imagination in the poet. A series of his essays on taste is entitled On the Principles of Genial Criticism, and this title indicates fairly clearly the connection he sees between critical taste and creative imagination:

This is the German use of the word genial, "pertaining to genius:" Coleridge is identifying literary taste with the kind of genius that has productive imagination and creates poetry. The few really good critics are men of taste and therefore, in a sense, poets themselves; the reader with the same kind of universal experience that is in the poet actually re-performs the poetic activity.²

We have already seen that Coleridge's concept of the poetic imagination has a very real influence on his concept of the critical activity

1 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 2, p. 115. (Chapter 22)

2 Creed, Howard Hall, "Coleridge on 'Taste,'" ELH, vol. 13 (1946), p. 152.

and here we find a manifestation of that influence. The critic must approach a work of poetry imaginatively if he is to experience the full force of the poet's imaginative fusion of multitude into unity. The first step in his critical approach must, of course, be one of sensibility, of emotional response, but after that he must bring his intellect into play, and here we find one great distinguishing feature of the true critic, the active exercise of taste:

By taste, . . . as applied to the fine arts, we must be supposed to mean an intellectual perception of any object blended with a distinct reference to our own sensibility of pain or pleasure, or vice versa, a sense of enjoyment or dislike co-instantaneously combined with, and appearing to proceed from, some intellectual perception of the object¹

To apprehend a poem intellectually requires the exercise of powers of analysis, analysis which will reveal the nature of the work which has caused the reader's original emotional stimulation.

TASTE is the intermediate faculty which connects the active with the passive powers of our nature, the intellect with the senses; and its appointed function is to elevate the images of the latter, while it realizes the ideas of the former.²

If a critic has taste Coleridge believes that he can avoid the errors of judgment into which men like Milton's Puritan friend and the critics of the Edinburgh Review have fallen. It will depend upon the development of the intellectual faculties of each critic, but it exists, nonetheless, as a potential in the minds of all men,

1 Coleridge, "Fragment of an Essay on Taste," (1810), in Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 248.

2 Coleridge, On the Principles of Genial Criticism, in Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 227.

and all men can develop it to appreciate the validity of the critical judgments of others. Those in whom it is fully cultivated can arrive at critical judgments which their fellows can securely accept:

. . . there exists in the constitution of the human soul a sense, and a regulative principle, which may indeed be stifled and latent in some, and be perverted and denaturalized in others, yet is nevertheless universal in a given state of intellectual and moral culture; which is independent of local and temporary circumstances, and dependent only on the degree in which the faculties of the mind are developed; and which, consequently, it is our duty to cultivate and improve, as soon as the sense of its actual existence dawns upon us.¹

The true critic will have developed this regulative power to its fullest.

We should perhaps pause now to see what sort of pattern we are weaving in this analysis of the personal basis of Coleridge's theories. Coleridge finds the source of poetry in the poet's personal emotional excitement, and its end in the reader's personal pleasure. He recognizes that the poet gives imaginative representation to the cause of his moment of excitement, and in that representation fuses the whole of his state of being into communicable form; this imaginative representation will reflect all that the poet has ever known, and this, in turn, will have been erected upon the basic truth of self-awareness. If the critic is to know the full force of the poet's work, he must approach the work imaginatively, seeking to grasp the nature of the poet's fusion;

1 Coleridge, On the Principles of Genial Criticism, in Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 227.

to do so he must submerge himself in the poem. However, because every man is different from all others, every imaginative perception of a poem will differ from all others. The inevitable variation will be aggravated because of innumerable personal prejudices, preconceptions, and associations. Some of these are unavoidable, but the danger which they offer can be met if the critic will develop his innate sense of taste.

As with Wordsworth, we are here faced again with a highly personal theory of poetry and criticism. However, we can see that Coleridge does try to avoid the pitfalls of the purely personal estimate, and in his critical writings we frequently find him declaring that the aim of the critic must be an impartial judgment based on sound principles.

I shall dismiss all feelings and associations which might lead me from the formation of a right estimate. I shall give talent and genius its due praise, and only bestow censure where, as it seems to me, truth and justice demand it. I shall, of course, carefully avoid falling into that system of false criticism, which I condemn in others; and, above all, whether I speak of those whom I know, or of those whom I do not know, of friends or of enemies, of the dead or of the living, my great aim will be to be strictly impartial. No man can truly apply principles who displays the slightest bias in the application of them; and I shall have much greater pleasure in pointing out the good, than in exposing the bad. I fear no accusation of arrogance from the amiable and the wise: I shall pity the weak, and despise the malevolent.¹

He does not advocate a return to the artificial rules of the neo-classicists, but he does advocate an acceptance of certain fundamental principles of criticism which can aid the man of sensibility

¹ Coleridge, "Lectures on Shakespeare and Milton," (1811-1812), I, in Raysor, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 63.

and taste in his evaluation of poetry. He recognizes that all great works of genius have order and form, but it is the critic's business to determine from a study of each work what this order is, and not to attempt to apply rules of form to the work; he recognizes that art, being vital and organic, assumes different shapes at different periods in human development, and we must be willing to accept each shape it takes, not try to judge Shakespeare's plays by the form of Sophocles'; and he recognizes that the spirit of poetry is the only constant that the critic can demand - if a man's poetry has that, its form can be quite unlike any that has gone before and its value be unaffected.¹ If the critic be a man of innate sensibility and cultivated taste, and if he be willing to accept these basic principles, he can, with some confidence, arrive at the sound criticism which Coleridge offers as an ideal to be sought after, that criticism

. . . in which the critic announces and endeavours to establish the principles, which he holds for the foundation of poetry Having thus prepared his canons of criticism for praise and condemnation, he would proceed to particularize the most striking passages to which he deems them applicable, faithfully noticing the frequent or infrequent recurrence of similar merits or defects, and as faithfully distinguishing what is characteristic from what is accidental, or a mere flagging of the wing. Then if his premises be rational, his deductions legitimate, and his conclusions justly applied, the reader . . . may adopt his judgement in the light of judgement and in the independence of free-agency. If he has erred, he presents his errors in a definite place and tangible form, and holds the torch and guides the way to their detection.²

We have now seen that neither Wordsworth nor Coleridge advocates

1 Zeitlin, Jacob, Hazlitt on Literature, Oxford University Press, 1913, pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

2 Coleridge, Biographia, vol. 2, p. 85. (Chapter 21)

anything like a personal estimate of poetry. Both recognize its dangers, and both suggest preventives. Nevertheless, the poetics which they offer in their criticism rests firmly on a personal base, a base of personal emotion, personal pleasure, and personal taste. Many of the critics who were to follow their lead were to overlook the preventives and slip into the pitfalls endangering the path of any critic who bases his criticism wholly on personal impressionism.

III

The Development of Impressionism in the Critical Theories of Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey

In the Principles of Genial Criticism Coleridge writes:

A moss-rose, with a sprig of myrtle and jasmine, is not more beautiful from having been plucked from the garden, or presented to us by the hand of the woman we love, but is abundantly more delightful.¹

To a degree we have here the attitude of Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey towards their task as critics of literature. For all of them the world of poetry is a world of intense emotional and spiritual experience, and in their criticism they seek to reveal the riches of that world to their fellows. They pluck the moss-rose from the garden of literature, heighten its beauty with the myrtle and jasmine of their own impression, and offer it to us for our increased appreciation and delight. De Quincey experiences a strong response to the knocking at the gate after Duncan's murder in Macbeth; in his criticism of the scene he conveys that response; and by conveying his response he seeks to enrich that scene for future readers.

In the critical theories of Wordsworth and Coleridge we have seen the establishment of a markedly personal base for literary criticism. Now, in the theories of Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey we are to see the development upon this base of an even more purely personal structure of criticism. Two of these men - Lamb and Hazlitt - are pure impressionists, criticizing literature wholly from their own

¹ Shawcross, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 236.

impressions of it; the third - De Quincey - works from certain principles, derived wholly or in part from Wordsworth and Coleridge, but in the criticism which results reveals himself to be primarily an impressionist. Annie Powell has suggested that one characteristic of the "romantic" is the desire " . . . to recreate a moment of his own spiritual experience . . . ,"¹ and certainly this characteristic is common to all three of these critics. Their criticism is essentially a recreation of their response to, their impression of, works of literature. They experience the power of Shakespeare, of Milton, of Wordsworth, and then attempt to recreate it in their own words. All of them follow the same path as Hazlitt in their criticism:

I say what I think: I think what I feel. I cannot help receiving certain impressions from things; and I have sufficient courage to declare . . . what they are.²

Wordsworth and Coleridge recognized that the basis of critical judgment must be the reader's own response, but they recognized also that the purely personal estimate was not enough in any man who pretended to the status of a critic. They both stressed that the critic who intends to sway his fellow's judgment must - if he is to perform his task properly - rise above the prejudices and associations of person, class, nation, and creed, and stand in the light of poetry as a man, simple and natural, but possessed of the knowledge, the sensitivity, the impartiality, in short, the taste, necessary to accept poetry as it is, not as he, as a reader, may wish it to be.

1 The Romantic Theory of Poetry, p. 5.

2 "A View of the English Stage," Preface, (1818), in P. P. Howe, ed., The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1930-1934, vol. 5, p. 175.

The men to whom we now turn accept their personal impressions alone as sure guides, and depend almost wholly upon them.

For Charles Lamb, the first of the three, poetry is an emotional activity in which " . . . passion is the all in all "1
Poetry exists to be felt and enjoyed, and in order to feel and enjoy it all that we need is a lively sensibility. Critical theories and dicta are of no real help. The true appreciation of poetry springs from the same human capacity for feeling which Rosamund Gray revealed as she walked with Elinor Clare during Elinor's first visit to the cottage.

. . . the girl's remarks were suggested, most of them, by the passing scene - and they betrayed, all of them, the liveliness of present impulse: - her conversation did not consist in a comparison of vapid feeling, an interchange of sentiment lip-deep - it had all the freshness of young sensation in it.²

To feel, to enjoy poetry to the full we must be willing to surrender our natures to it. If we can accept its stimulation as Rosamund accepted the stimulation of the world about her we can know the purest of delight. If we deaden the freshness of our natural responses with critical demands we lose our opportunity to know that delight.

In the pit [of the theatre] first begins that accursed critical faculty, which, making a man the judge of his own pleasures, too often constitutes him the executioner of his own and others! You may see the jealousy of being unduly pleased, the suspicion of being taken in to admire; in short, the vile critical spirit, creeping and diffusing itself, and spreading from the wrinkled brows and cloudy eyes of the front row sages and newspaper reporters (its proper residence) - till it infects and clouds over the

1 Lamb, Charles, Note to "Byron's Tragedy . . . by George Chapman," Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, (1808), in E. V. Lucas, ed., The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb, London, Methuen, 1903, vol. 4, p. 83.

2 Lamb, Rosamund Gray, (1818), in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 14, (Chapter 6).

thoughtless, vacant countenance, of John Bull tradesmen, and clerks of counting-houses, who, but for that approximation, would have been contented to have grinned without rule, and to have been pleased without asking why.¹

To enjoy one's own impression of a poem, a novel, a play, to be pleased without asking why one is pleased - these are the activities of the man who truly appreciates literature, and these form the basis of Lamb's whole approach to literature. For him the critical faculty is "accursed," "vile," an infectious disease that spreads over mankind, clouding the clear vision of youthful enjoyment, and leaving it blinded with suspicion, doubt, unsureness. Enjoy the "liveliness of present impulse," he urges; keep the "freshness of young sensation." Only with these natural responses to the world of poetry can we know the healthy exuberance of Chaucer, the intense power and humanity of Shakespeare, the sublimity of Milton.

Lamb once wrote of George Wither, "He seems to have passed his life in one continued act of an innocent self-pleasing."² His words are equally applicable to his own life in the world of literature. Although as a man he revealed a very real courage in his tender care of his sister, Mary, and a remarkable strength in his adjustment to the tragedy which darkened both their lives, as a lover of literature he too "passed his life in innocent self-pleasing." He was a man of strong likes and dislikes in literature, and his criticism consists almost entirely of attempts to express

1 Lamb, "Play-House Memoranda," (1813), in "Table-Talk in The Examiner," in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 159.

2 "On the Poetical Works of George Wither," (1818), in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 181.

what the works he liked meant to him, and to communicate something of his pleasure in them to others. In Rosamund Gray - which, despite its limitations as a narrative, is a rich mine for one who seeks an indication of Lamb's attitude as a critic - he writes of Allan Clare and Rosamund:

He would make her admire the scenes he admired - fancy the wild flowers he fancied - watch the clouds he was watching - and not unfrequently repeat to her poetry, which he loved, and make her love it.¹

Whether he writes of Ford's Broken Heart or a London fog, Shakespeare's Richard III or old china, a sonnet of Shelley's or an old actor, Lamb reveals the same attitude as Allan Clare: he too seeks to make us admire what he admires, fancy what he fancies, see what he sees, love what he loves. He stands in the thick vapour of a city fog and retains a certain impression of it:

In a well-mix'd Metropolitan Fog there is something substantial and satisfying - you can feel what you breathe, and see it too. It is like breathing water, as we may fancy the fishes do. And then the taste of it, when dashed with a fine season of sea-coal smoke, is far from insipid. It is also meat and drink at the same time: something between egg-flip and omelette soufflée, but much more digestible than either And it wraps you all round like a cloak, too - a patent water-proof one, which no rain ever penetrated.²

He reads The Broken Heart and finds the last scene of the play overpoweringly impressive:

I do not know where to find in any Play a catastrophe so grand, so solemn, and so surprising as this The

1 Lucas, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 8. (Chapter 4)

2 "London Fogs," (Date unknown), in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 351.

fortitude of the Spartan Boy who let a beast gnaw out his bowels till he died without expressing a groan, is a faint bodily image of this dilaceration of the spirit and exenteration of the inmost mind, which Calantha with a holy violence against her nature keeps closely covered, till the last duties of a Wife and a Queen are fulfilled. Stories of martyrdom are but of chains and the stake; a little bodily suffering; these torments

On the purest spirits prey
As on the entrails, joints, and limbs,
With answerable pains, but more intense.

What a noble thing is the soul in its strengths and in its weaknesses! who would be less weak than Calantha? who can be so strong? the expression of this transcendent scene almost bears me in imagination to Calvary and the Cross; and I seem to perceive some analogy between the scenical sufferings which I am here contemplating, and the real agonies of that final completion to which I dare no more than hint a reference.¹

He attends a performance of Richard III and rebels against stage performances of the play which leave one with a picture of Richard as no more than "A bloody tyrant and a homicide:"²

. . . is . . . this the impression we have in reading the Richard of Shakespeare? Do we feel anything like disgust, as we do at that butcher-like representation of him that passes for him on the stage? A horror at his crimes blends with the effect which we feel, but how is it qualified, how is it carried off, by the rich intellect which he displays, his resources, his wit, his buoyant spirits, his vast knowledge and insight into characters, the poetry of his part, - not an atom of all which is made perceivable in Mr. C.'s way of acting it. Nothing but his crimes, his actions, is visible; they are prominent and staring; the murderer stands out, but where is the lofty genius, the man of vast capacity, - the profound, the witty, accomplished Richard?³

No matter what he considers - be it fog, china, or men, a poem, or a play - Lamb's criticism is always of the same impressionistic, personal

1 Note to "The Broken Heart . . . by John Ford," Specimens of English Dramatic Poets, (1808), in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 218.

2 Richard III, V, iii, l. 247.

3 "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation," (1812), in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 105-106. "Mr. C." is G. F. Cooke, an actor of Lamb's day.

sort: he savours his subject until he has sucked out what for him is its essence, and he then distils that essence into his own words.¹

What we have in Lamb's criticism is, then, a very personal estimate of works of literature. It is Lamb, the individual man, Lamb, the near-idolater of John Ford, who turns to Calvary for a parallel to Calantha's catastrophe. What we have in such a passage is not an attempt at balanced judgment of the scene - such an attempt would have required the intervention of the vile, accursed critical faculty - but an attempt to communicate all the associations and emotions which entered into Lamb's own delighted impression of that scene. With Lamb we are in the world of the personal estimate.

Because his criticism is intensely personal Lamb does not always avoid the pitfalls which Wordsworth and Coleridge warned against. As we shall see, his praise of works he likes is sometimes excessive, and his criticism is, as he himself admits, often coloured by personal prejudice. Nevertheless, his work does have a very real value, and before we turn to its limitations we should be aware of its merits.

Like any honest impressionist, Lamb recognizes that impressions are variable things. My impression of Calantha's death may not be Lamb's. Even Lamb's own impression of it, which was one thing in 1808, might well have been something quite different in 1809. He sees, however, that different though every man's immediate impression of a work

1 Elton, O., A Survey of English Literature, 1780-1830, London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1912, vol. 2, p. 354.

may be from all others, each of us must try to achieve as rich an impression of any work of art as is possible, and to achieve this we must carefully prepare ourselves for the experience, and judiciously select its time and place. The finest possible painting of a rose would be lost upon us if displayed before a living rose-bush in full bloom. Among the Last Essays of Elia (1833) is one, "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading," in which Lamb makes this point with considerable effectiveness:

Much depends upon when and where you read a book. In the five or six impatient minutes, before the dinner is quite ready, who would think of taking up the Fairy Queen for a stop-gap, or a volume of Bishop Andrewes' sermons?

Milton almost requires a solemn service of music to be played before you enter upon him. But he brings his music, to which, who listens, had need bring docile thoughts and purged ears.

Winter evenings - the world shut out - with less of ceremony the gentle Shakespeare enters. At such a season, the *Tempest*, or his own *Winter's Tale* is fitting reading.¹

I once had the unhappy experience of attending a party where the host, at the peak of the evening's noise and gaiety, chose to play a very fine recording of Handel's Messiah. The effect was extremely disturbing. The consolation of the "Comfort ye," the tenderness of the foretelling of the Nativity ("And lo! a Virgin shall conceive"), the triumph of the "Hallelujah" - all the riches that make the Messiah what it is were lost upon us. We were prepared for the light-hearted and frivolous; we could not cope with the sublime. Our thoughts were not docile, nor our ears purged. We listened, but we did not hear.

