Creative Criticism

Edith Keay
Butler University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/mantheses
Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, and the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Keay, Edith, "Creative Criticism" (1899). Manuscript Thesis Collection. 68.
http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/mantheses/68

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Manuscript Thesis Collection at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Manuscript Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisa@butler.edu.
CREATIVE CRITICISM.

BUTLER COLLEGE

GRADUATING THESIS.

EDITH KEAY.

1899.
CREATIVE CRITICISM.

"This may well be called the age of criticism, a criticism from which nothing need hope to escape. When religion seeks to shelter itself behind its sanctity, and law behind its majesty, they justly awaken suspicion against themselves, and lose all claim to the sincere respect which reason yields only to that which has been able to bear the test of its free and open scrutiny." With these now famous words, Emmanuel Kant gave his critical philosophy to the world. Nearly a century later Matthew Arnold said to almost the same effect: "Of the literature of France and Germany as of the intellect of Europe in general, the main effort for now many years has been a critical effort; the endeavor in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, has been to see the object as in itself it really is." Other authorities have placed the novel beside criticism and called these two the distinctive literary forms of the century. Behind both alike are science and personality, ever growing in influence, always aiming toward the realization of the ideal democracy. Criticism has only obtained its present omnipotence through long centuries of evolution, slow and laborious. The modern revolution which science has effected, the scientific control which dominates man's attitude toward God as well as his knowledge of the earth beneath his feet, has seized upon criticism as peculiarly its aim.

With the growing importance and high development of criticism has come its analysis and division. There are many
kinds of criticism, and many theories applied and proclaimed
in its name. **Scientific** criticism, in a narrow sense, seeks
to investigate the elements which enter into the making of
literature, and to discover the laws of their action. Minute
research and exactness are essential to this application of
criticism. **Comparative** and analytic methods have aided the
cause of scientific procedure in this field. **Interpretative**
criticism endeavors to elucidate for the less gifted the thought
and manner of the great masters. **Historical** criticism takes
into account as decisive factors in the final judgment, the
writer's objective environment, and his psychological make-up.
Criticism has long suffered from the odium which its grovely
sensuous period cast upon it. The mercenary taint that ad-
heres to highly commendatory criticism has been almost as dif-
cult to get rid of. Justice and science have alike made war
against that criticism which is merely the superficial record
of personal bias. Criticism has proceeded from still other
points of view, and employed other methods, but these are per-
haps the most prominent aspects it has assumed. But of late
years a transcendent theory of criticism which rises above and
unifies all these diverse forms, has been advanced. This
theory asserts that literary criticism at its best is **creative**
in the strictest sense. It is a claim which seems to directly
antagonize what has long been honored as the accepted and es-
sential theory of criticism—its purely judicial function.
The attempt has always been to make of literary criticism a
purely intellectual exercise, to employ to the exclusion of the other faculties, the judgment without warmth or color. This tendency has been disciplinary, and has done much to establish criticism as a science. That such restriction belittles not only the function of criticism but literature itself, that there exists in one language criticism that is beyond question creative, that fact and philosophy will uphold these claims it is our object to show here. As creative criticism is the climax of achievement in this field, as criticism becomes creative through superiority of conception and execution, some exposition of the steps, some historical of the past phases, by which criticism has attained to high excellence is necessary.

In the history of universal literature, the creative and the critical modd have alternated. It has been the achievement of modern science to intermingle the two. The expression, the out-put of energy, comes first then the analysis and the judgment. The first great flowering age was Grecian, and is classic for us because it has furnished us enduring standards of truth and beauty. Its work was nearly done when Aristotle, the law-giver, appeared, classified the then known sciences, and established literary criticism. He drew from the existing canons, literature, rules and aesthetic and rhetorical. Criticism is greatly indebted to him. His method has its adherents even to-day. When Greece had burned her golden light quite to the end, the accumulated stores of wisdom and beauty drifted to the new Alexandria. The scholars gathered there constructed
a whole critical apparatus. They compiled grammars and rhetor-
ics, laid down laws on many subjects. They delved deeply in
the Grecian treasures and to their laborous toil posterity
owes the preservation of a large part of ancient literature.
They were not creators in any sense, but our debt to them is
greater than to any except the few masters.

