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I. A. Richards

PRACTICAL CRITICISM

A Study of Literary Judgment

A HARVEST BOOK

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PREFACE

A convenient arrangement for the parts of this book has not been easy to find. A friendly reader will, I think, soon see why. Those who are curious to discern what motives prompted me to write it will be satisfied most quickly if they begin by glancing through Part IV, which might indeed have been placed as an Introduction.

The length of Part II, and a certain unavoidable monotony, may prove a stumbling-block. I have included very little there, however, that I do not discuss again in Part III, and it need not be read through continuously. A reader who feels some impatience will prudently pass on at once to my attempted elucidations, returning to consult the facts when a renewed contact with actuality is desired.

The later chapters of Part III will be found to have more general interest than the earlier.

I am deeply indebted to the living authors of some of the poems I have used for their permission to print them; a permission which, in view of the peculiar conditions of this experiment, witnesses to no slight generosity of spirit. Some contemporary poems were necessary for my purpose, to avoid the perplexities which 'dated' styles would introduce here. But in making the selection I had originally no thought of publication. The interest of the material supplied me by my commentators and the desire that as many types of poetry as possible should be represented have been the only reasons for my choice. But in those instances in which I have not been able to form a high opinion of the poems I must ask the forgiveness of the

authors and plead as excuse a motive which we have in common, the advancement of poetry.

My acknowledgments are due also to the publishers of these poems. Details of these obligations will be found in Appendix C, in which I have hidden away, as far as I could, particulars as to the authorship and date of the poems. For obvious reasons the interest of these pages will be enhanced if the reader remains unaware of the authorship of the poems until his own opinions of them have been formed and tested by comparison with the many other opinions here given. I would, therefore, earnestly counsel an intending reader not to consult Appendix C until a late stage in his reading.

I. A. R.

CAMBRIDGE,
April 1929.

CONTENTS

I have set three aims before me in constructing this book. First, to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture whether as critics, as philosophers, as teachers, as psychologists, or merely as curious persons. Secondly, to provide a new technique for those who wish to discover for themselves what they think and feel about poetry (and cognate matters) and why they should like or dislike it. Thirdly, to prepare the way for educational methods more efficient than those we use now in developing discrimination and the power to understand what we hear and read.

For the first purpose I have used copious quotations from material supplied to me as a Lecturer at Cambridge and elsewhere. For some years I have made the experiment of issuing printed sheets of poems—ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognised.

After a week's interval I would collect these comments, taking certain obvious precautions to preserve the anonymity of the commentators, since only through anonymity could complete liberty to express their genuine opinions be secured for the writers. Care was taken to refrain from influencing them either for or against any poem. Four poems were issued at a time in groupings indicated in the Appendix, in which the poems I am here using will be found. I would, as a rule, hint that the poems were perhaps a mixed lot, but that was the full extent of my interference. I lectured the following week partly upon the

poems, but rather more upon the comments, or protocols, as I call them.

Much astonishment both for the protocol-writers and for the Lecturer ensued from this procedure. The opinions expressed were not arrived at lightly or from one reading of the poems only. As a measure of indirect suggestion, I asked each writer to record on his protocol the number of "readings" made of each poem. A number of perusals made at one session were to be counted together as one "reading" provided that they aroused and sustained one single growing response to the poem, or alternatively led to no response at all and left the reader with nothing but the bare words before him on the paper. This description of a "reading" was, I believe, well understood. It follows that readers who recorded as many as ten or a dozen readings had devoted no little time and energy to their critical endeavour. Few writers gave less than four attacks to any of the poems. On the whole it is fairly safe to assert that the poems received much more thorough study than, shall we say, most anthology pieces get in the ordinary course. It is from this thoroughness, prompted by the desire to arrive at some definite expressible opinion, and from the week's leisure allowed that these protocols derive their significance.

The standing of the writers must be made clear. The majority were undergraduates reading English with a view to an Honours Degree. A considerable number were reading other subjects but there is no ground to suppose that these differed for this reason in any essential respect. There was a sprinkling of graduates, and a few members of the audience were non-academic. Men and women were probably included in about equal numbers, so, in what follows "he" must constantly be read as equivalent to "he or she." There was no compulsion to return protocols. Those who took the trouble to write—about 60 per cent—may be presumed to have been actuated by a more than ordinarily keen interest in poetry. From such comparisons as I have been able to make with protocols supplied by audiences of other types, I see no reason whatever to think that a higher standard of critical discernment can

easily be found under our present cultural conditions. Doubtless, could the Royal Society of Literature or the Academic Committee of the English Association be impounded for purposes of experiment we might expect greater uniformity in the comments or at least in their style, and a more wary approach as regards some of the dangers of the test. But with regard to equally essential matters occasions for surprise might still occur. The precise conditions of this test are not duplicated in our everyday commerce with literature. Even the reviewers of new verse have as a rule a considerable body of the author's work to judge by. And editorial complaints are frequent as to the difficulty of obtaining good reviewing. Editors themselves will not be the slowest to agree with me upon the difficulty of judging verse without a hint as to its provenance.