On the other hand, as a boy I spent several summers with an aunt

1 Lucas, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 175.

and uncle on a farm in Saskatchewan. There I once found among my aunt's books an old copy of the works of Longfellow. I can still remember the delight with which I read Evangeline. Evening after evening I sat with the old book laid before me on the dining-room table, reading by lamplight the sad, sweet story of Evangeline and her lost love. During the past winter I again turned to the poem and found it feeble and sentimental, but because I first discovered it at the right time and in the right place I could know and appreciate its appeal.

Like Wordsworth, Lamb recognizes that we must come to literature prepared. Part of our preparation must be the selection of a time and place conducive to a full appreciation, a full impression of each poem or play we read. When we have prepared ourselves, then - and then only - can we hope to see what the poet wishes us to see. Probably Lamb's greatest value as a practising critic lies in " . . . his unsurpassed power to penetrate into the mind of the artist and to reveal what he has seen"¹ This power of penetration depends partly upon our willingness to prepare for the act of submission. Coupled with his innate sensitivity, it made Lamb the critic he was: "The spirit of the author descended upon him; and he felt it." What he felt he conveyed with exquisite sensitiveness to the reader."²

We have already seen that Lamb has little regard for abstract critical theories or dicta. For him - not only in his literary criticism, but in his essays on people and things as well - the concrete object is what matters, the object of which he has his impression. His concern is with the play, not with theories of the drama; with the man, not

1 Knox, R. S., "Charles Lamb, 1834-1934," University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 4 (October, 1934), p. 90.

2 Ibid., p. 89.

with ethical concepts. He works

. . . ever close to the concrete, to the details, great or small, of actual things, books, persons, and with no part of them blurred to his vision by the intervention of mere abstract theories¹

The path of personal criticism can lead one into error, but so, too, can the path of judgment based on abstract theory. (We have already seen the folly of criticism like Thomas Rymer's analysis of Iago.) When the personal critic keeps to the concrete, however, returning ever and ever again to the work he is considering, he does give us the opportunity to follow him if we wish, and if not, at least to grasp clearly what the work has meant to him. I cannot agree with Lamb's estimate of the catastrophe in Ford's Broken Heart,² but because he deals with the scene frankly and concretely, avoiding the temptation to fall back on vague abstractions, speaking always in specific terms of what the scene means to him, I can accept it as an honest, interesting

1 Pater, Walter, Appreciations, (1889), London, Macmillan, 1918, p. 109.

2 Nor could Hazlitt who has a very sensible comment on the scene in his Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth (Lecture IV, "On Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Ford, and Massinger," in Howe, op. cit., vol. 6, pp. 272-273): "This is the true false gallop of sentiment: anything more artificial and mechanical I cannot conceive.

" . . . that she should dance on with the same heroic perseverance in spite of the death of her husband, of her father, and of everyone else whom she loves, from regard to common courtesy or appearance, is not surely natural. The passions may silence the voice of humanity, but it is, I think, equally against probability and decorum to make both the passions and the voice of humanity give way (as in the example of Calantha) to a mere form of outward behaviour. Such a suppression of the strongest and most uncontrollable feelings can only be justified from necessity, for some great purpose, which is not the case in Ford's play; or it must be done for the effect and eclat of the thing, which is not fortitude but affectation. Mr. Lamb in his impressive eulogy on this passage in the Broken Heart has failed (as far as I can judge) in establishing the parallel between this uncalled-for exhibition of stoicism, and the story of the Spartan Boy."

expression of Lamb's response to a given work. Here is how Lamb feels about the play, not how theories tell him he should feel, and when the critic is a man of Lamb's sensitivity and taste, knowledge of how he feels about a work is never valueless.

There is, however, a very great danger in personal criticism - one which we have already seen Wordsworth and Coleridge stressing - that of allowing prejudice to sway our judgment. Lamb does not always avoid this danger. He himself saw his limitations as a critic: he knew himself to be incapable of wholly impartial judgment.

Whatever is, is to me a matter of taste or distaste; or when once it becomes indifferent, it begins to be disrelishing. I am . . . a bundle of prejudices - made up of likings and dislikings - the veriest thrall to sympathies, apathies, antipathies.¹

When Lamb criticizes a work he does so as Lamb, the individual man. We see the work through Lamb's eyes, eyes sometimes obscured by the man's prejudices and preferences. As an impressionist he builds his criticism wholly on his delight in certain works. If his impression of a work is pleasing to him he praises that work; if it is displeasing he rejects the work. He finds himself so delighted with Southey's Joan of Arc that he writes enthusiastically to Coleridge, " . . . I expect Southey one day to rival Milton. I already deem him equal to Cowper, and superior to all living Poets besides."² He finds himself so displeased with John Martin's Belshazzar's Feast that he writes to Bernard Barton rejecting it outright, deriding Martin's

1 "Imperfect Sympathies," Elia, (1823), in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 58.

2 Lamb to S. T. Coleridge, 8-10 June, 1796, in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 15.

"foolish little prophet," his "taylor-like remarks on the dresses," and his "Doctor Kitchener-like . . . [examination of] the good things at table."¹ He criticizes always from his own feeling for a work, his own enjoyment of it, and into such criticism, as he himself admits, personal sympathies, apathies, antipathies must inevitably enter.

Lamb's weaknesses as a critic are those of the pure impressionist:

He neither intends to be reliable nor pretends to be impartial. He must be read with a caution which comes from understanding him, and from being both able and willing to enter into the game he can play. Since he is truer to his whims than his subject he is not to be taken literally. He must have foreseen that modern dictionaries would define an opinion as a "judgment based on grounds short of proof." At any rate, he does not bother about being infallible. He writes quite frankly and disarmingly from his prejudices.²

If we can accept his criticism in this spirit we can find much in it that is both perceptive and illuminating; if, however, we look for calm, balanced judgment we may find ourselves badly misled.

In Lamb's approach to literature we have an open acceptance of the three basic tenets - all personal - on which Wordsworth and Coleridge erected their theories of poetry and criticism: poetry has its origin in an emotional excitement in the poet; it has its end in the rousing of pleasure in the reader; and he who would judge it must work from his own emotional response. Where Wordsworth and Coleridge, however,

1 Lamb to Bernard Barton, 11 June, 1827, in Lucas, op. cit., vol. 7, p. 731. Doctor William Kitchiner was the author of Apicus Redivivus; or, the Cook's Oracle, 1817. (Lamb's spelling of the surname is incorrect.)

2 Brown, John Mason, "Lamb as a Critic," Saturday Review of Literature, vol. 31 (July 31, 1948), p. 26.

see the need for certain intellectual abilities and powers in the man who assumes the mantle of critic, Lamb believes that all that is necessary is a capacity for fresh sensation and lively emotional response. He believes that abstract theories are a hindrance, and asks only that the critic convey frankly what he has felt in the presence of a work, and what pleasure he has derived from it: in short, that he honestly answer the question, What has been my own impression of it? Whether or not that impression reveals the influence of purely personal prejudices and associations does not greatly concern Lamb. What does concern him is that the impression rise spontaneously and vigorously in the presence of the poem, novel, or painting which the critic is considering.

With William Hazlitt we again find an acceptance of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's three basic tenets. For him too, "Poetry is the language of the imagination and the passions. It relates to whatever gives immediate pleasure or pain to the human mind."¹ It rises out of the heart of the poet, and speaks to the heart of the reader. It achieves its end if it brings the reader a feeling of pleasure. As we have found with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Lamb, we again find ourselves dealing with a man whose concept of poetry and its criticism is essentially personal.

In his theory of the source of poetry Hazlitt draws directly on Wordsworth's definition of poetry as

. . . the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity:

¹ Hazlitt, William, "Lectures on the English Poets," I, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 1.

the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition gradually begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on 1

The two essential features of Wordsworth's definition are initial stimulation (the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings") and subsequent contemplation, and these are equally essential features of Hazlitt's concept of poetry:

Wherever any object takes such a hold of the mind as to make us dwell upon it, and brood over it, melting the heart in tenderness, or kindling it to a sentiment of enthusiasm; - wherever a movement of imagination or passion is impressed on the mind, by which it seeks to prolong and repeat the emotion, to bring all other objects into accord with it, and to give the same movement of harmony, sustained and continuous, or gradually varied according to the occasion, to the sounds that express it - this is poetry.²

Following Wordsworth, Hazlitt recognizes that poetry springs out of a strong personal reaction to some aspect of life. It is not a contrived, mechanical thing, but the expression of intense personal feeling, an expression which finds its source in the poet's heart. Above all else a work of poetry must be this, and to achieve such an expression the poet must take care to hold fast to his initial feeling.

If this be not done, the artist may happen to impose on himself by partial reasoning, by a cold consideration of those animated thoughts which proceed, not perhaps from caprice or rashness (as he may afterwards conceit), but from the fulness of his mind, enriched with the copious

1 Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 35.

2 Hazlitt, "Lectures on the English Poets," I, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 12.

stores of all the various inventions which he had ever seen, or had ever passed in his mind. These ideas are infused into his design, without any conscious effort; but if he be not on his guard, he may reconsider and correct them, till the whole matter is reduced to a common-place invention.¹

What matters in a poem is the poet's feeling. The expression of that feeling makes the work poetry.

When we read Keats' sonnet, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer," we are reading a work which offers us Keats' own emotional response to Chapman's translation. Chapman's Homer has taken such a hold on Keats' mind as to make him dwell upon it. He has brooded over the work, found himself roused to a sentiment of enthusiasm. He has savoured his passionate response to Chapman, and has gradually enriched that response with all that forms his being as a man. He has ordered this full response of his being into a verbal expression communicable to the rest of mankind, an expression harmonious, sustained, continuous, and varied, in which we too can feel the passions which Keats felt when he first heard " . . . Chapman speak out loud and bold."²

In our consideration of Wordsworth and Coleridge we have already seen what must follow from a recognition of the source of poetry as a personal emotional response. Even as the poet's reaction to life is personal, so must be the critic's reaction to poetry. Milton's reaction to the persecution of the Waldenses was personal and, therefore, unique; my reaction to his sonnet will be personal and unique.

1 Reynolds, Sir Joshua, Thirteenth Discourse, quoted by Hazlitt in "On Genius and Common Sense," Table-Talk, Essay IV, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 33.

2 Keats, John, "On first looking into Chapman's Homer," l. 8.

Hazlitt recognizes that criticism must be fundamentally personal since it has its origin in the critic's emotional response to a work, even as poetry has its origin in the poet's emotional response to life:

In art, in taste, in life, in speech, you decide from feeling, and not from reason; that is, from the impression of a number of things on the mind, which impression is true and well-founded, though you may not be able to analyse or account for it in the several particulars.¹

Having recognized that criticism must be personal, Hazlitt frankly admits that what he offers in his criticism is but an honest expression of his own responses to art, responses coloured by all that he has been and known:

My opinions have been sometimes called singular: they are merely sincere. I say what I think: I think what I feel. I cannot help receiving certain impressions from things; and I have sufficient courage to declare . . . what they are.²

He recognizes and admits that his critical opinions must be personal because they are based upon his own impressions of works of art.

For Hazlitt all criticism of art must be essentially personal. The man who undertakes to criticize a work of sculpture, painting, music, or literature must depend to a high degree upon his own feeling for that work. This feeling will, in turn, depend upon his nature as a man. In criticizing what we might term the tangible arts, however, the critic is not left so completely dependent upon his own nature as he is in criticizing music or literature:

Painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies.

1 Hazlitt, "On Genius and Common Sense," Table-Talk, Essay IV, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 31.

2 "A View of the English Stage," Preface, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 175.

Painting embodies what a thing contains in itself; poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it. But this last is the proper province of the imagination.¹

In criticizing a painting we have the work, a representation of an actual object, visible before us; in criticizing a poem we have but a mass of suggestive words and phrases in which the poet has implied what a certain thing, or person, or event has meant to him. In his words the poet has sought to suggest all that he connects with his theme. About his theme he has left his imagination free to weave its web. Now for Hazlitt the imagination is an aggregative faculty, a power by which the human mind can gather a mass of associations about any thing, person, or idea. The richness of a poem depends upon the capacity of the poet's imagination as an aggregative power, and, similarly, the richness of our experience of a poem depends upon the capacity of our imaginations as aggregative powers. If, however, poetry merely suggests the poet's associations, what exists outside his object, and if each of us, as readers, has a different body of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual matter on which the poet's suggestions can work, the aggregate of each of our imaginative experiences of a poem will be unique. The suggestions of Lycidas will react in my being upon a mass of matter quite different from that they will affect in my neighbour's. The aggregate of associations which I build up about Milton's poem will be my own, unlike that of anyone else. Because my nature is my

1 Hazlitt, "Lectures on the English Poets," I, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 10.

own, my experience of that poem must be my own.

As we have seen, both Wordsworth and Coleridge clearly recognize that poetry demands a reciprocal interaction between poet and reader. Not only must the poet give his stimulation, but the reader must also give his submission. Each of us, as readers, must be willing to receive the suggestions of a poem and to allow them full freedom to act as they will upon us. Only when we do so can we hope to achieve that "sympathy with the artist's mind"¹ which is necessary if we are ever really to know a poem. And even when we do achieve that sympathy we must remember that although the poem - one agent in the poetic interaction - remains a constant, the reader - the second agent - is ever a variable. Hazlitt himself had a singular ability to become one with a poem:

So intimately did . . . [he] feel the spell of a work of genius, that its life-blood was transfused into his own He entered into the poet's creation with a sympathy amounting almost to poetic vision²

but even he was no more than the variable agent in the poetic interaction. As fully as he could he entered into the spirit of the poet, but, being an individual man, he could not - even if he had wished to - keep his response to poetry wholly free of personal elements. His responses to the poet's suggestions were his own. When he wrote the following lines on Ossian he truly entered into the strange spirit of the Ossianic poems, but he also gave expression to his own intensely personal impression of those poems:

As Homer is the first vigour and lustied, Ossian is the decay and old age of poetry. He lives only in the recollection and regret of the past. There is one impression

1 Zeitlin, Hazlitt on Literature, p. xlix.

2 Ibid., p. xlviii.

which he conveys more entirely than all other poets, namely, the sense of privation, the loss of all things, of friends, of good name, of country - he is even without God in the world. He converses only with the spirits of the departed; with the motionless and silent clouds. The cold moonlight sheds its faint lustre on his head; the fox peeps out of the ruined tower; the thistle waves its beard to the wandering gale; and the strings of his harp seem, as the hand of age, as the tale of other times, passes over them, to sigh and rustle like the dry reeds in the winter's wind! The feeling of cheerless desolation, of the loss of the pith and sap of existence, of the annihilation of the substance, and the clinging to the shadow of all things as in a mock-embrace, is here perfect If it were indeed possible to shew that this writer was nothing, it would only be another instance of mutability, another blank made, another void left in the heart, another confirmation of that feeling which makes him so often complain, "Roll on, ye dark brown years, ye bring no joy on your wing to Ossian."¹

For Hazlitt criticism is impressionism. The true critic seeks to communicate as fully and as clearly as possible the impression which a given work has made upon him; he tries to tell his readers what that work has meant to him as a man. "A genuine criticism should, as I take it, reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work . . . ;"² the critic must consider himself a medium through which the light and shade are filtered and intensified, and the soul and body made increasingly perceptible. We may here object - and with good reason - that such criticism is dangerous in its tendency to leave the average reader with the critics' impressions of works, and seldom with his own. The danger is, I believe, a real one, but, nevertheless, the man who will study

1 "Lectures on the English Poets," I, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 18.

2 Hazlitt, "On Criticism," Table-Talk, Essay XXII, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 217.

here? For utter purity of feeling and expression I know of only two comparable passages in English poetry: Lear's words to Cordelia,

Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish, fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady to be my
child Cordelia.¹

and the departure of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden,

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide.
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow
Through Eden took their solitary way.²

In the lines from the Clerk's Tale, as in these from King Lear and Paradise Lost, we do have "sentiment . . . 'that heaves no sigh, that sheds no tear,'" sentiment "as still and calm as the face of death," sentiment untouchable "in its ethereal purity: tender as the yielding flower, . . . fixed as the firmament." The critic who can reveal the light and shade, the soul and body of a work as Hazlitt has done with the Clerk's Tale does a real service to literature, and demonstrates that there is a place for impressionism in criticism.

Impressionism is, then, the flesh and spirit of Hazlitt's criticism. However, sensibility to impressions does not form the total equipment of his critic. Hazlitt follows Wordsworth and Coleridge in recognizing the need for taste in the man who assumes the task of

1 Shakespeare, William, King Lear, IV, vii, ll. 59-70.

2 Milton, John, Paradise Lost, XII, ll. 646-649.

judging for the guidance of others, and for Hazlitt, as for Coleridge, taste is a form of intellectual perception:

Where there is no conscious apprehension, there can be no conscious pleasure. Wonder at the first sight of works of art may be the effect of ignorance and novelty; but real admiration and permanent delight in them are the growth of taste and knowledge. 'I would not wish to have your eyes,' said a good-natured man to a critic, who was finding fault with a picture, in which the other saw no blemish. Why so? The idea which prevented him from admiring this inferior production was a higher idea of truth and beauty which was ever present with him, and a continual source of pleasing and lofty contemplations.¹

Our natural sensitivity as emotional beings will enable us to experience part of the effect of a work of art, but to experience it fully we must call into play our intellectual powers. Sensuous appreciation of art is not enough; we must understand as well.