As the center of civilization moved westward, we find
literary activity following in its wake. The best period of
Roman literature was folled by the Augustan Age, essentially
critical and formal. When the dark curtain of the Middle Age
fell upon the drama of the Muses, they fled to the monasteries
for shelter. The Church Militant held for centuries in her
safe keeping the precious heritage of these priceless folios
and manuscripts. Monks with shaven crowns, poured over them,
copied and illuminated them, cherished them lovingly. Then
the bright tide of the Renaissance swept over dully sleeping
Europe. The pride and pomp of Greece and Rome, after almost
a thousand years, lived again in eagerly awakened imaginations.
The spirit of antiquity was dominant once more, as cause and
stimulus of a new creative epoch. Though the assimilation
of the classic spirit, spoke the age itself, the nations were
coming to full consciousness. Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio,
uttered Italy's soul-stirring message; then their brothers to
the north heard and answered. Thus it was that the Renaissance-
the re-birth-ushered in our modern age.

In England the new movement fostered our starry
Elizabethan Age. After a few brief, futile years England could
boast of an unsurpassed literature, original in a rare degree.
Less than a century later English literary criticism had its
birth. John Dryden (1631-1700) is called its father, but his
brilliant and systematic work was made possible by his predeces-
sors. Puttenham, Sir Philip Sidney, Ben Johnson and others
less well known had made suggestive contributions toward a criti-
cal literature. Dryden naturally adapted to his chosen work
was considerably influenced by Corneille, Malherbe, and the
French Academy, which was at their time formulating classic
criticism. Dryden, although hardly conscious of it, was in a
close sympathy with the new scientific spirit, and became an
early member of the Royal Society. His work is pervaded by
the characteristic spirit of the time. Dryden established a
correct ideal and he always emphasized law and order. But on
the other hand he referred to universal nature as the essental
study of the poetry and philosophy. Such a law-giver can
hardly be accused of dry and meaningless formalism. He pays
a highly proper respect to literary tradition, but refuses a
slavish fidelity to precedent. If Dryden was dogmatic he
was progressive. He felt the obligation of literature to soci-
ety, and recognized in the distance the social ideal. Not only
did he embody the scientific spirit of the day but the ethical
stress is reflected in his work. Not only was the new criti-
cism learned by the spirit of scepticism; its method was pure-
ly inductive and objective. Its insistence on a definite and
reasonable excellence was softened by hardly an attempt after
psychological analysis, and inevitably tended to a certain hardness of judgment; but the acceptance of nature is the constant standard of reference, and the source on which artist and critic were alike to draw, must in the end have rectified the temporary narrowness of the sympathies.

In Dryden's work there culminated a century and a half of critical progress—through it the thought of an earlier England became a shaping force in the eighteenth century. Dryden subjugated imagination to reason, lawlessness to art, and harmonized the classic standards with the law of England's own vigorous out-put. By dwelling a moment upon the work of John Dryden, we would make clear how scientific and philosophical, how broad and firm, were the foundations of English criticism. Its very beginnings were scholarly and dignified, in every way worthy of respect. Dryden was a mighty personal force. Lowell says of him that whatever else he may have been he was thoroughly manly. His work was creative, as he gathered up and put into a form peculiarly his own, what had been said. Infused with his personality, it became whole and new.

With the eighteenth century came the period of English Classicism. It was preeminently an age of criticism—a criticism which extended to all phases of thought. Voltaire and Rousseau influenced England quite as much as did Locke and Hume. Art and intellect were assiduously cultivated in both France and England. Addison and Johnson were typical critics.
Addison's faultless, lucid style illustrates his theories as to writing. In his criticism he applied the current philosophic precepts, as well as the formalism of the Classicists. But he had the native critic's sympathetic appreciation, and it saved him from dogmatism. His aesthetic susceptibility allied himself, however, remotely, to the already dawning movement which tied the end of one century to the beginning of another.