Enough, for the moment, about the documentation of this book. My second aim is more ambitious and requires more explanation. It forms part of a general attempt to modify our procedure in certain forms of discussion. There are subjects—mathematics, physics and the descriptive sciences supply some of them—which can be discussed in terms of verifiable facts and precise hypotheses. There are other subjects—the concrete affairs of commerce, law, organisation and police work—which can be handled by rules of thumb and generally accepted conventions. But in between is the vast *corpus* of problems, assumptions, adumbrations, fictions, prejudices, tenets; the sphere of random beliefs and hopeful guesses; the whole world, in brief, of abstract opinion and disputation about matters of feeling. To this world belongs everything about which civilised man cares most. I need only instance ethics, metaphysics, morals, religion, aesthetics, and the discussions surrounding liberty, nationality, justice, love, truth, faith and knowledge to make this plain. As a subject-matter for discussion, poetry is a central and typical denizen of this world. It is so both by its own nature and by the type of discussion with which it is traditionally associated. It serves, therefore, as an eminently suitable ***bait*** for anyone who wishes to trap the current opinions

and responses in this middle field for the purpose of examining and comparing them, and with a view to advancing our knowledge of what may be called the natural history of human opinions and feelings.

In part then this book is the record of a piece of field-work in comparative ideology. But I hope, not only to present an instructive collection of contemporary opinions, presuppositions, theories, beliefs, responses and the rest, but also to make some suggestions towards a better control of these tricksy components of our lives. The way in which it is hoped to do this can only be briefly indicated at this point.

There are two ways of interpreting all but a very few utterances.

Whenever we hear or read any not too nonsensical opinion, a tendency so strong and so automatic that it must have been formed along with our earliest speech-habits, leads us to consider *what seems to be said* rather than the *mental operations* of the person who said it. If the speaker is a recognised and obvious liar this tendency is, of course, arrested. We do then neglect what he has said and turn our attention instead to the motives or mechanisms that have caused him to say it. But ordinarily we at once try to consider the objects his words seem to stand for and not the mental goings-on that led him to use the words. We say that we "follow his thought" and mean, not that we have traced what happened in his mind, but merely that we have gone through a train of thinking that seems to end where he ended. We are in fact so anxious to discover whether we agree or not with what is being said that we overlook the mind that says it, unless some very special circumstance calls us back.

Compare now the attitude to speech of the alienist attempting to "follow" the ravings of mania or the dream maunderings of a neurotic. I do not suggest that we should treat one another altogether as "mental cases" [1]

[1] A few touches of the clinical manner will, however, be not out of place in these pages, if only to counteract the indecent tendencies of the scene. For here are our friends and neighbours—nay our very brothers and sisters—caught at a moment of abandon giving themselves and their literary reputations away with an unexampled freedom. It is indeed a sobering spectacle, but like some sights of the hospital-ward very serviceable to restore proportions and recall to us what humanity, behind all its lendings and pretences, is like.

but merely that for some subject-matters and some types of discussion the alienist's attitude, his direction of attention, his order or plan of interpretation, is far more fruitful, and would lead to better understanding on both sides of the discussion, than the usual method that our language habits force upon us. For normal minds are easier to "follow" than diseased minds, and even more can be learned by adopting the psychologist's attitude to ordinary speech-situations than by studying aberrations.

It is very strange that we have no simple verbal means by which to describe these two different kinds of "meaning." Some device as unmistakable as the "up" or "down" of a railway signal ought to be available. But there is none. Clumsy and pedantic looking psychological periphrases have to be employed instead. I shall, however, try to use one piece of shorthand consistently. In handling the piles of material supplied by the protocols I shall keep the term "statement" for those utterances whose "meaning" in the sense of what they *say*, or purport to say, is the prime object of interest. I shall reserve the term "expression" for those utterances where it is the mental operations of the writers which are to be considered.

When the full range of this distinction is realised the study of criticism takes on a new significance. But the distinction is not easy to observe. Even the firmest resolution will be constantly broken down, so strong are our native language habits. When views that seem to conflict with our own prepossessions are set before us, the impulse to refute, to combat or to reconstruct them, rather than to investigate them, is all but overwhelming. So the history of criticism,[2] like the history of all the middle subjects alluded to above, is a history of dogmatism and argumentation rather than a history of research. And like

[2] We shall meet in the protocols plenty of living instances of famous critical doctrines that are often thought to be now merely curiosities of opinion long since extinct.

all such histories the chief lesson to be learnt from it is the futility of all argumentation that precedes understanding. We cannot profitably attack any opinion until we have discovered what it expresses as well as what it states; and our present technique for investigating opinions must be admitted, for all these middle subjects, to be woefully inadequate.