To be dazzled by admiration of the greatest excellence, and of the highest works of genius, is natural to the best capacities, and to the best natures; envy and dullness are most apt to detect minute blemishes and unavoidable inequalities, as we see the spots in the sun by having its rays blunted by mist or smoke. It may be asked, then, whether mere extravagance and enthusiasm are proofs of taste? And I answer, no, where they are without reason and knowledge. Mere sensibility is not true taste, but sensibility to real excellence is.²

Hazlitt's recognition of the need for taste in the critic is no more than an acceptance of the fact that poetry demands the play of all Man's faculties if it is to be fully appreciated. It is rather interesting to conjecture to what extent Coleridge's influence led Hazlitt to make this sensible modification of his concept of criticism as impressionistic. As early as 1803 Coleridge had pointed out -

1 Hazlitt, "On the Pleasures of Painting," Table-Talk, Essay II, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 19.

2 Hazlitt, "Thoughts on Taste," (1818-1819), Uncollected Essays, VI, in Howe, op. cit., vol. 17, p. 63.

after a heated argument with Wordsworth and Hazlitt - a great weakness in the whole impressionistic attitude towards art:

. . . surely, always to look at the superficies of objects for the purpose of taking delight in their beauty, and sympathy with their real or imagined life, is as deleterious to the health and manhood of intellect as, always to be peering and unravelling contrivance may be to the simplicity of the affection and the grandeur and unity of the imagination.¹

When we find Hazlitt, fifteen years later, accepting and stressing the need for reason and knowledge in criticism we can almost hear the echo of Coleridge's words sounding along the dark caverns of the years.

Whether or not his recognition of taste as a requirement of the true critic resulted from Coleridge's arguments need not, however, concern us here. What does concern us is that we find Hazlitt, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, suggesting as a check on unlicensed impressionism the faculty of taste. The true critic will be " . . . a man of disinterested taste and liberal feeling . . . , " prepared to " . . . see and acknowledge truth and beauty . . . " wherever he finds it.² Given such taste and such feeling, this critic will be able to arrive at a just and sensitive appreciation of a work of art.

Many persons see nothing but beauties in a work, others nothing but defects. Those cloy you with sweets, and are 'the very milk of human kindness,' flowing on in a stream of luscious panegyrics; these take delight in poisoning the sources of your satisfaction, and putting you out of conceit with nearly every author that comes in

1 Coleridge, Anima Poetae, October 26, 1803, pp. 35-36.

2 Hazlitt, "On Criticism," Table-Talk, Essay XXII, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 225.

their way. The first are frequently actuated by personal friendship, the last by all the virulence of party-spirit.¹

Hazlitt's critic will reveal the real beauties and communicate his own delight in them, and he will indicate the real defects and communicate his displeasure with them. He will have known the initial stimulation of the work and have savoured it; he will have contemplated the work, using all his powers as a feeling and thinking being to enter into the spirit of it; and he will then have conveyed his full impression of it.

. . . the critic reacts on the art he enjoys - reacts masculinely, ardently, even wilfully - if he is Hazlitt; and so produces - if he be Hazlitt! - another work of art, of which the work he reviews is the subject-matter. He is inspired by it as one poet is inspired by another.²

All that we have seen in Hazlitt's theory of poetry and criticism is, in essence, personal. Poetry rises out of the poet's emotional being; it appeals to the reader's passions; it aims to bring the reader pleasure; its criticism depends upon the reader's impression; and that impression is, to some degree, controlled by the reader's taste. Hazlitt does recognize, however, one purely objective standard of judgment in his critical theories, that of long-established public opinion:

. . . we may be sure of this, that when we see nothing but grossness and barbarism, or insipidity and verbiage in a writer that is the God of a nation's idolatry, it is we and not they who want true taste and feeling.³

Homer, Virgil, Dante, Cervantes, Racine, Shakespeare - these are gods

1 Hazlitt, "On Criticism," Table-Talk, Essay XXII, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 220.

2 Elton, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 373.

3 Hazlitt, "On Criticism," Table-Talk, Essay XXII, (1821), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 8, p. 223.

of their nations' idolatry, and if we cannot recognize their worth, we, not they, are at fault. We might accuse Hazlitt here of going contrary to his own teachings: he has constantly stressed the need for a frank acceptance of our own impressions. Nevertheless, his words are sensible. The man who today cannot appreciate Shakespeare will do well to remain silent, for to declare that for him Othello is not poetry will mark him an insensitive fool, an honest fool perhaps, but a fool nonetheless.

We must note one thing, however, about Hazlitt's recognition of long-established public opinion as a guide to critical judgment. It holds only with men who are the gods of their nations' idolatry, with men like those whom I have suggested. He does not mean us to accept public recognition as a general standard of judgment. There are today altogether too many writers who have achieved wide recognition which men of discrimination deplore. The "best-seller" achieves great fame, and is widely read and praised, but it very seldom deserves its recognition. It too often directs its appeal to the lowest human interests, and the recognition it gains comes from men of little taste, of few standards. Hazlitt is aware of the fallacy of considering the number of those who like a work a just indication of its value. Apart from his acceptance of general recognition as a guide when we consider the "god of a nation's idolatry," he insists upon sensibility and taste in those men whose judgment he is willing to consider:

To agree with the greatest number of good judges is to be in the right; and good judges are persons of natural

sensibility and acquired knowledge.¹

With Thomas De Quincey we come to the last of our group of Romantic critics. In one very obvious respect he is an admirable figure to consider before we turn to Matthew Arnold: in De Quincey's critical theories we find both an acceptance of the personal response of the critic as the basis of criticism, and an attempt to determine and state the principles underlying that response. In his work we find criticism fully as impressionistic as that of Lamb, and Hazlitt, combined with a statement of principles - derived primarily from his study of Wordsworth and Coleridge - accounting for the impressions he has derived from works of literature. Like Lamb and Hazlitt in his acceptance of criticism as a communication of the critic's personal impression, like Wordsworth and Coleridge in his attempt to establish the principles of the artistic effects leading to that impression, De Quincey stands as a fusion of two major forces in Romantic criticism.

We have now seen that Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt all accept the concept of poetry as "the language of . . . the passions."² For all of them poetry is an emotional activity, one in which the heart is dominant over the mind, the capacity to feel over the capacity to reason. For De Quincey, too, poetry finds its source in the heart of man: it is

. . . the science of human passion in all its fluxes and refluxes - in its wondrous depths below depths, and its

1 Hazlitt, "Thoughts on Taste," (1818-1819), Uncollected Essays, VI, in Howe, op. cit., vol. 17, p. 65.

2 Hazlitt, "Lectures on the English Poets," I, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 1.

starry altitudes that ascended to the heavens.¹

In the very greatest works of literature the passions will be those of mighty men engaged in mighty conflicts, Man and the elements, Man and Man, Man and God; in lesser works the passions will be those of lesser men in the lesser conflicts of Man and society; but in all poetry the passions of mankind are dominant.

. . . in the earliest stages of literature, men deal with the great elementary grandeurs of passion, of conscience, of the will in self-conflict; they deal with the capital struggle of the human race in raising empires, or in overthrowing them - in vindicating their religion (as by crusades), or with the more mysterious struggles against spiritual races allied to our own, that have been dimly revealed to us. We then have an Iliad, a Jerusalem Delivered, a Paradise Lost. These great subjects exhausted, or exhausted in their more inviting manifestations, inevitably by the mere endless motion of society, there succeeds a lower key of passion. Expanding social intercourse in towns, multiplied and crowded more and more, banishes those gloomier and grander phases of human history from literature. The understanding is quickened; the lower faculties of the mind - fancy, and the habit of minute distinction, are applied to the contemplation of society and manners. Passion begins to wheel in lower flights, and to combine itself with interests that in part are addressed to the insulated understanding - observing, refining, reflecting. This may be called the minor key of literature in opposition to the major, as cultivated by Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton.²

Whether we stand with Hector and Andromache at the Scaian Gates of Troy, with Lear and his Fool on the heaths of England, with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, with Belinda and the Baron at Hampton Court, or with Tam and Souter Johnny in the tavern at Ayr - wherever we find ourselves in the world of poetry there we find the passions, the heart of man. In

1 "Recollections of Hannah More," in David Masson, ed., The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey, Edinburgh, Adam and Charles Black, 1890, vol. 14, p. 117.

2 De Quincey, "The Poetry of Pope," (1848), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 11, pp. 60-61.

elevation and intensity these passions will vary from poem to poem, but they are the essence of all poetry.

In his recognition of the emotional nature of poetry De Quincey stands in direct line with Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt, and all that we have said of the inevitable effect of such recognition on one's critical approach holds for De Quincey as it did for the others. Poetry springs out of the poet's emotional being and addresses the reader's. To the extent that each of us is a unique emotional being, each of us will experience a unique response to a poem.

When he comes to consider the end of poetry, however, De Quincey differs somewhat from the others, although, as we shall see, the difference is probably not so great as De Quincey himself believes. In his Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1800) Wordsworth had stated his belief that the end of poetry was not knowledge, but pleasure. This belief, as we have seen, was accepted by Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt: for all of them the end of poetry was pleasure, pleasure of the most intense, elevated, satisfying sort. As a necessary preliminary to the experiencing of this pleasure Wordsworth saw that the reader of taste will actively participate in the poetic activity. He will exert a co-operating power within himself in order to unite with and share in the greater power of the poet. Even as the poet will have exerted his every faculty as a man in the creation of his poem, so must the reader exert his every faculty to appreciate the poem. Neither can perform his function in the poetic activity while reclining on the bed of slothful ease. From the interaction of the two actively exerted powers will result the reader's feeling of pure delight which Wordsworth

held to be the end of poetry. For Wordsworth the power of the poet and the power of the reader are complementary, reciprocal aids to the achieving of that delight.

In De Quincey we find an unwillingness to accept pleasure as the end of poetry. As we shall see when we come to consider his law of the idem in alio, he does recognize that part of the effect of poetry lies in the pleasure which it brings, but he rejects as degrading the belief that pleasure is the true end of poetry. In its place he offers power. Now where Wordsworth sees power as a means to an end, De Quincey sees it as the end itself. Accepting knowledge as the end of all writing which does not seek to move, he offers power as the end of poetry:

The true antithesis to knowledge . . . is not pleasure, but power. All that is literature seeks to communicate power; all that is not literature, to communicate knowledge. Now, if it be asked what is meant by communicating power, I, in my turn, would ask by what name a man would designate the case in which I should be made to feel vividly, and with a vital consciousness, emotions which ordinary life rarely or never supplies occasions for exciting, and which had previously lain unawakened, and hardly within the dawn of consciousness as myriads of modes of feeling are at this moment in every human mind for want of a poet to organize them? I say, when these inert and sleeping forms are organized, when these possibilities are actualized, is this consciousness and living possession of mine power, or what is it?¹

And to illustrate his point he asks,

When, in King Lear, the height, and depth, and breadth, of human passion is revealed to us, and, for the purposes of a sublime antagonism, is revealed in the weakness of an old man's nature, and in one night two worlds of storm are brought face to face - the human world, and the world of physical nature - mirrors of each other, semi-choral antiphonies, strophe and antistrophe heaving with rival convulsions, and

1 "Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected," Letter III, (1823), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 10, p. 48.

with the double darkness of night and madness, - when I am thus suddenly startled into a feeling of the infinity of the world within me, is this power, or what may I call it?¹

Now what De Quincey says of King Lear is certainly true. Any one who has experienced the effect of that play will grasp the very rightness of De Quincey's impression, will know that the mighty tragedy of the work does leave one's being in a state in which "inert and sleeping forms are organized, . . . possibilities are actualized," and the entire man is left with a "consciousness and living possession of . . . power." However, when De Quincey rebels against accepting pleasure as the end of poetry is he doing any more than halting the poetic process one step earlier than Wordsworth? Wordsworth recognizes that the experience of power is a considerable element in the poetic action, but he goes one step beyond power and sees the end of poetry as the elevated pleasure which spreads through the human being with the acquisition of this power; De Quincey stops with power.

Whether or not we agree with De Quincey depends to a great degree upon whether or not we hold pleasure to be a degrading end for poetry.

1 "Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected," Letter III, (1823), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 10, p. 49. De Quincey appears to have fluctuated between two levels in his concept of power. At times he has no more in mind than the capacity of poetry to move us as all true poetry does, be it lyric, satire, epic, or tragedy. At other times, however, he conceives of power as something higher than the mere rousing of emotions, and offers us - as he does here - a concept identical with Longinus' sublime. When he speaks here of the " . . . feeling of the infinity of the world within me, . . . this power," he is speaking in almost the very words which Longinus uses to describe the effect of transport which the sublime in literature can have upon us: " . . . the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer." (On the Sublime, I, 4, p. 43) He is not at all clear whether he means by literature of power works of sublimity, or merely all works which move.

From our analysis of the critical theories of Wordsworth and Coleridge we have seen that they conceive of poetry as the most exalted activity of man. The poet is

. . . the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.¹

It is a common characteristic of Romantic critics to hold the poet in high esteem as a great man enriching the lives of his fellows.

It is evident that the theory of literature as power is one variant of a basic conception which informs the ideas of all the romantic critics and philosophers, and which may be named the romantic theory of art or of poetry. This conception is one of the high role of the poet as philosopher, priest, or prophet, and of poetry itself as having the practical power of enlarging and ennobling the being of man and the power of communicating knowledge of spiritual reality.²

Here is a noble conception, one well grounded in actual fact. If, like De Quincey, we find it repugnant to accept the end of such a man's work as pleasure we can do as he does and accept it as power, an apparently more elevated end. If, however, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt, we can accept its end as pleasure we shall, I believe, be merely recognizing that following upon the acquisition of the sense of power comes the keen, elevated pleasure which great poetry can bring to the receptive being, a pleasure not

1 Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

2 Proctor, Sigmund Kluss, Thomas De Quincey's Theory of Literature, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1943, p. 139.

blind or unthinking, not cheap or vulgar,¹ but pure, ennobling, enriching.

In any case, the end which De Quincey sees for poetry is fully as personal as that which the other four men see. The sense of power which poetry brings us is the result of a stimulation and co-ordination of our latent passions. The function of poetry - or literature of power - is simply to move, and it appeals primarily not to the dry, cold intellect, but to the warm hearts of living men:

. . . it does and must operate, else it ceases to be a literature of power, on and through that humid light which clothes itself in the mists and glittering iris of human passions, desires, and genial emotions.²

Since the passions, desires, and genial emotions will be those of individual men, so will the sense of power vary with each recipient. The effect of a poem will differ with each reader. In every man who reads Paradise Lost there will be a common resultant sense of power, but that sense of power will vary in nature as each man varies from all others:

. . . what you owe [to the poem], is power, that is, exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards - a step ascending as upon a Jacob's ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above the ladder. All the steps of knowledge, from first to last, carry you further on the same plane, but could never raise you one foot above your ancient level of earth: whereas the very first step in power is a flight - is an ascending movement into another element where earth is forgotten.³

1 Wordsworth, "Letter to John Wilson (Christopher North)," (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 3.

2 De Quincey, "The Poetry of Pope," (1848), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 55.

3 Ibid., p. 56.

Like Wordsworth's pleasure, De Quincey's power is a personal response, depending for its nature upon the reader's own "latent capacity of sympathy with what the poet has to offer.

Those emotions or feelings the conscious possession of which is power . . . are revelations or intuitions of "the infinity of the world within me" - the full range of human passions and values In short, they are intuitions of the sublime. The feelings are latent in the minds of all; literature's function is to actualize them.¹

For De Quincey, then, the end of poetry is power, a revelation or intuition of the sublimity of the soul of man. This revelation is accomplished by means of an intense stimulation of man's emotional being. In the last scene of Marlowe's Faustus we see Faustus in the ultimate agony of Man. Damned to perpetual torment because of his unholy pact with evil, he stands on the very brink of Hell. One hour remains to him. All in the soul of man that craves peace after the tumult of life, absolution from the binding cerements of sin, the light of Heaven after the darkness of mortality, cries out in the being of this unhappy man. Sinful and knowing that he is sinful, weak and knowing his weakness, he tries desperately to find the refuge of the Cross:

The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The Devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.
O! I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?
See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul - half a drop: ah, my
Christ!²

But with the naming of Christ the torments of Lucifer seize upon him.

1 Proctor, op. cit., p. 127.

2 Scene XIV, ll. 67-70.

He prays Lucifer to spare him. The torments cease, but now comes a terrifying vision of the wrathful God:

. . . see where God
Stretcheth out his arm, and bends his ireful brows!
Mountain and hills come, come and fall on me,
And hide me from the heavy wrath of God!¹

In utter fear he searches for the hiding place that is not, the hiding place from God. Desperately he suggests a terrible bargain:

Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years -
A hundred thousand, and at last be saved!²

But even as he suggests it he realizes that " . . . no end is limited to damned souls."³ The clock strikes. The hour is ended. The full, inconceivable agony of damnation rises in him, and with the cry of the soul in ultimate terror before the God it has defied - "My God! my God! look not so fierce on me!"⁴ - Faustus descends into the world of the lost.

In such a scene as this we find an intense stimulation of our emotions. Through this stimulation the poet reveals for us the infinity, the sublimity which lies within us. This, for De Quincey, this sense of revealed power, is the end of poetry.

Before we can fully experience the power of poetry, however, we must be prepared to participate actively in it. We have seen that Wordsworth and Coleridge stress the need for submission to the poet, and submersion in the poem. De. Quincey fully agrees. To know the

1 Doctor Faustus, ll. 74-77.

2 Ibid., ll. 93-94.

3 Ibid., l. 95.

4 Ibid., l. 111.

power of Marlowe's Faustus the reader must seek to see " . . . everything from the inner point of view of the artist."¹ What we take from that play will depend to a high degree upon what we bring to it. All that we have been will enter into our response. Speaking of a work of music De Quincey writes in his Confessions:

. . . it is sufficient to say that a chorus . . . of elaborate harmony displayed before me, as in a piece of arras-work, the whole of my past life - not as if recalled by an act of memory, but as if present and incarnated in the music; no longer painful to dwell upon, but the detail of its incidents removed, or blended in some hazy abstraction, and its passions exalted, spiritualised, and sublimed.²

De Quincey here reveals fully the intensely personal nature of his approach to art. In the work which we experience we find our beings as men "present and incarnated." Because De Quincey's being is a different entity from mine his experience of Marlowe's Faustus will be a different experience from mine. His criticism of it will, therefore, also be different from mine. Each will reflect a personal response. If we accept De Quincey's view of the function of the critic, each criticism will be " . . . a vessel for the power called forth and communicated."³ Each will be an expression of the critic's own impression.