Bentley, as scholar and philosopher, substituted the spirit of Greece for that of Rome—Augustan Rome for which the England of Anne had so close an affinity. Copper, Gray, Blake, Thompson, their work and their tenets stand midway between Classicism and Romanticism. Personality is becoming an appreciable power, invisible, moulding, breathing out a fuller life, a wider humanity. The romantic movement which gathered to itself, the new philosophy, the new sociology, the new democracy, is a subtle thing and eludes description. It found its inspiration in the new value accorded to, and the new assertion of, individuality, and in the new love of nature. There was renovation in all directions, life was regarded from an entirely shifted point of view. There was intelligent appreciation of the past, ardent hope for the future. Wordsworth, lonely among his hills, was in many ways, the essential figure in the romantic drama, but there were many other actors.
The criticism which sprang up spontaneously in defense of the new spirit in literature did not have any principles at first. Its form was shaped by the material at hand. But the criticism which has dominated the thought of the nineteenth century had its source in Germany, the home of Romanticism. Coleridge, coming in contact with German transcendentalism, was the first of Englishmen to fully appreciate its value. He devoted himself to the study of it, a task which was his personal bent made particularly congenial and profitable. After assimilating the essence of German philosophy, Coleridge returned to England and began the propagation of it. The philosophic system of Coleridge is doubtless correctly put down as vague and fragmentary. But it is impossible to over-estimate the quickening influence of his thought in the early part of the century. Theology and literature were most directly affected. The expanded point of view, the spiritualizing content of German transcendentalism could not but enrich whatever came in contact with it. Coleridge founded the new criticism upon the rock of his own inspiring faith. He did not condemn the perfection of form and external arrangement, which the Classicists had directed so much painstaking labor. But he did insist upon a deeper meaning, a more comprehensive unity between form and content. To him we owe this key-note, "the acceptance of spiritual life is the source of knowledge." His theories as to the organic unity of literature and life, the evolution of the race and of history, had
to express itself in ever new forms, there was an inspiring analogy between the growth of society and the creative work of the imagination. Literature, like history, found in itself its own law of progress; it was the vocation of criticism to understand that law and to judge each type after its kind.

"As a literary critic, Coleridge's sympathy, appreciation and keen insight; his theory as to the unity of diverse elements, and the all powerful influence of creative thought, give him value for all time. His criticism has essential dignity, and is creative by reason of what he was and what he knew.

At the same time the mystic and partial tendency of Coleridge's thought, directed it toward that impotency in which so large a part of the Romantic movement lost itself. Odd as it seems to-day, Coleridge felt himself somewhat alien to the life of his time, and probably never comprehended his intimate relation to the new trend of the century, and to which he had made so large a contribution of motive-power. " In this new England the critic had to fulfil many requirements, undreamed of by the old philosophy. The widening of the realm of scholarship demanded, even in popular treatment, a method more scholarly; the advance of philosophy made essential a well-wrought aesthetic theory; the new conception of history asked for a correlation of the claims of the past and the present; a deeper sense of both humanity and individuality extended the human interest which at the same time intensified.

--Under the new conditions its task lay chiefly in the under-
standing of the complex relations of literature and life, in
the perception of the laws according to which genius works,
and especially in the establishment of the principles of lit-
erary judgment." The criticism which attempted to fulfill
these far-reaching functions, and conform itself to the rich,
complex life of the time could have nothing final about it.
It could only lend itself to suggestion, and grow into more
complete being with the century itself.

A very interesting advent can only be alluded to here,
the birth of the first journal of literary criticism—the
modern magazine. The circumstances are rather romantic—the
group of idle, brilliant young lawyers, Francis Jeffrey, Sidney
Smith, Henry Brougham, and others less known to fame—smould-
ering intelligence, a spirit of mischief, and the Edinburg
Review saw the light in October, 1802. It is not necessary
to describe how the new publication raised, how the lions
roared and how keen an interest the public took in the unknown
writers. The Edinburg Review soon had several rivals. The
magazine was readily recognized as a power and authority, and
its permanence assured by popularity on all sides. It opened
up a new outlet for literary criticism and encouraged its
production as nothing else had done. An audience and a med-
ium for it were prepared, and criticism took its place boldly
as a distinct branch of literature. With the multiplication
of periodicals, and the inevitable lowering of standards,
criticism had its day of day of darkness and disgrace. The
very word became synonymous with cavil and abuse. Wordsworth called it the inglorious employment, and his brother writers denounced the critics as black-guards. But English criticism had too sturdy roots to be long subjected to wide-spread abuse.