We have already observed that such a concept of criticism has the value of sincerity, and - in the case of such critics as Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey - the value of being an expression of the feelings

1 Elton, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 313.

2 Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, (1856), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 391.

3 Darbishire, H., ed., De Quincey's Literary Criticism, Introduction, London, H. Frowde, 1909, p. 26.

of men of sensibility and taste. It has in it also, however, the seeds of anarchy. Writing of De Quincey's pride in his early recognition of Wordsworth's genius, John Fowler makes a very sensible comment on criticism which builds wholly upon the critic's personal impression:

"Was I then, in July, 1802, really quoting from Wordsworth? Yes, reader; and I only in all Europe." I confess that I have long suspected De Quincey of some exaggeration, though probably unintentional exaggeration, in this matter. He has the not altogether singular tendency to view himself as the centre of any subject he has under contemplation. In The Vision of Sudden Death, for example, the central point of the tragedy is De Quincey's personal inability to rouse himself to avert the catastrophe. So he cannot view the question of Wordsworth's recognition by the world objectively; he must place himself at the central point in the situation. In this manner of approaching literary criticism De Quincey has many descendants at the present day. The manner has indeed become conscious of itself and pleased with itself: we have critics who seriously maintain that the sole business of criticism is to put before us a personal impression, a personal point of view.¹

As we have earlier observed, the danger is that such personal impressions as these, springing as they do from a personal point of view, may reflect more of the nature of the critic than of the nature of the work.

In his essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," for example, De Quincey

. . . recreates the expression of the passage by identifying it with living feelings of his own. But because he considers a poem for the feelings to which it gives rise and not for the expression, he is apt to foist upon the poetic passage feelings which it suggests in him through peculiarities of his own character and circumstance.²

As we shall see, we have in "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth"

1 De Quincey as Literary Critic, Oxford University Press, 1922, p. 11.

2 Powell, op. cit., p. 180.

the very sort of criticism against which Matthew Arnold was to rebel, and which was to lead to Oscar Wilde's frank declaration that the critic was but another artist creating new works of art out of his experience of old works.

In his criticism, however, De Quincey does attempt more than the mere communication of impressions. He was a man of deep feeling, but he was also a man of keen intellect, and, like Coleridge, he was not satisfied with a mere acceptance of the impressions of poetry. Working from those impressions he sought to determine the principles underlying them. He recognized that the effects of all great poetry have some common characteristics, and he attempted to abstract from those common characteristics the principles of artistic effect. Throughout his work we find two forces in operation, a " . . . constancy in believing in an impression for which he cannot account, combined with the restless desire to find a reason for the faith that is in him "1

Only three of De Quincey's principles - or "laws" - need concern us here. These are the law of the idem in alio, the law of antagonism, and the law of ebb and flow. The first of these, the law of the idem in alio, is, for De Quincey, the basic principle of all the fine arts:

In all alike, more or less directly, the object is to reproduce in the mind some great effect, through the agency of the idem in alio. The idem, the same impression, is to be restored; but in alio, in a different material, - by means of some different instrument.²

The effect of any work of art springs from the fact that it offers what

1 Darbishire, op. cit., p. 11.

2 De Quincey, "The Antigone of Sophocles," (1846), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 10, p. 368.

Coleridge terms "sameness, with difference."¹ Waxwork is not art because it offers but a " . . . mechanic imitation, some imitation founded in the very fact;"² we do not find ourselves under the spell of artistic illusion, but merely disturbed by the delusion that we are looking upon life where life should not be. Art extracts the essence from life and offers us that essence in a purified form through a medium far removed from the actual world. The stage, the canvas, the orchestra, the sculptor's marble - these are not life; these are not the idem, the actual objects of the natural world; they are the alio, the different material through which we perceive the essence of life. They are not the actual fact; they are an instrument to reveal the reality behind the fact. Through them we can perceive the reality because they are far removed from the accidentals which in life enshroud and conceal that reality.

. . . a sculptor will draw tears from you, by exhibiting, in pure statuary marble, on a sepulchral monument, two young children with their little heads on a pillow, sleeping in each other's arms; whereas, if he had presented them in waxwork, which yet is far more like to flesh, you would have felt little more pathos in the scene than if they had been shown baked in gilt gingerbread. He has expressed the idem, the identical thing expressed in the real children; the sleep that masks death, the rest, the peace, the purity, the innocence; but in alio, in a substance the most different; rigid, non-elastic, and as unlike to flesh, if tried by touch, or eye, or by experience of life, as can well be imagined.³

From the operation of the principle of the idem in alio in art we

1 Biographia, vol. 2, p. 12. (Chapter 14)

2 De Quincey, "The Antigone of Sophocles," (1846), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 10, p. 369.

3 Loc. cit.

experience at least three distinguishable effects which enter into our impression of any successful work. The first of these is a " . . . sense of pleasure in the mere perception of idem in alio, or similitude in dissimilitude . . . ;"¹ the second, " . . . the pleasure of admiring the beauty of workmanship involved in reproducing a given effect in a different material - the beauty of resistance overcome . . . ;"² and the third, for De Quincey far the most important, " . . . a great effect [power], . . . achieved by means of idealizing the subject through the selection of a suitable material or method."³

The second of De Quincey's great laws, that of antagonism, is very close in nature to his idem in alio. In the idem in alio we find a reconciliation of the matter of life with the medium of art, and in the law of antagonism we find a reconciliation of conflicting matters in the one entity. We have already seen that for De Quincey much of the effect of King Lear comes from that "sublime antagonism" in which " . . . the height, and depth, and breadth, of human passion is revealed to us . . . in the weakness of an old man's nature . . . "⁴ Mighty passions in a feeble vessel - here is the antagonism of art. Again, in Wordsworth's "We are seven," he finds the blackness of Death heightened by its essential antagonism to the light

1 Proctor, op. cit., p. 100.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Ibid., pp. 100-101.

4 De Quincey, "Letters to a Young Man Whose Education Has Been Neglected," Letter III, (1823), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 10, p. 49.

of a little child's innocence:

In the poem of We are Seven, which brings into day for the first time a profound fact in the abysses of human nature - viz. that the mind of an infant cannot comprehend the aboriginal darkness . . . - the little mountaineer who furnishes the text for this lovely strain, she whose fulness of life could not brook the gloomy faith in a grave, is yet (for the effect upon the reader), brought into connexion with the reflex shadows of the grave: and if she herself has not, the reader has, and through this very child, the gloom of that contemplation obliquely irradiated, as raised in relief upon his imagination, even by her. That same infant, which subjectively could not tolerate death, being by the reader contemplated objectively, flashes upon us the tenderest images of death. Death and its sunny antipole are forced into connexion.¹

Through this meeting of one force with its antithesis the poet intensifies our awareness of both. He achieves a more vivid effect upon his audience.

The third of De Quincey's laws is that of ebb and flow:

In all poetic enthusiasm, however grand and sweeping may be its compass, so long as it is healthy and natural, there is a principle of self-restoration in the opposite direction; there is a counter-state of repose, a compensatory state, as in the tides of the sea, which tends continually to re-establish the equipoise. The lull is no less intense than the fury of commotion.²

No matter how powerful the passions of a poem may be, no matter how intense their effect upon a reader, there is inevitably - in great poetry - a final impression of tranquillity. The Iliad builds up from Achilles' initial wrath to the mighty drama of his battle with Hector, but comes to a quiet close with Hector's funeral rites;

1 "On Wordsworth's Poetry," (1845), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 11, pp. 301-302. Italics in l. 7 mine.

2 De Quincey, "Notes on Gilfillan's Literary Portraits: Keats," (1846), in Masson, op. cit., vol. 11, p. 379.

Paradise Lost traces the fall of the angels, and Man's temptation by Satan, but ends with the tranquil though poignantly moving departure of Adam and Eve from Eden; Doctor Faustus reveals the agony of the damned soul, but ends with the calm wisdom of the Chorus: all great works of art leave us in a state of repose in which mighty conflicts are resolved, and the spirit is left with " . . . calm of mind all passion spent."¹

Now all three of these laws - sound as, I believe, they are - have one feature in common, one which again reveals the very personal nature of De Quincey's criticism. They are not laws which can be applied from without. All are derived from De Quincey's own impressions of poetry. All seek to explain the personal effects of poetry: pleasure and power in the case of the idem in alio, intensification of awareness in the law of antagonism, excitement and repose in the law of ebb and flow. In De Quincey's laws we do not find objective standards of criticism, but an analysis of the personal effects of poetry.

De Quincey's criticism, then, offers the highly personal impressionism of Lamb and Hazlitt, coupled with an attempt to determine the basis of his impressions. His " . . . main interest, like Coleridge's, lay in the analysis and the passionate experience of 'states of mind.'² Throughout his work we find him trying to tell us what poetry means to him, trying " . . . to gauge the

1 Milton, John, Samson Agonistes, l. 1758.

2 Powell, op. cit., p. 164.

significance . . . "1 for him of individual poems:

. . . the value of this criticism was . . . that it suggested unfathomable depths in a wide ocean of genius - a sea on which we could set sail in our own tiny barques of criticism and plunge in the net, confident that we should draw up some spoil worth the having though we should never exhaust the riches of the unharvested deep.²

In his criticism, however, we see poetry as De Quincey sees it: we sail his ocean in his barque, we plunge in his net, and draw up his riches.

We have now analyzed the personal basis of Romantic criticism as established by Wordsworth and Coleridge. We have hurriedly surveyed the highly personal critical theories developed by the three impressionists, Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey, and seen the development of a critical attitude which stresses above all else the personal response of the individual critic. We have seen the rise of a school of criticism which denies the value of tests of judgment drawn from outside the nature of him who experiences the effects of art. Now, with Matthew Arnold, we are to see a reaction against much of this attitude and an attempt to restore some sort of objective standard to criticism.

1 Fowler, op. cit., p. 8.

2 Loc. cit.

IV

The Attempt of Matthew Arnold to Restore Objective Standards to Criticism

In the introduction to his selection of Hazlitt's essays, Hazlitt on Literature, Jacob Zeitlin - who has a real appreciation of the value of Hazlitt's criticism - makes a very sensible observation on the inherent weakness of impressionistic criticism as a whole:

The impressionist's aim is to record whatever impinges on his brain, and though with a writer of fine discernment it is sure to be productive of exquisite results, as criticism it is undermined by the impressionist's assumption that every appreciation is made valid by the very fact of its existence.¹

We have now seen enough of the critical work of Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey to appreciate the justice of Zeitlin's comment. We have seen all these men offering as criticism their own impressions of works of literature, impressions rich and often illuminating, but nonetheless intensely personal. We have seen, too, that the only justification for our accepting these impressions as criticism is that they reveal to us the effect which great art can have on a sensitive spirit. Accepting art - as these men do - as an emotional activity, we can test our own emotional responses to it against those of men like Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey. If we find in The Broken Heart the spiritual nobility which Lamb feels, or in The Clerk's Tale the purity of sentiment which Hazlitt experiences, or in King Lear the

1 p. xli.

"sublime antagonism" which De Quincey detects, we can claim a certain justification for our response to the work: we feel about that work as a man of great sensitivity and taste has felt. Every student has, at one time or another, known the private satisfaction of finding his response to a work of art sanctioned by a chance remark revealing that a teacher he respects has responded in a similar way. Every student, too, has known the illumination which a perceptive teacher can bring to a work which has hitherto had little effect upon him. That such sanction and such illumination can be very valuable is obvious, but we must be aware that all that the student does in the one case is find a similarity in two personal responses, and in the other (frequently, although not always) accept one man's response as his own. Much impressionistic criticism is valuable only in the same way. It sanctions our own emotional responses to art, or it offers us another man's highly emotional response which appeals to our own hearts much as poetry itself appeals.

Its function is to move, not to teach: its object to suggest and not define It substitutes heightened colouring for clean outline; and its emotional appeal tends to count for more than its intellectual content.¹

At its best, impressionistic criticism can have a real value. He who reads De Quincey's "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth" may well find - as I have myself - that the original scene in the play takes on a new power and significance. The impressionistic critic often has an admirable ability to reveal hidden depths in literature:

1 Darbishire, De Quincey's Literary Criticism, Introduction, p. 28.

He concentrates upon his feeling, "passes it through a prism and radiates it into distinct elements." By bringing the dim impression into the full light of consciousness he makes his reader experience more fully and distinctly the effect of a poem, gives to him something of his own power of imaginative reconstruction.¹

We must not under-rate such criticism. It is valuable. We must, however, recognize that it has serious limitations. The impressionist concentrates upon his feeling. His criticism is bound up within his own emotional self. The world in general and the human intellect are subordinated to self and feeling. If criticism be no more than an expression of one man's feelings while journeying through the world of art, such subordination is essential. If, however, it is more than this, if we can rightly expect of it a calm, balanced estimate of the value of works of art for all mankind, this subordination is an ever-present danger:

To reason from [one's] feelings does not conduce to . . . hard clarity of thought . . . ; it is a process that encourages, rather, a warm clamminess of the mental integument inimical to straight thinking.²

Wordsworth and Coleridge saw the danger inherent in their concept of poetry and criticism, and they sought to guard against it. They stressed that the critic must be a man of taste, a man of knowledge, judgment, and impartiality, a man capable of rising above the level of self to the level of man. The impressionists who followed them, however, took as their credo Hazlitt's "I say what I think: I think what I feel."³ The result was that criticism became a form of art,

1 Powell, The Romantic Theory of Poetry, p. 177.

2 Ward, A. C., The Frolic and the Gentle, London, Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1934, p. 218.

3 "A View of the English Stage," Preface, (1818), in Howe, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 175.

an expression of one man's emotional response to an aspect of life. When Lamb eulogizes the catastrophe in The Broken Heart he is writing as a poet, and he " . . . not only limits himself to the creation of what is at best minor poetry: he expressly negates the existence of the very field in which he is working."¹ Instead of bringing us closer to a clear perception of The Broken Heart as it really is, he introduces the colouring of his own vision into our perception. We are now kept from a true perception of Ford's play, not only by our own limitations, but also by Lamb's persuasive poem on the play. If criticism were nothing but poetry based on poetry, we should find ourselves moving ever further and further from a just appreciation of the great works of poetry. But the task of criticism is surely, above all else, to bring us closer to such an appreciation, and to the degree that the impressionist fails in this task he does "negate the existence of the very field in which he is working."

For Matthew Arnold the Romantic concept of criticism as impressionism was inadequate. He saw that the end of criticism must be " . . . to see the object as in itself it really is,"² and he saw, too, that the impressionistic critic substituted for this an end which could be quite different: to communicate what he saw - or thought he saw - in the object. For Arnold such an attitude towards criticism was but one more manifestation of the weakness which he believed pervaded the whole of English life in the first quarter of

1 McKenzie, Gordon, Organic Unity in Coleridge, University of California Press, 1939, p. 2.

2 Arnold, Matthew, "On Translating Homer," Lecture II, (1861), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, Oxford University Press, 1914, p. 285.

the nineteenth century, a weakness resulting from the French Revolution. That revolution had derived its power from " . . . the force, truth, and universality of the ideas which it took for its law "1 It had within it the seeds of an "epoch of expansion,"2 a period of "fresh thought, intelligent and alive."3 Had it remained a movement in the world of ideas it might well have borne fruit in the form of " . . . a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power "4 England - and all Europe - might have known a period comparable to that of Sophocles' Athens, and Shakespeare's England. As it happened, however, the Revolution turned to practical political ends, and sought to impose its ideas forcibly upon all men. The result was that an opposition developed to the Revolution. Because men could not assent to the imposition of its ideas from without they barricaded themselves against it. They fought it not only on the battlefields of Europe, but also in their own minds. They refused to admit its ideas into their thinking. About their minds they established a cordon sanitaire. They turned into themselves for the matter of their thought, and in place of a " . . . free play of the mind upon all subjects . . . "5 they settled on an intensely introspective study of self. Nowhere did this study reveal itself more clearly than

1 Arnold, Matthew, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), London, Macmillan & Co., 1902, p. 11.

2 Ibid., p. 17.

3 Ibid., p. 8.

4 Loc. cit.

5 Ibid., p. 16.

in the literature of the period, much of which was devoted to self-revelation. In poetry Byron and Shelley laid their hearts bare to the gaze of all, and in prose Hazlitt and De Quincey indulged themselves in the luxury of confession in the Liber Amoris and The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. In literary criticism the men whom we have considered in the last chapter offered their hearts as sounding-boards on which to test poetry, and in doing so they reduced criticism to self-revelation. For them criticism was a far more limited activity than for Matthew Arnold who saw it as an exercise of curiosity:

It obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.¹

For Arnold criticism was much more than a mere communication of a personal response: it represented an attempt to "know the best that is known and thought in the world." Through the critical activity the life of a nation could know the benefits of " . . . a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power "² In place of the inbreeding which the criticism of the impressionists offered, Arnold's criticism offered new blood, new vitality to both the world of literature and the world of men.

Before turning to a detailed analysis of Arnold's theory of criticism, however, we should recognize that his concept of poetry

¹ Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), pp. 16-17.

² Ibid., p. 8.

has certain affinities with that of the Romantics. Like the men whom we have considered, Arnold recognizes the essentially emotional nature of poetry. He believes that when we read a true poet " . . . the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can "1 Like Coleridge, he recognizes that " . . . what comes from the heart, that alone goes to the heart "2 Poetry rises in the heart of the poet, and addresses the heart of the reader: "Poetical works belong to the domain of our permanent passions: let them interest these, and the voice of all subordinate claims upon them is at once silenced."3 Like the Romantics, Arnold recognizes that poetry is an emotional activity, and that it seeks to bring pleasure to the reader: "A poetical work . . . is a representation from which men can derive enjoyment."4

To a considerable degree, therefore, Arnold's concept of poetry is in line with that of the Romantic critics, and had he demanded no more of poetry than a representation of intense emotion bringing pleasure to the reader, he might well have become another impressionistic critic in the line stretching from Lamb to Wilde. However, Arnold requires much more of poetry than emotion and pleasure alone. He recognizes that these have a place in the poetic activity, and he recognizes that they give poetry its appeal, but for him poetry is not merely a delightful world of emotional stimulation: it is

. . . at bottom a criticism of life; . . . the greatness

1 Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, (1888), London, Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1905, p. 10.