At this very time, some of the most illustrious of our writers, had come to the rescue of their literary theories, and incidently, of criticism itself. Coleridge's high mission we have already given account of. Wordsworth deigned to reply to the famous critique of Jeffrey with a most valuable exposition of his theory. It is creative because of its adaptation to its end, and its comprehensive grasp of a new principle of criticism. Scott, De Quin,cy, Lamb, Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt, working more or less in unison, did a great deal toward establishing criticism as an art. Orden and Coleridge had already made it a science. They brought sympathy and intelligence, imagination as well as judgment to their task. When is there a feeling superior to that of Lamb, a delicacy more fastidious than that of De Quin,cy's or a style more exquisite? Where can we find a kindlier sympathy than Walter Scott breathes out? Men who have won distinction as original writers have been purposely cited as exemplary critics. For it is intended to show that the critical and the creative functions are not mutually destructive, but they have free inter-play. We believe the hard and fast line drawn between the two to be artificial, and at this day an anachronism. Creation is set down as of the imagination and criticism
as of the judgment. Modern psychology will hardly permit such
direct juxta-position to two mental faculties. The mental
processes are not isolated but unified, and the action of one
envelops the others. The creative writer must make constant
appeal to his judgment as he proceeds. He follows its dictates
and acts by its mandates. The critic writer is as closely
dependent upon imagination. How else than through imagination
could he obtain the insight and sympathy so stringently de-
manded of him? We could not suffer or rejoice or in any
sense comprehend human experience outside our selves except
that the mental perception reproduces for us in imagination
what has been for others in reality. The purest judgment so
long proclaimed as the critic's function and his orthodox ideal,
involves imagination. Kant proves this to us. After explain-
ing that in synthesis lies the true origin of our knowledge,
he says: "Synthesis, in general is due solely to the opera-
tion of the imagination, a blind but indispensable function
of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge what-
ever, but of which we are seldom even conscious." Kant
makes imagination one of the necessary transcendental func-
tions of the mind, and a priori element involved in any judg-
ment. An English critic pays a more poetic tribute to im-
agination: "Suddenly it is the mind's eye; suddenly again it
is the second sight; anon it is known as intuition, then it
is apprehension; quickly it passes into a dream; as quickly
it resolves itself into sympathy and imitation; in one moment
it turns to invention and begins to create; in the next moment
it adopts reason and begins to generalize; at length it flies in a passion and is lost in love. It takes the likeness, or apt the style by turns, of every faculty, every mood, every motion of thought. What is this Proteus of the mind that so defies our search?" Imagination is the versatile, expansive quality that perceives values and relations in new orders, that pierces into the narrow of things and recognizes affinities. For all these reasons and still others the critic has need of imagination. Indeed his progress without it could only be along a blind alley.

But for criticism, personality must be accredited the highest value as a creative factor. We like the rather didactic definition of personality as "moral agency". The element of universality is implied as well as that transcendent element that utterly defies definition. The personality of mankind is above all else, sacred, inexplicable. It becomes the essential element in all true art, which, without it, becomes dead and uninteresting, wanting in motif. It is this leavening of differentiation spirit that stamps us as individuals. True personality is not expressed in the peculiar or the whimsical. It lies in the very "structural force and genius of every man," and appears in his highest expression of himself. Hamilton Wright Mabie says: "Personality is the divinest thing in the world because it is the only creative thing; the only power that can bring to material already existent a new idea of order and form." It might be well to suggest here that in a psychological analysis our ideal of
personality would very nearly dissolve itself into imagination. But there would still remain the soul-element that is philosophy's perpetual will o' the wisp. There must be no confusion between the personality here involved and the rank egoism and sensationalism which are sometimes understood by this term. That creative criticism which depends in part upon the properly directed far-reaching projection of self into obscure and unexplored fields, does lead towards impressionism and in a measure is dependent upon it. But sensibility in this case is presupposed to have been purged and refined before it is used as a test. Impressionistic criticism, which has neglected these refining and disciplinary prerequisites of intelligent procedure, is valueless. It often has a lively spirit and considerable temporary interest, but it has no lasting worth.