2 Coleridge, The Friend (Section 2, Essay 11, 1818), p. 345.

3 Arnold, Preface to Poems, (1853), in Sir A. T. Quiller-Couch, ed., The Poetical Works of Matthew Arnold, Oxford University Press, 1909, p. 4.

4 Ibid., p. 2.

of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life, - to the question: How to live.¹

Now at first sight these lines from the essay on Wordsworth seem to indicate that Arnold advocates mere didacticism in poetry, metrical moralizing. However, although the ideas which the poet applies to life are moral in nature,

A large sense is . . . to be given to the term moral. Whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live,' comes under it.

'Nor love thy life, nor hate; but, what thou liv'st,
Live well; how long or short, permit to heaven.'

In those fine lines Milton utters, as every one at once perceives, a moral idea. Yes, but so too, when Keats consoles the forward-bending lover on the Grecian Urn, the lover arrested and presented in immortal relief by the sculptor's hand before he can kiss, with the line,

'For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair' -

he utters a moral idea. When Shakespeare says, that

'We are such stuff
As dreams are made of, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep,'

he utters a moral idea.²

The criticism of life which Arnold believes poetry offers is something much more than what we customarily think of as didacticism. If we were called upon to offer an example of didactic verse - using the term in its usual sense - we should hardly suggest the line from the Ode on a Grecian Urn, or, for that matter, the passage from The Tempest. However, for Arnold these are examples of the moral ideas which poetry applies to life, and they are moral in the sense that anything is moral

1 Arnold, "Wordsworth," (1879), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, pp. 143-144.

2 Ibid., pp. 142-143.

that offers us a perception of some truth of life. In Keats' line the truth is that of the permanence of the ideas of love and beauty: though the objects, the men and women, in which these ideas are manifested may perish, love and beauty themselves remain - they always have been; they always will be. In Shakespeare's lines the truth is that of the insignificance of man's life: we think that our sorrows and our joys are important, but they are no more than the stuff of dreams, soon to be dissipated when we sink into the nothingness of the deep, eternal slumber of death. These ideas are moral because they are true, and they offer a partial answer to the question "How to live" in the sense that awareness of any truth is a help to man in his adjustment to life.

In the Preface to Poems (1853), Arnold gives a fairly clear indication of what he means by poetry as a criticism of life. Dealing with the effect of the truly great classics of the past upon a reader, he writes,

As he penetrates into the spirit of the great classical works, as he becomes gradually aware of their intense significance, their noble simplicity, and their calm pathos, he will be convinced that it is this effect, unity and profoundness of moral impression, at which the ancient Poets aimed; that it is this which constitutes the grandeur of their works, and which makes them immortal.¹

And again, in the essay on Wordsworth, he writes,

. . . a great poet receives his distinctive character of superiority from his application, under the conditions immutably fixed by the laws of poetic beauty and poetic truth, from his application, I say, to his subject, whatever it may be, of the ideas

'On man, on nature, and on human life,'

1 Arnold, Preface to Poems, (1853), in Quiller-Couch, op. cit., p. 13.

which he has acquired for himself. The line quoted is Wordsworth's own; and his superiority arises from his powerful use, in his best pieces, his powerful application to his subject, of ideas on man, on nature, and on human life.¹

Now it is obvious that Arnold here conceives of the ideas of poetry as something far more vital than mere moral maxims. The ideas of the ancients are ideas of "intense significance," "noble simplicity," "calm pathos." If we turn back to the matter with which those writers dealt we find that it is man and the tragedy of man on earth. The grief of Priam, the pride of Agamemnon, the jealousy of Medea, the horror of Oedipus: these are the themes of Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. These are the themes in which the significance, nobility, and pathos of man and his life are revealed. These are the themes in which the universal truths of life are made manifest. These are the concrete representations of Plato's Ideas. What the great poet reveals in his poetry is the reality of life, the Idea which lies back of the actual world. As Aristotle suggests in his theory of art as mimetic representation, the poet perceives in his theme some universal truth, a truth which lies hidden to the limited gaze of most men. In his poem the poet reveals that truth in a purified form which all men can grasp if they will follow his lead. Now although Aristotle's universal is a truth which lies as a potential within the actual object, and Plato's Idea is a reality existing only in the mind of God, the truth which both represent is one, and what the poet offers is a concrete

1 Essays in Criticism, Second Series, pp. 140-141.

manifestation of this truth, this universal, this Idea. The ancient Greeks perceive the reality, the Idea of man's life, its meaning, its nobility, its tragedy. They perceive it, and even though it may sadden them, they accept it as a truth.

There, on the mountain and the sky,
On all the tragic scene they stare.¹

In their poetry they reveal this truth, and in so doing they apply ideas to life; they offer a criticism of life.

When we conceive of poetry as a criticism of life, then, we conceive of it as an activity which, although it makes its appeal by its delightful stimulation of the emotions, has yet a higher mission:

" . . . it has to bring man into harmony with life, to explain life to him, to tell him how to live."² It does not teach explicitly, through moral maxims: it detects and reveals the idea, the ideal of life, and offers that idea in concrete form. The great poet does not offer us a "working" morality, but he does take us into the very presence of the truth which underlies all morality, and in so doing he joins the company of the greatest teachers, those of whom Kahlil Gibran speaks in The Prophet:

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple,
among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather
of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the
house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold
of your own mind.³

1 Yeats, W. B., Lapis Lazuli, ll. 51-52.

2 Worsfold, W. B., The Principles of Criticism, London, George Allen, 1897, p. 175.

3 New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1946, p. 62.

If we experience Oedipus Rex to the full we do have a richer appreciation of life because - through Sophocles - we have seen what life truly is. "In this sense poetry can hardly be denied to be a criticism of life; it is the winning portrayal of the ideal of human life as this ideal shapes itself in the mind of the poet."¹ Or, in Arnold's words,

The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power; by which I mean . . . the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them. When this sense is awakened in us, as to objects without us, we feel ourselves to be in contact with the essential nature of those objects, to be no longer bewildered and oppressed by them, but to have their secret, and to be in harmony with them; and this feeling calms and satisfies us as no other can.²

For Arnold, then, poetry is more than a revelation of the poet's heart. It is a criticism of life. The poet does give expression to his own feelings, but in so doing he offers to mankind a concrete representation of the reality, the ideas of life. Those men who say that "A true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history . . . is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry"³ fail to grasp the full intent of the great poet. In the poetry of Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Milton - poetry which does reveal the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry - we find no such limited concept. Their poetry offers not only the strong emotions of living men, but also a criticism of life through the concrete manifestation of ideas, ideas which are moral

1 Worsfold, op. cit., p. 150.

2 "Maurice de Guérin," Essays in Criticism, First Series, p. 81.

3 Arnold, Preface to Poems, (1853), in Quiller-Couch, op. cit., p. 8.

because they are truths.

We have seen that because the impressionists accept poetry as a purely emotional activity their emotional activity their emotional response to it serves as their criticism of it. If a work moves them deeply they acclaim it as great poetry. Strong feeling is all they require of poetry, and if they find it in a poem they are satisfied. Their criticism of the poem is an expression of their response to it. Whatever associations may have entered into their response are accepted without question; such associations have merely been agents in the full enriching of that response. Arnold, however, sees poetry as the embodiment of truth. The poet has looked on life and perceived its essential nature. His poem offers a concrete presentation of the essential truth of being. If we are to see what the poet has seen we must do all in our power as men to cleanse ourselves of personal associations and see the poet's work as in itself it really is.¹ To do this we must do what we have already seen Wordsworth advocate: we must rise above considerations of self, class, nation, and creed, and stand as men, simple and natural. The moment that we let our own associations as individual men enter into our appreciation of a poem we cease to see that poem as it really is, and deny ourselves its vision of truth. We may still experience an emotional response to the poem, but we lose its value as a criticism of life.

Arnold's concept of criticism, therefore, is quite different from

1 Arnold, "On Translating Homer," Lecture II, (1861), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, p. 285.

that of the impressionists. He recognizes that the task which he offers the critic is one of almost insurmountable difficulty. Where the impressionist, by confessing that he writes merely what he feels, can often speak " . . . out of a whim or a crochet or a mere personal inclination,"¹ Arnold requires that the true critic convey a perception of the essential nature of the poem.

Now poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth. It is no small thing, therefore, to succeed eminently in poetry. And so much is required for duly estimating success here, that about poetry it is perhaps hardest to arrive at a sure general verdict, and takes longest.²

The very greatest poetry has " . . . a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can."³ If we are to know the full benefit of such poetry we must stand with the poet and see his poem as he meant us to see it. Only by doing so can we perceive the truth which he has perceived, benefit from the criticism of life which his poem offers, and arrive at a real estimate of the value of the poem as a work of literature.

For Arnold . . . there are, quite definitely, both a true reading and also a false; for him one must not put into the work of art "whatever one wishes" or "see in it whatever one chooses to see." To be a critic, one should "see the object as in itself it really is." And that is the tenor and spirit of Arnold's whole critical effort.⁴

Arnold suggests one great guide in arriving at a real estimate of a poem:

1 Sherman, Stuart Pratt, Matthew Arnold, How to Know Him, Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1917, p. 154.

2 Arnold, "Wordsworth," (1879), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 128.

3 Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 5.

4 Stoll, E. E., "Critics at Cross-Purposes," ELH, vol. 14 (1947), p. 323.

. . . constantly in reading poetry, a sense for the best, the really excellent, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, should be present in our minds and should govern our estimate of what we read.¹

The true critic will be a man who knows what great poetry can offer. He will know the great works of the past - the epics of Homer and Milton, the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare, the Divine Comedy of Dante - and his knowledge of them will guide him in his judgment. He will not, however, allow that judgment to be swayed by two fallacious estimates, the historical and the personal, both of which can hinder him from a true reading of the poem. "A poet or a poem may count to us historically, they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves, and they may count to us really."² These two fallacious estimates - the historical and the personal - are but two results of the same error in critics, that of bringing to " . . . the consideration of their object some individual fancy" ³ The critic who allows his concern from the historical place of a work of literature to affect his judgment

. . . often is distracted from the enjoyment of the best, and with the less good he overbusies himself, and is prone to over-rate it in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him.⁴

The criticism which he offers frequently results in such unbalanced estimates as the comparison of Caedmon to Milton, the praise of the Chanson de

1 "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 6.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Arnold, "On Translating Homer," Lecture II, (1861), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, p. 285.

4 Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 12.

Roland in terms befitting only the Iliad and Odyssey. The critic who offers a personal estimate of poetry - as we have seen Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey do - falls into the trap of offering his own emotional response to a poem as a just estimate of it, forgetting that

Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet's work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance. Here also we over-rate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise which is quite exaggerated.¹

- The true critic does make use of both historical matter and his personal response in his consideration of a poet's work, but his great aim is to see that work as it really is, and to estimate how nearly it approaches the level of the truly great. Only by so doing can he arrive at a real estimate.

Everything depends on the reality of a poet's classic character. If he is a dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best (for this is the true and right meaning of the word classic, classical), then the great thing for us is to feel and enjoy his work as deeply as ever we can, and to appreciate the wide difference between it and all work which has not the same high character. This is what is salutary, this is what is formative; this is the great benefit to be got from the study of poetry. Everything which interferes with it, which hinders it, is injurious. True, we must read our classic with open eyes, and not with eyes blinded with superstition; we must perceive when his work comes short, when it drops out of the class of the very best, and we must rate it, in such cases, at its proper value. But the use of this negative criticism is not in itself, it is entirely in its enabling us to have a clearer sense and a deeper enjoyment of what is truly excellent. To trace the labour, the attempts, the weaknesses,

1 Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 7.

the failures of a genuine classic, to acquaint oneself with his time and his life and his historical relationships, is mere literary dilettantism unless it has that clear sense and deeper enjoyment for its end.¹

We should note one thing, however, about Arnold's doctrine of the importance of seeing the object as in itself it really is. Arnold was a sensible man. He appreciated as well as anyone else that no matter how disinterested, how objective the approach, no critic can ever see a poem precisely as it really is. He appreciated that some personal associations or prejudices must inevitably enter into every response to a poem. Nevertheless, if every man who pretends to the title of critic will make every possible effort to stand with the poet, to see the poem as in itself it really is, every criticism of a poem will bring mankind a little closer to a true reading, a real estimate of that poem:

To try and approach truth on one side after another, not to strive or cry, nor to persist in pressing forward, on any one side, with violence and self-will, - it is only thus, it seems to me, that mortals may hope to gain any vision of the mysterious Goddess, whom we shall never see except in outline, but only thus even in outline.²

We have already mentioned that Arnold follows Wordsworth in his insistence on the need for the critic's rising above personal considerations of self, class, nation, and creed, and standing as a man, simple and natural, untouched by any concern other than the perception of truth. For Arnold disinterestedness is the great essential of all true criticism:

1 Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, pp. 10-11.

2 Arnold, Preface to Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), p. v.

It is of the last importance that . . . criticism should clearly discern what rule for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word, - disinterestedness. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called "the practical view of things;" by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches. By steadily refusing to lend itself to any of those ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with. Its business is, as I have said, simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas. Its business is to do this with inflexible honesty, with due ability; but its business is to do no more, and to leave alone all questions of practical consequences and applications, questions which will never fail to have due prominence given to them.¹

Criticism must be above sect and party: it must be " . . . not the minister of these interests, not their enemy, but absolutely and entirely independent of them."² If criticism deserts the ideal of disinterestedness and allows itself to be infected with personal, or political, or sectarian interests, it can no longer perform its function of knowing the best that is known and thought in the world.³ It must be disinterested, for " . . . without . . . [a] free disinterested treatment of things, truth and the highest culture are out of the question."⁴ And the critic of literature must have not

1 Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), pp. 18-19.

2 Ibid., p. 20.

3 Ibid., p. 16.

4 Ibid., p. 27.

only disinterestedness in matters concerning his relationship with the rest of mankind, but also disinterestedness in matters concerning his relationship with the literature which he criticizes.

To handle these matters properly there is needed a poise so perfect, that the least overweight in any direction tends to destroy the balance. Temper destroys it, a crotchet destroys it, even erudition may destroy it. To press to the sense of the thing itself with which one is dealing, not to go off on some collateral issue about the thing, is the hardest matter in the world. The 'thing itself' with which one is here dealing, - the critical perception of poetic truth, - is of all things the most volatile, elusive, and evanescent; by even pressing too impetuously after it, one runs the risk of losing it. The critic of poetry should have the finest tact, the nicest moderation, the most free, flexible, and elastic spirit imaginable; he should be indeed the 'ondoyant et divers,' the undulating and diverse being of Montaigne. The less he can deal with his object simply and freely, the more things he has to take into account in dealing with it, - the more, in short, he has to encumber himself, - so much the greater force of spirit he needs to retain his elasticity. But one cannot exactly have this greater force by wishing for it; so, for the force of spirit one has, the load put upon it is often heavier than it will well bear.¹

We have now seen that Arnold accepts poetry as an emotional activity, but requires of it that it be a criticism of life. It offers such a criticism through the concrete manifestation of moral ideas, of truths of life. To enjoy the benefit of this criticism the reader must see the poem (the object) as in itself it really is; whatever of himself enters into his reading of the poem may hinder him from so seeing it. To ensure that he does see it as it really is the reader must try to keep individual whims and fancies out of his response to the poem: he must beware of both the historical and the personal estimates. He must try, above all else, to maintain a disinterested

¹ Arnold, "On Translating Homer, Last Words," (1862), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, pp. 384-385.

approach to the literature he reads: he must let the poem be what it is, not what he wishes it to be.

All that we have thus far considered in Arnold's critical theories has had to do with the critic as an individual man, and the essence of most of it is to be found in the one word disinterestedness. We have been dealing with the question of the critic's own response to literature. We come now to one of Arnold's critical standards which does not depend upon the critic as a man, but upon critics as a group. For an anticipation of this standard we can turn back, strangely enough, to the impressionist, Hazlitt. We noted in our survey of his critical theories that despite his constant emphasis upon the personal response as the basis of criticism he does recognize one non-personal standard of judgment, that of long-established public opinion.¹ Now, in Arnold, we find a similar recognition of the value of a body of enlightened opinion, although Arnold favours a more organized body than does Hazlitt. Arnold recognizes that the great force leading to the creation of true poetry is energy in the poet. The work of Shakespeare springs from power in the man himself.

And what that energy, which is the life of genius, above everything demands and insists upon, is freedom; entire independence of all authority, prescription, and routine, - the fullest room to expand as it will.²

For the man of creative genius a body such as the French Academy, a body of fixed intellectual authority, can be a hindrance. However,

1 See pp. 80-82 above.

2 "The Literary Influence of Academies," Essays In Criticism, First Series, (1865), p. 51.

such a body can also have a very real value in the establishment of standards in those matters of literary composition which are the concern of the intellect, matters of form, evolution, precision, and proportion.

So far as routine and authority tend to embarrass energy and inventive genius, academies may be said to be obstructive to energy and inventive genius, and, to this extent, to the human spirit's general advance. But then this evil is so much compensated by the propagation, on a large scale, of the mental aptitudes and demands which an open mind and a flexible intelligence naturally engender, genius itself, in the long run, so greatly finds its account in this propagation, and bodies like the French Academy have such power for promoting it, that the general advance of the human spirit is perhaps, on the whole, rather furthered than impeded by their existence.¹

Bodies like the Academy serve the valuable function of setting standards, and creating a force of educated taste and opinion capable of detecting and chastening those writers who fail to meet those standards. Because England lacks such a body both the creation and the criticism of its literature are purely personal. In the creation of literature, as Arnold admits, the lack of an Academy may often prove a value, but in the criticism of literature this lack presents a real danger:

It is not that there do not exist in England, as in France, a number of people perfectly well able to discern what is good . . . from what is bad, and preferring what is good; but they are isolated, they form no powerful body of opinion, they are not strong enough to set a standard, up to which even the journeyman-work of literature must be brought, if it is to be vendible. Ignorance and charlatanism in work of this kind are always trying to pass off their wares as

1 "The Literary Influence of Academies," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), p. 52.

excellent, and to cry down criticism as the voice of an insignificant, over-fastidious minority; they easily persuade the multitude that this is so when the minority is scattered about as it is here; not so easily when it is banded together as in the French Academy.¹

Because England lacks a controlling body to set standards in literature many Englishmen believe " . . . that there is no such thing as a high correct standard in intellectual matters; that every one may as well take his own way . . . ;"² and English poets and critics fall into " . . . habits of wilfulness and eccentricity, which hurt our minds, and damage our credit with serious people."³ In Arnold's view the country as a whole would be better for an organized " . . . force of critical opinion controlling a learned man's vagaries, and keeping him straight "⁴

Now there is considerable good sense in all that Arnold says, and were an Academy possible in which all the members were men of Arnold's own taste and discrimination, the effect of such a body on the cultural life of the nation would doubtless be most beneficial. However, the great danger in such a body is that instead of a force of enlightenment it become a force of suppression. There are far more Francis Jeffreys in the world of criticism than there are Matthew Arnolds. We need but turn to some of the greatest names in our own literature to appreciate the reality of this danger. What would have been the fate of William Blake at the hands of a rigidly orthodox

1 "The Literary Influence of Academies," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), p. 57.

2 Ibid., p. 58.

3 Loc. cit.

4 Loc. cit.

academy? How would the Bronte sisters have fared before a strictly Victorian court of literature? What verdict would have been passed on John Donne before the present century? Despite Arnold's arguments - and they have much truth in them - I cannot but feel that it is a sound instinct in the English people that has kept them from the establishment of an English counterpart of the French Academy. True, their failure to found such a group has led to idiosyncracies in both the creation and the criticism of literature, but it has also left men free to speak honestly and freely from their hearts. Where the French Academy helped France to the brilliance of Racine, our freedom gave England the glory of Shakespeare. We may have lost something in form and standards, but we have kept the inestimably valuable freedom to speak as inspiration tells us to speak.

Arnold may, however, be right in the case of literary criticism. An academy would offer a standard by which men could test the soundness of their own criticisms of literature. Readers could find in it " . . . a standard higher than one's own habitual standard in intellectual matters, . . . a superior ideal."¹ Given an academy, we might be spared such criticisms as one by an American reviewer which I recently read which damned a currently popular novel (by an English author) for no apparently better reason than that a sexually perverted character in it happened to be an American consular official. Whether the novel is good or bad I do not know - I have not read it - but the "criticism" of it is not criticism at all. Had we an academy to give

¹ "The Literary Influence of Academies," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), p. 49.

us a grasp of literary standards, writers might pause before foisting such reviews upon us, reviews which demonstrate only too well the truth of Arnold's words:

. . . there exists too little of what I may call a public force of correct literary opinion, possessing within certain limits a clear sense of what is right and wrong, sound and unsound, and sharply recalling men of ability and learning from any flagrant misdirection of these their advantages.¹

In his consideration of the value of literary academies we find Arnold suggesting the establishment of standards outside, and above, the individual critic, standards to which the critic can turn for "a superior ideal" by which he can weigh the validity of his own judgments. Arnold also suggests the establishment of standards within the critic, standards by which he can test works of poetry before arriving at a judgment. These personal standards are his famous touchstones. He believes that

. . . there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, an infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of this quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them.²

As examples of what he means he suggests passages from Homer, Dante,

1 "On Translating Homer, Last Words," (1862), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, p. 382.

2 "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, pp. 16-17.

Shakespeare, and Milton, and declares:

These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate.¹

Now among his touchstones he suggests Dante's "In la sua voluntade e nostra pace";² Hamlet's dying words to Horatio:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain
To tell my story;³

and Milton's description of Satan:

Darken'd so, yet shone
Above them all the archangel; but his face
Deep scars of thunder had intrench'd, and care
Sat on his faded cheek⁴

These passages - along with all the others he offers as touchstones - have in common " . . . the possession of the very highest poetical quality,"⁵ that quality which we find in poetry in which both the matter and substance and the manner and style have " . . . a mark, an accent of high beauty, worth and power."⁶ In such poetry we find both matter which demonstrates the truth of Aristotle's " . . . profound observation that the superiority of poetry over history consists in

1 "The Study of Poetry" (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 19.

2 Paradiso, iii, 85. "In His will is our peace."

3 Hamlet, V, 2, ll. 357-360.

4 Paradise Lost, I, ll. 599-602.

5 "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 20.

6 Ibid., p. 21.

its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness . . . , "1
and style which possesses that grandeur which " . . . arises in
poetry, when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with sim-
plicity or with severity a serious subject."2

At first sight Arnold seems to advocate in his touchstone
theory that we merely stock our minds with great lines of poetry,
and when we wish to determine the value of a new work we test a
few of its lines against a few of our touchstones to see whether
or not they are in any way comparable. If the new work rises to the
level of the touchstones we accept it as great poetry; if not, we
relegate it to its relative position. Now if Arnold means no more
than this in his touchstone theory the theory well deserves the harsh
judgment of Sir Walter Raleigh:

Nothing so bizarre has ever been done in so serious a
spirit since the foolish fellow of the classical story
brought a sample brick to market in the attempt to sell
his house. He too was a pedant, but he must yield the
prize to the English professor, who taught poetic archi-
tecture all his life, and when he was asked to pass judg-
ment on the merits of a church and a town-hall, was con-
tent to handle a brick from each.³

However, I cannot but think that Arnold - who was, as we have had rea-
son to observe before now, a sensible man - means something far more
intelligent than what Raleigh suggests. Arnold explicitly says of his
touchstones that " . . . we are not to require . . . other poetry to
resemble them; it may be very dissimilar."⁴ Surely he means here to

1 "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 21.

2 "On Translating Homer, Last Words," (1862), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, p. 399.

3 Some Authors, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923.

4 "The Study of Poetry," (1880), Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 17.

guard his theory against the very idiocy of application which Raleigh believes he advocates. The use of Arnold's touchstones does not require the comparison of two bricks to determine the relative value of two cathedrals: it merely requires that the critic be a man who has read sufficiently widely and sufficiently carefully to have stocked his mind with a thorough knowledge of the great literature of the world. Out of his reading he will have garnered a small treasure-house of passages which, for him, are of the essence of poetry, passages which, in the sweat of labour, the pain of grief, the lone silence of night, he has contemplated and come to know as he knows himself. These passages have become a part of him, spirit of his spirit. As they have permeated his being, as he has known the consummate joy which they offer, he has unconsciously, involuntarily, developed a taste for poetry which rises to the level of these passages. When he comes to criticize new poetry the critic - often quite unaware of what he is doing - will have this treasure-house of touchstones, and the literary taste which they have brought him, as guides in arriving at his judgment.

Arnold may have meant in his touchstone theory the ridiculous activity which Raleigh suggests, but I doubt it. He was too wise a man, too intelligent a critic to have thought that the comparison of one brick - one line - from Paradise Lost with one from the Ode on a Grecian Urn would be sufficient to justify an estimate of the relative value of the two poems. Surely the touchstone theory is no more than a suggestion of a base on which we can develop a true, a sound, literary taste.

I have devoted considerable space to Arnold's touchstone theory because of its importance for our present purposes. We have now seen enough of Arnold's critical attitude to appreciate that he strongly opposes the purely personal critical approach of the impressionists. We have seen him demanding of the critic that he see a poem as in itself it really is; we have seen him seeking to establish external standards by which the critic can test the validity of his estimates; now in the touchstone theory we see him seeking to establish a set of standards within the critic. However, we must note one great paradox in the touchstone theory: the standards, the touchstones, at which each critic will arrive must depend, to a high degree, upon himself as a man. The lines which will linger in my memory will not necessarily be those which will linger in my neighbour's. What we have in the touchstone theory is then an attempt to erect universal standards on the base of personal response. However, if every critic will make Arnold's initial effort to see the object as in itself it really is, the touchstones at which men of sensitivity and intelligence will arrive will probably have a fair degree of uniformity. The fact that most men of sensitivity and intelligence today agree on the value of Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton suggests that they will.

From all that I have said of Arnold's critical theories, one great fact emerges: the critic is a man who seeks to determine what is good:

. . . it is the critic's first duty, prior even to his duty of stigmatising what is bad - to welcome everything

that is good. In welcoming this, he must at all times be ready, like the Christian convert, even to burn what he used to worship, and to worship what he used to burn. Nay, but he need not be thus inconsistent in welcoming it; he may retain all his principles: principles endure, circumstances change; absolute success is one thing, relative success another. Relative success may take place under the most diverse conditions; and it is in inappreciating the good in even relative success, it is in taking into account the change of circumstances, that the critic's judgment is tested, that his versatility must display itself. He is to keep his idea of the best, of perfection, and at the same time to be willingly accessible to every second best which offers itself.¹

The critic is not merely a minor poet communicating his own delight in works of literature: he is a man who has the ability to stand as man, sensitive and enlightened, able to " . . . discover and define . . . the dominant tendency of his age, to analyze the good from the bad, foster the good, diminish the bad"² He will perceive the truth of the great poet's ideas and seek to reveal that truth to those less perceptive than he; he will perceive the falsity of the bad poet's work and reveal that. He not only perceives the good, but also propagates it: he recognizes that he has " . . . two obligations - to strive to possess the best ideas, and to strive to make his ideas prevail."³ He achieves the great end of criticism when he leads man " . . . towards perfection, by making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty

1 "On Translating Homer, Last Words," (1862), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, p. 409.

2 Trilling, Lionel, Matthew Arnold, New York, Columbia University Press, 1949, pp. 159-160.

3 Brown, E. K., Matthew Arnold, a Study in Conflict, Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1948, p. 209.

and fitness of things."¹

Above all else, Arnold requires of the critic that he be a man who is well-rounded, a man who feels deeply and who knows much, a man of sympathy and wisdom. He must be one with a " . . . true sense for his subject," and "a disinterested love of it."² He must be a man who has felt the passions of poetry, but has kept a balanced sense of judgment to enable him to determine its truth, its value for mankind. He is a man

. . . of nicest discernment in matters intellectual, moral, aesthetic, social; of perfect equipoise of powers; of delicately pervasive sympathy; of imaginative insight; who grasps comprehensively the whole life of his time; who feels its vital tendencies and is intimately aware of its most insistent preoccupations; who also keeps his orientation towards the unchanging norms of human endeavour; and who is thus able to note and set forth the imperfections in existing types of human nature and to urge persuasively a return in essential particulars to the normal type. The function of criticism, then, is the vindication of the ideal human type against perverting influences. . . . ³

In our study of Arnold's critical theories we have seen a strong reaction against the concept of criticism as purely personal response. We have seen Arnold point out the danger of such criticism: it can blind us to the highly beneficial truth of poetry. We have seen him advocate the establishment of standards - both external and internal - by which the critic can determine the best from the inferior. We have seen him recognize that the critic must feel the emotional power of poetry, but that that feeling alone does not lead to balanced criticism.

1 "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Essays in Criticism, First Series, (1865), p. 21.

2 "On Translating Homer, Last Words," (1862), in Essays by Matthew Arnold, p. 423.

3 Gates, Lewis E., Three Studies in Literature, London, Macmillan, 1899, pp. 139-140.

The virtue of his attitude is balance, a balance which depends on universality of interest, unity of spirit and sobriety of temperament - in a word, it is the excellence of culture.¹

1 Brown, E. K., ed., Representative Essays of Matthew Arnold, Toronto, Macmillan, 1936, p. xi.

The Analytical Impressionism
of Walter Pater

We have now traced the development of the personal estimate through the critical theories of six men. We have seen Wordsworth and Coleridge establish Romantic criticism on an essential personal base, but we have also seen them warn of the errors into which such criticism can fall. We have seen Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey - disregarding the warning - develop on that base a frankly impressionistic criticism, depending almost entirely upon the critic's emotional response, and communicating that response to the reader. We have seen Arnold rebel against criticism of this sort: we have seen him deny that the communication of an emotional response is the function of criticism; we have seen him summon the critic to return to his fundamental task of seeing the object as in itself it really is, the task of perceiving the poet's truth and propagating it. Now, in Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, we are to see the culmination of the development. We are to see a return to the impressionism of Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey, and ultimately - in the theories of Wilde - a frank declaration that " . . . the highest criticism really is the record of one's own soul."¹ Coleridge saw that the true critic must be " . . . a poet, at least in posse,"²

1 The Critic as Artist, I, Intentions (1891), London, Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1919, p. 139.

2 Anima Poetae, p. 128. (From Chapter 4, 1805)

but for Coleridge the critic's powers as a poet were but a means to a true perception of the work of art as in itself it really is, a means to the end of detecting the value, the depth, the significance, of the work as it is for all men. Wilde, too, sees the critic as a poet, but for him the critic no longer uses his powers as a means to a perception of the work as it really is, but as a means to the creation of a new poem which finds no more than its suggestion in the original work. With him criticism loses its identity to become one with poetry, a communication of emotional response.

In Walter Pater we find a man who builds the structure of his critical theory - and of his life - about one central belief:

. . . what is secure in our existence is but the sharp apex of the present moment between two hypothetical eternities, and all that is real in our experience but a series of fleeting impressions . . .¹

What is past is gone; what is to come is unknown; all that we have is the immediate moment, and to know the fullest richness of life we must endeavour to make that moment yield its utmost. Like all Epicureans, all Cyrenaics, Pater believes that we must experience each moment of life to the full, for the moment is all that we can be sure we have.

. . . we are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve - les hommes sont tous condamnés à mort avec des sursis indéfinis: we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more.²

Therefore, since we cannot be sure that anything will follow this immediate moment of living,

1 Pater, Walter, Marius the Epicurean, (1885), London, Macmillan, 1910, vol. 1, p. 146.

2 Pater, Walter, The Renaissance, Conclusion (1868), London, Macmillan, 1910, p. 238.

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.¹

For Pater there is but one way in which man can maintain this ecstasy of the moment, and that is by living in the world of the beautiful, the world of art. Pater is not a sensualist. When he speaks of burning with a hard gem-like flame he has no thought of the delights of the flesh. He was greatly disturbed to discover that some young men - notably Oscar Wilde - believed that he advocated complete license in the indulgence of bodily desires. Physically, his own life was one of strict asceticism; he was himself a most moral, abstemious, continent man. What he does have in mind when he speaks of burning with a hard, gem-like flame is the pure, aesthetic joy of art, art which, for Pater, is beauty. We are given an interval of living; "Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest, at least among 'the children of this world,' in art and song."² There, in art and song, lies our opportunity of " . . . getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time"³ of life.

Pater believes that we must turn to the world of art if we are to know the highest joy of living because of all man's activities art

1 Pater, The Renaissance, Conclusion, (1868), p. 236.

2 Ibid., p. 238.

3 Loc. cit.

alone exists for the sake of beauty, and beauty is the source of the highest joy. Art is beauty made manifest, and therein lies its claim to a place in man's life. In Pater's view,

The artist was to reject with determination every competing claim. He was not to write in the interests of morality, religion, humanitarian progress, popular favour, commercial gain, or even the revelation of his own personality. He was to work only in the service of beauty, obedient to no laws save the laws of art, devoted to art for its own sake.¹

Art exists for its own sake, for the sake of its beauty, and the true critic of art will be " . . . an 'aesthetic' critic, or a critic of all things beautiful."²

At the base of Pater's critical theories, then, we find the Epicurean desire to live each moment of life as intensely as possible, and to satisfy this desire fully Pater believes that we must turn to the world of art because there we find beauty - the source of the highest joy - made manifest. Now, obviously, a criticism which builds on such a concept of the place of art in life must inevitably be highly personal. What is to me beautiful, what brings me the highest joy, need not be beautiful, need not bring the highest joy, to my neighbour. Pater himself recognizes that the beauty which he seeks, " . . . like all other qualities presented to human experience, is relative "³ Each of us perceives beauty through his impressions of the objects in which it is embodied, and those impressions are ever

1 Child, Ruth C., The Aesthetic of Walter Pater, New York, Macmillan, 1940, p. 13.

2 Ibid., p. 9.

3 Pater, The Renaissance, Preface, (1873), p. vii.

changing. Man is not a static being; he is constantly in a state of flux; he is

. . . so receptive, all the influences of nature and of society ceaselessly playing upon him, . . . that every hour in his life is unique, changed altogether by a stray word, or glance, or touch.¹

At best his impressions of beauty are but relative, and depend to a very high degree upon his own nature, upon what sounds, colours, thoughts, and emotions have previously entered into the sum of his own life. Despite the relativity of our impressions, however, they provide our only means of knowing the beauty of art, and they are the foundation of our appreciation of that beauty. For Pater, therefore, the criticism of art is fundamentally impressionistic.

A work of art, a picture - let us say da Vinci's Mona Lisa - impinges on a certain mind - let us say Walter Pater's - and from the impact arises a certain vision in the beholder. Pater's description of that vision . . . is his "criticism" of the picture. It is an account of . . . his "reactions" to the picture, or rather his reactions to it at a particular moment of his life.²

Now, as we shall see, Pater conceives of the function of criticism as more than mere meditation on impressions. However, such meditation does play a considerable part in his critical theories. In his Preface (1873) to The Renaissance he reveals the approach of the impressionistic critic. Such a critic first asks himself certain questions, all bearing upon his personal response to the work which he is criticizing:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality

1 Pater, "Coleridge," (1866), Appreciations, London, MacMillan, 1918, p. 67.

2 May, James L., Charles Lamb, a Study, London, Geoffrey Bles, 1934, pp. 166-167.

presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?¹

Having arrived at answers to these most personal questions, the impressionist seeks to convey the essence of his answers to his fellows.