In further exaltation of personality, Mr. Habie says: "It is in Sophocles, in Shakespeare, in Moliere, in Goethe, that we find the ripest and most powerful personalities, — personalities that have not rested in simple transcription of the feeling of the moment, but have made their own experiences illustrative of universal law, and in the untroubled surface of their calm, deep natures have reflected the whole moving image of things." It would be difficult to find a better expression on this subject. We would claim that the critic has just as strong a personality as the strictly creative writer and that it becomes just as fundamental a
power in his work.

The greatest of critical writing is as much tinged with true personality, as much flesh and blood of it as any other literature. Let us first take Charles Lamb as an example. Whoever has read the gentle Elia, does not thereafter fail to recognize the winning personality any more than he does the face of a friend. Walter Pater in his remarkably fine essay on Lamb shows us how the personal characteristics of the man are woven into his critical work. It was his personal affinity with them that makes Lamb's criticism of the old English poets and dramatists so valuable as creative criticism. He was almost the discoverer of this old literature, which he collected and re-edited, but "he adds in a series of notes the very quintessence of criticism, the choicest savor and perfume of Elizabethan poetry being sorted and stored here, with a sort of intellectual epicureanism, which has had the effect of winning for these, then almost forgotten poets, one generation after another of enthusiastic students." Pater goes on to say of Lamb's style: "Even in what he says casually there comes an aroma of old English; noticeable echoes, in chance turn and phrase, of the great masters of style, the old master," and of Lamb himself,—"he has reached an enduring moral effect also, in a sort of boundless sympathy.—He felt the genius of place; and I sometimes think he resembles the places he knew and liked best.—Below his quiet, his quaintness. Below his quiet, his quaintness, his humour, and what may seem the slighness, the occasional or accidental character
of his work, there lies as I said at starting, a genuinely tragic element." No where have we seen so adequate a treat-
ment of Charles Lamb as this essay of Walter Pater. It is indeed creative—bringing to the surface with keen sympathy and appreciation the lights and shadows of the sweetly pathetic character. The style of the essay is that of a master.

No lover of "Esmond," who has tried to reconstruct for himself, with Thackeray's help, the England of Anne, has escaped some acquaintance with the "English Humorists." They are a motley and for the most part, hilarious, crowd. Surly Dean Swift, courtly Addison, riotous, tender-hearted Dick Steele in his red coat, and Goldsmith, wearing a peach-colored garment, saying witty things. The skilful art of Thackeray, which aims to show us the men rather than to comment upon their work, brings it about that we catch their spirit once for all. Beneath their genius, they become for us men, sin-
ning, sorrowing, loving, and hating. Just this creative criticism—the gentle touch of a kindred hand, that throws into high relief the fine qualities, accentuates the good, commiserates the bad. Thackeray makes no attempt to gloss over the faults of these very faulty gentlemen, but he does attempt to show us that they were part and parcel of their time and people, no better, no worse. The style, the temper, in which a literary thing is executed makes a world of dfference in the total effect. And we are glad that it is Thack-
eray's half satirical but wholly sympathetic touch, here,
and not that of an alien hand. He puts his best self, his creative faculty into his English Humorists, just as unmistakably as into the marvelous outlines of Becky Sharp.