With criticism-metaphors, with cycles of thought released by the strong spring of the impression, he envelops the latter with concentric intellectual lines, he elucidates it, erects and orders it on the plane of consciousness.²

We have already seen De Quincey gauging the significance (as he sees it) of works of art, and Pater's impressionist attempts much the same task. Both experience the effect of a work upon their own beings, and then endeavour to elucidate and order that effect on the plane of consciousness. And the result of the activity is in both cases a personal response, a personal estimate.

So far all that we have seen of Pater's critical theories has indicated that those theories are wholly personal in nature, and in a limited sense they are: Pater believes that " . . . in aesthetic criticism the first step . . . is to know one's own impression as it really is . . . , "³ and he erects the entire structure of his criticism upon this initial impression. However, Pater was too much influenced by Matthew Arnold to accept knowledge of one's own

1 p. viii.

2 Fernandez, Ramon, Messages, transl. Montgomery Belgion, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1927, p. 291.

3 The Renaissance, Preface, (1873), p. viii.

impression as the critic's ultimate aim. He accepts it merely as the first step in criticism, a step towards a higher knowledge. Like Arnold, Pater believes that the critic must have " . . . a curiosity about everything as it really is "¹ Only if he endeavours to see art in this way - as in itself it really is - can he hope to arrive at a true estimate of the value of any work.

When we begin to speak of seeing a work as in itself it really is, and of a true estimate, we find ourselves in a different world from that we usually associate with impressionistic criticism. Impressionism almost inevitably carries with it a suggestion of the fanciful: when we hear the term we think of De Quincey probing his hyper-sensitive soul, Oscar Wilde creating poems as criticism, and Pater himself meditating imaginatively upon the Mona Lisa, seeing in it " . . . what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire."² Now Pater is an impressionist, but for him impressions are but a means to an end, and that end is the same as Arnold's: to see the object as in itself it really is. The meditation on the Mona Lisa is fanciful; it is a poem, a new work of art which draws its inspiration from the work which Pater is criticizing, but it is

. . . an indulgence of fancy, by one who is everywhere else resolute in guarding against the seductions of fancy. It was no habit of Pater's to use a book or a picture or an example of fine architecture as the starting-point for some dream or speculation in which the thing itself would be left behind.³

1 "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 11. Italics mine.

2 "Leonardo da Vinci," (1869), The Renaissance, p. 124.

3 Welby, T. Earle, "Walter Pater," in Lascelles Abercrombie and others, Revaluations, London, Oxford University Press, 1931, p. 203. Italics mine.

That meditation is not at all typical of Pater's criticism. Like Wordsworth, Pater sees that a great poem is the work of a man

. . . endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind¹

He recognizes that the work which such a man offers is far more beautiful - and, therefore, far more valuable - than what a critic can create from his impression of that work. The critic must contemplate his own impression, but his contemplation will be but a means to an end, that of seeing the poet's poem.

"To see the object as in itself it really is," has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly.²

Although he can never, perhaps, reach a positive perception of the work as in itself it really is, the critic can approach such a perception and thereby arrive at " . . . a kind of just criticism and true estimate "3

Pater recognizes that the poet " . . . says to the reader, - I want you to see precisely what I see."⁴ The poet will strip his work of " . . . any diversion, . . . any vagrant intruder, because one can go wandering away with it from the immediate subject."⁵ As fully as he is capable he will offer the reader a work in which he has expressed what he wishes to convey, no more and no less. He will have exerted

1 Wordsworth, Preface to Lyrical Ballads, (1800), in Smith, op. cit., p. 23.

2 Pater, The Renaissance, Preface, (1873), p. viii.

3 Pater, "Wordsworth," (1874), Appreciations, p. 42.

4 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 31.

5 Ibid., p. 19.

his every power to ensure that his expression is clean of the un-essential. "Surplusage! he will dread that, as the runner on his muscles."¹ His poem will be hard, clear, and concise, free of the soft, the vague, the diffuse. When the critic approaches the poem he will recognize that he is about to consider a work which expresses something as best the poet could express it. And he will recognize that for him, as for all readers of poetry,

The appropriate principle is that of the late Lascelles Abercrombie, which is in keeping with Plato, Aristotle, and more recent notables: 'literature exists not only in expressing a thing; it equally exists in the receiving of the thing expressed.' Received, communicated it must be.²

The poet has expressed something, and the reader must receive it. Only when the critic recognizes this - and, like Arnold, Pater does recognize it - can he hope to see the poem as in itself it really is.

The critic must, therefore, make every effort to rise above his limitations as an individual man and stand with the poet. Even as the finished poem is the

. . . effect of an intuitive condition of mind [in the poet], it must be recognised by like intuition on the part of the reader, and a sort of immediate sense.³

The critic must endeavour to ensure that the impressions which will lead to that intuition will be as close as possible to those intended by the poet. He will follow the poet's lead. He will allow the poem full liberty to play upon his emotions, but he will be constantly

1 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 19.

2 Stoll, Elmer Edgar, "Critics at Cross-Purposes," ELH, vol. 14 (1947), p. 325.

3 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 33.

aware that " . . . art addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the 'imaginative reason' through the senses "1 Through the proper functioning of that fusion of sense, intellect, and intuition in the imaginative reason the critic can approach a perception of the object as in itself it really is.

We can now appreciate that Pater is not of that school which sees criticism merely as original creation. He is in the line of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Arnold when he recognizes that the critic must know the poet's poem, the composer's music, the artist's painting. He believes that we can know nothing of a work beyond our impressions of it, but that a close, sensitive analysis of those impressions can lead us to a perception of the essential nature, the unique virtue of the work. The critic

. . . regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar or unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, by analysing and reducing it to its elements.²

Out of his analysis will come an awareness of " . . . the virtue by which a picture, a landscape, a fair personality in life or in a book, produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure "3

We have already seen that for Pater the beauty of art is relative. It must be so because our only awareness of it is that derived from our personal impressions, and these differ in all men and at all times. We now find Pater, however, seeking the unique quality, the formula, the virtue, of works and artists. But how can

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- 1 Pater, "The School of Giorgione," (1877), The Renaissance, p. 130.
 - 2 Pater, The Renaissance, Preface, (1873), p.ix.
 - 3 Loc. cit.

we ever arrive at agreement on this virtue if each of our impressions of a work or artist differs from all others? To this apparently unanswerable question there is a reasonable reply. When Pater seeks in his own impressions a grasp of a virtue apparent to all men, he is doing no more than fuse two facts of human experience:

Modern man is quite convinced that he can never know anything at all as it actually is . . . ; and that no two people ever see things exactly alike. But experience has also shown us that human faculties are sufficiently similar so that a fairly general agreement is arrived at by minds of a similar acuteness and degree of experience. Human likeness is a fact which goes along with human difference. In his critical writings Pater is taking into account both elements. His search for the unique quality, the 'active principle,' indicates his belief that each man is essentially different from all others. His belief that qualified observers will recognize and agree on the 'active principle' is a recognition of the fundamental similarity of human minds.¹

There will, of course, be some differences of opinion as to the virtues of different artists and their works. However, when Pater sees Plato's virtue as a philosopher as a love of the unseen, or Coleridge's as a thinker as a quest for the absolute, or Wordsworth's as a poet as a perception of Man's companionship with Nature, or Michelangelo's as a sculptor as a fusion of sweetness and strength, he does offer virtues on which most men could agree.

The discovery and revelation of the virtue, the characteristic quality of the artist's work is a consistent aim of Pater as a critic, and one which distinguishes him from the purely personal impressionist. Despite the fact that the critic must depend upon his personal impressions for the material from which he will draw the essence, the quest which

¹ Child, Ruth C., "Is Walter Pater an Impressionistic Critic?," PMLA, vol. 53 (December, 1938), pp. 1180-1181.

he undertakes is for something not limited to one man's experience, for that quality which is common to all sensitive men's impressions of a given work.

Such an aim is certainly objective, requiring careful, analytical thinking. And Pater, in his own criticism, adheres to it with remarkable fidelity. In almost all of his major essays, he attempts to analyze and convey the essence, the unique quality, of the artist's work.¹

To find that quality the critic must pierce through all that is accidental and individual in his impressions, and find in them their universal, their essence.

When Pater seeks the virtue of an artist's work he not only seeks in art something outside himself, but also, in a sense, he seeks truth. The quest for the virtue is a means to an end, that of arriving at a " . . . kind of just criticism and true estimate " ² To arrive at such a criticism and estimate the critic must first grasp the essential nature of the artist's work. Only with an awareness of that nature can he hope to determine the value of the work itself. A prerequisite for any true critical estimate is, therefore, a perception of the essence of the work of art. Here is one sense in which the critic seeks the truth of art: he seeks its essential nature.

Pater's critic, however, also seeks truth in art in quite another sense. The truth which we have seen the critic pursuing in his quest for the virtue of an artist's work has been the truth of the critic's own perception. For Pater, however, there is also a truth

1 Child, Aesthetic, p. 110.

2 Pater, "Wordsworth," (1874), Appreciations, p. 42.

in art itself, a truth which depends not upon the critic but upon the artist. Pater holds that truth is relative. We can never know absolute truth. All that we can know is the truth of

. . . relations that experience gives us, not the truth of eternal outlines ascertained once for all, but a world of fine gradations and subtly linked conditions, shifting intricately as we ourselves change¹

The truth which we know in our lives is not eternal, fixed and unchanging, but transient, ever-changing, and our grasp of it is the direct result of our grasp of the fleeting facts - the sights, sounds, tastes, thoughts, and emotions - which impinge upon us in life. "The faculty for truth is recognised as a power of distinguishing and fixing delicate and fugitive detail."² The world offers us a mass of facts, and " . . . bids us, by a constant clearing of the organs of observation and perfecting of analysis, to make what we can of these."³

The artist is one who observes and analyzes the facts of this world, and then gives us " . . . not fact, but his peculiar sense of fact, whether past or present."⁴ He offers us not the fact as it exists in the actual world, but a " . . . representation of such fact as connected with soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition, and power."⁵ In his poem the poet gives us

1 Pater, "Coleridge," (1866), Appreciations, p. 68.

2 Ibid., p. 67.

3 Ibid., p. 68.

4 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 8.

5 Ibid., p. 10.

. . . an expression no longer of fact but of his sense of it, his peculiar intuition of a world, prospective, or discerned below the faulty conditions of the present, in either case changed somewhat from the actual world.¹

Above all else, the artist must endeavour to represent this fusion of fact and soul as it really is: his " . . . will be good . . . art . . . in proportion as its representation of that sense, that soul-fact, is true."² The truth of art, therefore, is the truth of the artist's expression to his experience.

Truth! there can be no merit, no craft at all, without that. And further, all beauty is in the long run only fineness of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within.³

In the greatest poets the faculty for truth, the power of fixing and expressing soul-facts in words is elevated to such a height that his words

. . . are themselves thought and feeling; not eloquent, or musical words merely, but that sort of creative language which carries the reality of what it depicts, directly, to the consciousness.⁴

The truth of a poem, then, is the truth of the expression to the soul-fact. For Pater, truth of style is truth of art. Because it is so Pater believes that the critic can eventually arrive close to a true perception of the poet's experience.

. . . there is, under the conditions supposed, for those elements of the man, for every lineament of the vision within, the one word, the one acceptable word, recognisable by the sensitive, by others "who have intelligence" in the matter, as absolutely as ever anything can be in the

1 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, pp. 8-9.

2 Ibid., p. 11.

3 Ibid., p. 10.

4 Pater, "Wordsworth," (1874), Appreciations, p. 58.

evanescent and delicate region of human language. The style, the manner, would be the man, not in his unreasoned and really uncharacteristic caprices, involuntary or affected, but in absolutely sincere apprehension of what is most real to him

If the style be the man, in all the colour and intensity of a veritable apprehension, it will be in a real sense "impersonal."¹

In the poet's expression the critic finds an " . . . absolute correspondence of the term to its import . . . , "² and because of this correspondence he is justified in seeking to know the poem as in itself it really is.

We have now seen that although Pater builds his critical theories on a belief that man must live every moment of life as intensely as possible, and that to do so he must experience the exquisite impressions of art as widely and as fully as possible, Pater does see more in criticism than the mere contemplation and communication of impressions. He sees that the critic must use his impressions merely as a means to an end, that of seeing the object as in itself it really is; he sees that the critic must pierce through the personal accidents of his impression of a work to the essence of that impression, and in that essence he will find the virtue, the characteristic quality, of the work as all men of sensitivity can expect to perceive it; he sees that the critic must recognize that the poet offers a representation of the soul-fact which is the source of his poem, and if the poet has fulfilled the basic requirement of all poetry - that the term correspond to its import - the critic at least hopes to see the poem as in itself it really is. Above all else, the critic

1 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, pp. 36-37.

2 Ibid., p. 38.

must heed the poet's caution, "I want you to see precisely what I see."¹

Now there is much here that is quite unlike what we should expect in the critical thought of a man who has been termed - by the unthinking - a pure impressionist. And there is even more to come. We are going to see Oscar Wilde declare that the substance of art is of no concern to the critic. Since the work of art is but an inspiration for the critic's poetic meditation on it, the substance is of no importance. It can be utterly sordid, utterly insignificant. What matters is the critic's response to it. As Flaubert could create in Madame Bovary a great work out of the infidelity of a weak woman, so can the critic, Wilde believes, create a great poem out of an inadequate work. Pater would not agree at all. He holds that the essential of good art is merely " . . . the absolute correspondence of the term to its import . . . ,"² but this is merely the essential of good art.

Good art, but not necessarily great art; the distinction between great art and good art depending immediately, as regards literature at all events, not on its form, but on the matter. Thackeray's Esmond, surely, is greater art than Vanity Fair, by the greater dignity of its interest. It is on the quality of the matter it informs or controls, its compass, its variety, its alliance to great ends, or the depth of the note of revolt, or the largeness of hope in it, that the greatest of literary art depends, as The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost, Les Miserables, The English Bible, are great art. Given the conditions I have tried to explain as constituting good art; - then, if it be devoted further to the increase of men's happiness, to the redemption of the oppressed, or the enlargement of our sympathies with each other, or to such presentment of new or old truth about

1 Pater, "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 31.

2 Ibid., p. 38.

ourselves and our relation to the world as may ennoble and fortify us in our sojourn here, or immediately, as with Dante, to the glory of God, it will be also great art; if, over and above those qualities I summed up as mind and soul - that colour and mystic perfume, and that reasonable structure, it has something of the soul of humanity in it, and finds its logical, its architectural place, in the great structure of human life.¹

Great art has more than form: it has great substance. It is, in Arnold's words, a true criticism of life: it offers great ideas profoundly applied to life. Unlike Wilde, Pater sees much more in art than momentary ecstasy. Although an Epicurean, Pater recognizes that

. . . Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die! - is a proposal, the real import of which differs immensely, according to the natural taste, and the acquired judgment, of the guests who sit at the table. It may express nothing better than the instinct of Dante's Ciacco, the accomplished glutton, in the mud of the Inferno; or, since on no hypothesis does man "live by bread alone," may come to be identical with - "My meat is to do what is just and kind;" while the soul, which can make no sincere claim to have apprehended anything beyond the veil of immediate experience, yet never loses a sense of happiness in conforming to the highest moral ideal it can clearly define for itself; and actually, though but with so faint hope, does the "Father's business."²

For Pater, great art can help us to conform to this "highest moral ideal." It offers us, as well as intense stimulation, a guide to living in such a way that we do the "Father's business." For Pater's critic, "Appreciation of beauty is to be the direct aim, enhancement of life the indirect result"³ of the study of art, and to the degree

1 "Style," (1888), Appreciations, p. 38.

2 Pater, Marius the Epicurean, vol. 1, p. 145.

3 Child, Aesthetic, p. 23.

that the critic guides man to an awareness of the truth of the moral ideals of art he achieves this indirect result.

We have seen that Pater establishes his criticism on a belief that art exists, and should be studied, for its own sake. However, although this belief is the basis of his critical theories it is but part of a whole. He recognizes that although art does not consciously seek to teach, and although we should not look to it for specific moral lessons, art does, at the same time that it conveys its beauty, vitalize and enrich the ethical spirit of man. As we read King Lear we know the beauty of the play as a work of art, and at the same time we achieve a heightened appreciation of humility as a virtue. The play gives us " . . . sheer intensity, intellectual and emotional excitement,"¹ but at the same time it " . . . actually enlarges and purifies the soul, by developing the emotions and intellect and by holding up a vision of the ideal."²

For Pater the ultimate end of art is, therefore, much more than emotional stimulation. Art offers us an ideal- ethical and aesthetic - by which to live, an axis about which to centre our lives.

. . . for us of the modern world, with its conflicting claims, its entangled interests, distracted by so many sorrows, with many preoccupations, so bewildering an experience, the problem of unity with ourselves, in blitheness and repose, is far harder than it was for the Greek within the simple terms of antique life. Yet, not less than ever, the intellect demands completeness, centrality.³

1 Child, Aesthetic, p. 10.

2 Loc. cit.

3 Pater, "Winckelmann," (1867), Renaissance, p. 227.

In art we can find a solution to " . . . the eternal problem of culture - balance, unity with one's self "1 We can derive a perception of "completeness, . . . perfectly rounded wholeness and unity . . . ,"2 and try to give our own lives a similar wholeness and unity. In art, Pater suggests, we may find the oneness which our mortal lives so desperately lack.

It must be obvious that if we are to know these higher benefits of art - ethical guidance, unity of life - we must try to see the work of art as clearly as possible as it really is. Pater recognizes that we must make every effort to stand with the artist. The further we move from the artist, the more we allow our own personalities to enter into our response to his work, the less likely we are to perceive the true nature of the ideals which that work embodies and which could lead us along the path to spiritual peace. Pater is an impressionist, but he recognizes that personal impressions are but the means to a true perception.

1 Pater, "Winckelmann," (1867), The Renaissance, p. 228.

2 Pater, "Coleridge," (1866), Appreciations, p. 99.

VI

The Full Flowering of the Personal Estimate: Oscar Wilde

With Oscar Wilde we come to the last of our group of eight critics and the culmination of the whole development of the personal estimate in nineteenth-century English criticism. For Wilde, as we have already indicated, criticism is creation, the creation of poems which draw their inspiration from existing works of art. Objectivity is no longer desirable or necessary in criticism; all that matters is that the critic convey the emotions which a work arouses within him.

For a clear understanding of Wilde's attitude to life and to art we must recognize the importance of Pater as an influence upon him. When still a young man Wilde discovered Pater's Renaissance, and there, in the Conclusion, read that the aim of men who want to live life to the full must be " . . . to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions " ¹ We must live intensely. "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." ² We have now seen enough of Pater to appreciate that when he wrote his Conclusion he did not intend to lead men into a life of licence. All that he did intend was to establish his own position as an Epicurean, and to indicate the value of art to the Epicurean man:

1 (1868), p. 237.

2 Ibid., p. 236.

. . . art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.¹

Wilde, however, gave Pater's words the broadest possible application, and built his life about his own interpretation of the advice, "What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and couring new impressions."² Now it is obvious that whatever value Pater's advice here may have in our journey through the world of art, it can be highly dangerous when applied to life. It can lead us to justify every indulgence of our beings as a new sensation, a new impression. Carried to an extreme, it can lead us to Wilde's own position, that sin is to be courted as a source of new sensation: "By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type."³ Every possible crime, every conceivable perversion of the human being becomes acceptable when such a view is carried to its logical end.

Wilde's attitude towards life is the same as his attitude towards Beaudelaire's poetry: ". . . suffer it to tell even one of its secrets to your soul, and your soul will grow eager to know more, and will feed upon poisonous honey" ⁴ He hungers for sensation, and in both Salomé and The Picture of Dorian Gray we find a disturbingly real indication

1 Pater, The Renaissance, Conclusion, (1868), p. 239.

2 Ibid., p. 237.

3 The Critic as Artist, I, Intentions, p. 130.

4 Ibid., II, p. 166.

of the intensity of his hunger.

Live! live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you. Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing A new Hedonism - that is what our century wants.¹

In his search for the most intense life possible, however, Wilde found that the impressions, the sensations, of art were keener, more satisfying than those of life, and to art he turned as a cat turns to a dish of rich cream, eager for the sensuous delight awaiting it. Art could give him the perfection of experience which life could only approximate.

Life! Life! Don't let us go to life for our fulfilment or our experience. It is a thing narrowed by circumstances, incoherent in its utterance, and without that fine correspondence of form and spirit which is the only thing that can satisfy the artistic and critical temperament.²

He turned to art in search of an almost physical sort of pleasure, and because his concern was constantly the sensations to be found in art, his critical theories are, as we should expect based firmly on an acceptance of personal impressions.

For Wilde the aim of art is " . . . simply to create a mood."³ He reads Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and is left with certain impressions of it. These blend into a mood, and that mood is the end of art. Now that mood will be a purely personal experience, and when we do not undertake Pater's calm analysis of it, it must remain a personal experience. We do not seek to ensure that it will be the

1 Wilde, Oscar, The Picture of Dorian Gray, (1891), in Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems, London, J. M. Dent & Sons, 1945.

2 Wilde, The Critic as Artist, II, Intentions, p.167.

3 Ibid., p. 177.

Now it is all very well to say that criticism which conveys the mood of a critic while under the spell of a work is justified because

. . . the critic, since he is usually, unlike the specialist artist, a man of wide and varied culture, can relate the work he discusses to realms of thought and imagination beyond its immediate reference;¹

and to declare that Pater's meditation on the Mona Lisa makes the painting " . . . more wonderful to us than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which in truth it knows nothing " ² Perhaps Pater's communication of his mood is justified. But are we to recognize any man's mood as a criticism of art?

We may easily pardon Walter Pater for looking at Leonardo's famous picture and reading into it a meaning which Leonardo himself did not intend to be read there. But what was likely to happen had any one of those middle-class philistines, against whom Wilde himself railed so heartily, looked at "La Gioconda"?³

If the aim of art is simply to create a mood, and if criticism itself is merely a mood, surely the mood created in any man is criticism as sound as that created in anyone else. Wilde himself has said that we are not to try to see the work as in itself it really is.

Wilde, however, does not go quite so far as this seemingly logical end of his theory. He does make one requirement of the critic. He does not demand that the critic be rational (for art appeals not to the reason, but to the irrational sense of beauty);⁴ nor does he demand

1 Woodcock, George, The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, London, T. V. Boardman, 1950, p. 128.

2 Wilde, The Critic as Artist, I, Intentions, p. 143.

3 Kennedy, J., English Literature, 1880-1905, London, Stephen Swift & Co., 1912, p. 82.

4 Wilde, op. cit., II, p. 190.

that he be sincere or fair (for sincerity and fairness are of the world of ethics and morality, and art is not directed to this world);¹ but he does demand that he be possessed of " . . . a temperament exquisitely susceptible to beauty, and to the various impressions that beauty gives us."² The critic will be a man who has developed this temperament through a long sojourn in the world of art. That sojourn will have developed his sensitivity to beauty, his taste, and with this cultivated sensitivity he will be able to discern the true beauty of art. The impressions of a man with this cultivated sensitivity, and the mood into which those impressions blend, will provide the only true criticism of art.

For Wilde " . . . the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not "³ Even as the poet can find in his experiencing of the meanest flower that grows a depth and power which do not lie in the actual flower, so must the critic find in his experiencing of a work of art a depth and power which may not really lie in the actual work. As the flower is less important than the poet's experience, so is the work of art less important than the critic's mood: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."⁴ What the critic offers us is, therefore, in a very literal sense, a poem. Like the poet, the critic experiences the emotional power of something in life - a work of art - and he conveys his experience

1 Wilde, The Critic as Artist, II, Intentions, p. 191.

2 Ibid., p. 194.

3 Ibid., I, p. 146.

4 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Preface, p. 70.

to the reader. "The critic is he who can translate into another manner or a new material his impression of beautiful things."¹ Rather than try to rise above the personal, the individual, in his response to art, the critic consciously seeks to communicate it:

. . . it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true.²

The critic acknowledges no responsibility to either the artist or the reader:

. . . Criticism, being the purest form of personal impression, is in its way more creative than creation, as it has least reference to any standard external to itself, and is, in fact, its own reason for existing, and, as the Greeks would put it, in itself, and to itself an end.³

As well as allowing the poet almost full freedom in his representation of what life has meant to him - a representation limited only by the requirements of intelligibility - we must also allow the critic freedom. In short, for Wilde the critic is a poet, and his criticism offers as intensely personal a response as does the poet's poem. Criticism

. . . treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation. It does not confine itself . . . to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it.⁴

1 Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Preface, p. 69.

2 Wilde, The Critic as Artist, II, Intentions, p. 156.

3 Ibid., I, p. 139.

4 Ibid., I, pp. 143-144.

What we have in Wilde's theory of criticism is, therefore, the reductio ad absurdum of the personal estimate. Wordsworth and Coleridge would have rejected it; Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey might have smiled sympathetically, but would have recognized its extreme position; Arnold would have denounced it; and Pater would have denied that he intended anything of the sort in his impressionism. When we accept the function of criticism as the communication of a purely personal mood which has no more relation to the work of art - in fact, less - than a poem has to the actual object which inspired it, we lose sight of the fundamental requirement of criticism, the requirement that all critics, from Aristotle on, have recognized: that it help the reader to a clearer grasp of the artist's intention. Wilde's criticism offers no such help, but, rather, leads the reader ever further from the poem. The poet's truth remains unseen on the peak in Darien while the critic leads us through the shadowy valleys of his own soul. In The Critic as Artist Gilbert (who is Wilde himself) declares, "I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world."¹ I cannot but think of Wilde's critic as a dreamer who tries to lead us to beauty by moonlight, but who never sees the dawn. He remains always in the moonlight of his own being, and never finds the clear sunlight of the poet's inspiration.

1 II, Intentions, p. 217.

We have seen that when Pater recognizes that great art offers an ideal for life, he stresses that if we are to know the higher benefit of art we must stand with the poet and see what he sees. Wilde, however, does not require greatness of substance in art. The critic

. . . does not even require for the perfection of his art the finest materials. Anything will serve his purpose To an artist so creative as the critic, what does subject-matter signify? No more and no less than it does to the novelist and the painter. Like them, he can find his motives everywhere. Treatment is the test. There is nothing that has not in it suggestion or challenge.¹

For Wilde, all that matters in criticism is the communication of delicious impressions, and for the critic truth of art is no more than "one's last mood."² Criticism and the personal estimate have here become one and the same. Since we are not to expect ultimate truths from art, there is no need - in fact there is a danger in attempting - to see the work as in itself it really is.

Before leaving Wilde, however, we should note one amazing passage in The Critic as Artist. In the midst of all the witty, paradoxical play of the dialogues, Wilde suddenly speaks (through Gilbert) in a tone of utter seriousness, and what he says hits one with its striking contrast to what lies before and after:

Ordinary people are 'terribly at ease in Zion.' They propose to walk arm in arm with the Poets, and have a glib ignorant way of saying, 'Why should we read what is written about Shakespeare and Milton? We can read the plays and the poems. That is enough.' But an appreciation of Milton is . . . the reward of consummate scholarship. And he who desires to understand Shakespeare truly must understand the

1 Wilde, The Critic as Artist, I, Intentions, p. 138.

2 Ibid., II, p. 188.

relations in which Shakespeare stood to the Renaissance and the Reformation, to the age of Elizabeth and the age of James; he must be familiar with the history of the struggle for supremacy between the old classical forms and the new spirit of romance, between the school of Sidney, and Daniel, and Johnson [sic], and the school of Marlowe and Marlowe's greater son; he must know the materials that were at Shakespeare's disposal, and the method in which he used them, and the conditions of theatric presentation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, their limitations and their opportunities for freedom, and the literary criticism of Shakespeare's day, its aims and modes and canons; he must study the English language in its progress, and blank or rhymed verse in its various developments; he must study the Greek drama, and the connection between the art of the creator of the Agamemnon and the art of the creator of Macbeth; in a word, he must be able to bind Elizabethan London to the Athens of Pericles, and to learn Shakespeare's true position in the history of European drama and the drama of the world. The critic will certainly be an interpreter, but he will not treat Art as a riddling Sphinx, whose shallow secret may be guessed and revealed by one whose feet are wounded and who knows not his name. Rather, he will look upon Art as a goddess whose mystery it is his province to intensify, and whose majesty his privilege to make more marvellous in the eyes of men.¹

Wilde here speaks as Coleridge or Arnold might have spoken. He recognizes that the critic must make every effort to see as the poet sees. However, the passage is unique in the dialogues, and must, I fear, be taken as an aberration in Wilde's theories. It is not compatible with the rest of his writings.

With Pater and Wilde we come to the end of our survey of the development of the personal estimate in our group of nineteenth-century critics. We have seen Pater stress the importance of the initial

1 II, Intentions, pp. 154-155.

impression in criticism, but we have seen him recognize that that impression is but a means to the critic's clear appreciation of the work as in itself it really is; and we have seen Wilde accept the impression, the mood, as the end of art, and the communication of that mood as the end of criticism. On Wordsworth's and Coleridge's original base of emotional stimulation and personal pleasure as the essence of art we have seen Wilde, the pure impressionist, erect the structure of the entirely personal estimate and offer that as a theory of criticism.

VII

Conclusion

The time has now come to draw together the various threads of this survey, to see what sort of pattern they offer, and to see what lesson we can draw from them. I believe that they reveal a very clear development in the attitude towards the whole question of the personal response in criticism. From Wordsworth to Wilde there is a constant, sustained interest in the problem. Some of the eight critics whom I have considered build their entire theory of criticism on an unquestioning acceptance of the personal response; others accept that response as the basis of their theory, but demand more of the critic than a mere revelation of his own sensibility. All, however, recognize that the critic of poetry must speak from the heart, and, no matter what else he may do, he must lay the cornerstone of his criticism on the firm bedrock of a sincere personal appreciation. Whether he seeks with Coleridge to analyze the riches of the poet's imaginative expression, with De Quincey to gauge the significance of literature, with Arnold to reveal the criticism of life implicit in poetry, with Wilde to express his feelings while in the presence of art - the critic, as conceived of by all eight of these men, begins his criticism with an appreciation of the emotional power of poetry, its appeal to the heart of man. For all of them criticism begins in a personal response.

Although they agree that the personal response must be the cornerstone of criticism, however, they do not agree on the extent to which the critic

should depend upon that response as a sure guide to a true estimate. Wordsworth and Coleridge both accept personal emotion and personal pleasure as the source and end of poetry, but both are very much aware of the danger that their concept of poetry can lead to quite groundless criticism. Both see that personal prejudices and associations can influence our emotional response and lead us to over-value works which agree with our prejudices or arouse pleasant personal associations, and to under-value those which clash with our prejudices or arouse disagreeable personal associations. In other words, Wordsworth and Coleridge see the danger of the personal estimate.

Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey build their critical theories on a frank acceptance of their own response, their own impressions, as the great value of art. Lamb admits that prejudices affect his pleasure in art, and influence his judgment, but he sees no harm in this: for Lamb, if the critic frankly reveals a sincere feeling for a work of art he has done his duty. Hazlitt places a similar stress on the pleasure resulting from the impressions of art. He says what he thinks about art; he thinks what he feels. For him there is but one other guide in criticism, and that is the consensus of opinion amongst men of taste, men of sensibility and knowledge. De Quincey, too, accepts his impressions as the basis of critical judgment. For him the great value of literature is the sense of power, of sublimity, which those impressions can bring to the human being. This power rises in us with the stimulation of our emotions, and is, therefore, a personal

experience.

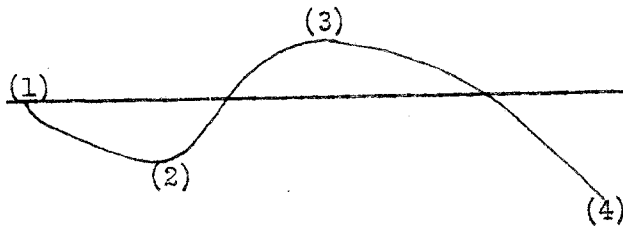
Arnold rejects criticism based entirely upon the personal response. He recognizes that emotional stimulation and personal pleasure play a great part in the poetic activity, but he recognizes, too, that poetry offers a revelation of the Ideas of life. To the extent that we allow personal associations to affect our response to the poet's suggestions we blind ourselves to these Ideas: we deprive ourselves of a perception of truth by letting our own individual natures cast their mists about the poet's illumination. For Arnold the personal response is essential to criticism, but it is merely a means to a higher end, that of seeing the object - the real nature of the poem - as in itself it really is, and so perceiving truth.

Pater lays renewed stress upon impressions as the basis of criticism, but recognizes that our impressions of a work of art - necessary though they are to our experiencing of the work - are but the matter which we must contemplate until we arrive at a perception of the essence, the unique quality of that work. Like Arnold, he recognizes, too, that great art offers us the ideals of life embodied in great matter. If we are to know the essence of a work and the ideals which it embodies, we must know more than purely personal impressions. Impressions alone can give us but a personal estimate; the contemplation of those impressions can lead us to a real estimate based on a perception of the essence, and the ideals, of the work.

Wilde follows Pater in the stress on impressions, but makes his impressions of a work the starting-point for a new work of art, his expression of his feelings while contemplating the original work. Anything

within him that associates itself with that work is a justifiable part of his criticism. As the poet creates a new work of art out of his experience of something in life, so does the critic create a new work of art out of his experience of something in art. And as a poem is a purely personal expression of one man's feelings about something, so is a criticism. In other words, for Wilde criticism is, in the strictest sense, a personal estimate.

In these eight critics we find, therefore, a sort of extended sine curve of development:



At the initial point of the curve (1) we find Wordsworth's and Coleridge's balanced recognition of the rightful place of the personal response in criticism, but the latent danger of the personal estimate. In the first decline of the curve (2) we find Lamb's, Hazlitt's, and De Quincey's great stress on impressions in their response to art, and their acceptance of personal associations - and the resultant possibly personal estimate - as a justifiable part of that response.

With Arnold's and Pater's desire to see the object as in itself it really is the curve inclines to a peak (3). Then, with Wilde's belief that criticism is but a matter of expressing all that poetry rouses in us - whether what we feel has its source in the poem or in ourselves - we decline again to the very depths of the personal estimate. (4).

What, then, can I offer as a conclusion from this study of the place

of the personal estimate in the theories of these eight critics? All of them do, I believe, follow the right path in recognizing that poetry must be personally appreciated. He who seeks to estimate poetry by standing outside it, and applying merely tests of form and substance, can never know the true effect of a poem; each of us must enter into a personal union with the poet. However, some of them, notably Wilde, so, I believe, lose sight of their duty as critics when they read into a poem their own experience of life. A poem exists to be known. We can never truly know it if we allow the colouring of our own natures to distort our perception of it. We must constantly keep in mind that it is a whole, an entity. It does not exist to be enlarged by the addition of our natures. We must accept it as it is, avoiding all temptation to add ourselves to it.

High art, indeed, though not indifferent, may rise above its object; criticism cannot - obviously cannot - above what it is reading, viewing or hearing, to be interpreted or appreciated and judged.¹

If we can hold fast to this truth, a truth which the greatest of these eight critics - Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Arnold - recognize, we can avoid the pitfall of the personal estimate, and eventually hope to come close to a just interpretation, a sound appreciation, a real estimate of poetry.

1 Stoll, ELH, p. 328.

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