Matthew Arnold and Thackeray might have been of different ages and races so far removed in spirit are they. A comparative of a page of each writer will show this as plainly as an exhaustive analysis of the two men. No great man could devote himself to literature, and be animated by a "scientific passion for pure truth," without putting something valuable out of himself into his writing. This is true of Arnold—scholar, poet, philosopher, ethical teacher. The cold purity of his intellect, his innate refinement of feeling, tinge his criticism with his personality just as do the warmer temperaments. Arnold is at his best—and indeed his even temper seldom fell below it—in his essay on Marcus Aurelius. Back in pagan Rome, seated upon the royal purple, Arnold found a kindred soul. The writings of Aurelius have not been wholly unknown to us, but it takes just such creative criticism as Arnold uses to make us feel the character of the man, appreciate his spirit, and finally to shape a fair judgment. The man and his work are permanently valuable, not because of the greatness of the latter, but because they are the highest products of pagan ethics. Arnold not only produced criticism which we consider creative, but he formulated his principles of criticism and they have had a wide-spread influence. He upheld the classic standards and masters and admitted little
else as excellence. He was a Greek born too late and his literary ideal is Grecian.

America has produced at least one great critic—James Russell Lowell. He also possessed the same qualities that we have found essential to the higher critics, scholarship, sympathy, keen intellect, imagination. And he had, too, the greatest of all, a powerful creative personality. His essays on "John Dryden" and "Chaucer" and "Shakespeare, Once More" are replete with suggestive and creative thought. It is very difficult to select only a few sentences that illustrate. "What Dryden did in his best writing was to use the English as if it were a spoken, and not merely an inkhorn language; as if it were his own to do what he pleased with it, as if it needed not to be ashamed of itself. In this respect his service to our prose was greater than any other man has ever rendered." He says further: "He was a strong thinker who sometimes carried common sense to a height where it catches the light of a diviner air, and warmed reason until it had well nigh the illuminating property of intuition.—He had beyond most the gift of the right word." In the first part of the essay on Shakespeare, Lowell makes use of this pregnant sentence: "Before attempting any analysis I must clear away a little rubbish." The foremost Chaucerian scholar of the day has said that Lowell's critique of Chaucer is easily at the head of the list. All of Lowell's criticism has the genial fair-minded quality that made the man himself so charming a
companion. One of the claims that creative literature makes is that it moulds the taste and shapes the spirit of the age. It is hardly possible to over-estimate a writer's influence. Literature reflects the age no more than the age reflects the literature. There is close interaction. The field of influence seems especially adapted to the nature of criticism. So conservative and irreproachable a judge as Arnold designates this field as the particular "function of criticism at the present time." He finds the province of the critic in preparation more than anything else. For the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its exercise, appointed elements, and these elements are not in its own control. Nay, they are more within the control of the critical power. It is the business of the critical power—to see the object as in itself it really is. Thus it tends, at least, to make an intellectual situation of which the creative power can profitably avail itself. It tends to establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces; to make the best ideas prevail. Presently these new ideas reach society, the touch of truth is the touch of life, and there is a stir and growth everywhere; out of this stir and growth come the creative epochs of literature. Thus Arnold would have criticism a sort of footman running before genius. But in the work he defines for criticism, is still creation—creation of atmosphere, public taste and environment. And as to objective results
what more can the purely creative writer accomplish? The process of criticism is more selective and destractive, while creative work involves a building and cumulative process. Both methods are formative and creative.

If it is true that genius has its inevitable vocabulary, there are many critics who can claim genius. The excellence of style that characterizes our critical literature is a thing to inspire one. Almost without exceptions, the great critics express themselves simply, clearly, elegantly. The personal charm of so many has already been spoken of. From the ornate diction of Sir Philip Sidney's "Defense of Poetry", through Dryden to Addison, who remains a model of elegant style, to the moderns—Ruskin, Arnold, Pater, Stevenson and the many others who we have not been able even to mention, the style is beyond reproach and can be accorded the highest praise. It is probably safe to say that in no other branch of literature has so high a standard been sustained. Masterly style is one of the best claims, and the final claim of creation that we make for the critic. For a man's style is no less himself than the thought he endeavors to clothe with proper form.

The opposition to the much abused personal element in criticism, and the almost universal demand that judgment is the critic's final task, make any treatment of creative criticism partake of the nature of a defense. It seems necessary that creative criticism should first of all give an ac-