Therefore, the second aim of this book is to improve this technique. We shall have before us several hundreds of opinions upon particular aspects of poetry, and the poems themselves to help us to examine them. We shall have the great advantage of being able to compare numbers of extremely different opinions upon the same point. We shall be able to study what may be called the same opinion in different stages of development as it comes from different minds. And further, we shall be able in many instances to see what happens to a given opinion, when it is applied to a different detail or a different poem.

The effect of all this is remarkable. When the first dizzy bewilderment has worn off, as it very soon does, it is as though we were strolling through and about a building that hitherto we were only able to see from one or two distant standpoints. We gain a much more intimate understanding both of the poem and of the opinions it provokes.[8] Something like a plan of the most usual approaches can be sketched and we learn what to expect when a new object, a new poem, comes up for discussion.

It is as a step towards another training and technique in discussion that I would best like this book to be regarded. If we are to begin to understand half the opinions which appear in the protocols we shall need no little mental plasticity. And in the course of our comparisons, interpretations and extrapolations something like a plan of the ways in which the likely ambiguities of any given term or opinion-formula may radiate will make itself apparent.

[8] A strange light, incidentally, is thrown upon the sources of popularity for poetry. Indeed I am not without fears that my efforts may prove of assistance to young poets (and others) desiring to increase their sales. A set of formulae for "nation-wide appeal" seems to be a just possible outcome.

For the hope of a new technique in discussion lies in this: that the study of the ambiguities of one term assists in the elucidation of another. To trace the meanings of "sentimentality," "truth," "sincerity," or "meaning" itself, as these terms are used in criticism, can help us with other words used in other topics. Ambiguity in fact is systematic; the separate senses that a word may have are related to one another, if not as strictly as the various aspects of a building, at least to a remarkable extent. Something comparable to a "perspective" which will include and enable us to control and "place" the rival meanings that bewilder us in discussion and hide our minds from one another can be worked out. Perhaps every intelligence that has ever reflected upon this matter will agree that this may be so. Everyone agrees but no one does any research into the matter, although this is an affair in which even the slightest step forward affects the whole frontier line of human thought and discussion.

The indispensable instrument for this inquiry is psychology. I am anxious to meet as far as may be the objection that may be brought by some psychologists, and these the best, that the protocols do not supply enough evidence for us really to be able to make out the motives of the writers and that therefore the whole investigation is superficial. But the *beginning* of every research ought to be superficial, and to find something to investigate that is accessible and detachable is one of the chief difficulties of psychology. I believe the chief merit of the experiment here made is that it gives us this. Had I wished to plumb the depths of these writers' Unconscious, where I am quite willing to agree the real motives of their likings and dislikings would be found, I should have devised something like a branch of psychoanalytic technique for the purpose. But it was clear that little progress would be made if we attempted to drag too deep a plough. However, even as it is, enough strange material is turned up.

After these explanations the reader will be prepared to find little argumentation in these pages, but much analysis, much rather strenuous exercise in changing our ground and a good deal of rather intricate navigation.

Navigation, in fact—the art of knowing where we are wherever, as mental travellers, we may go—is the main subject of the book. To discuss poetry and the ways in which it may be approached, appreciated and judged is, of course, its prime purpose. But poetry itself is a mode of communication. What it communicates and how it does so and the worth of what is communicated form the subject-matter of criticism. It follows that criticism itself is very largely, though not wholly, an exercise in navigation. It is all the more surprising then that no treatise on the art and science of intellectual and emotional navigation has yet been written; for logic, which might appear to cover part of this field, in actuality hardly touches it.

That the one and only goal of all critical endeavours, of all interpretation, appreciation, exhortation, praise or abuse, is improvement in communication may seem an exaggeration. But in practice it is so. The whole apparatus of critical rules and principles is a means to the attainment of finer, more precise, more discriminating communication. There is, it is true, a valuation side to criticism. When we have solved, completely, the communication problem, when we have got, perfectly, the experience, *the mental condition* relevant to the poem, we have still to judge it, still to decide upon its worth. But the later question nearly always settles itself; or rather, our own inmost nature and the nature of the world in which we live decide it for us. Our prime endeavour must be to get the relevant mental condition and then see what happens. If we cannot then decide whether it is good or bad, it is doubtful whether any principles, however refined and subtle, can help us much. Without the capacity to get the experience they cannot help us at all. This is still clearer if we consider the use of critical maxims in teaching. Value cannot be demonstrated except through the communication of what is valuable.

Critical principles, in fact, need wary handling. They can never be a substitute for discernment though they may assist us to avoid unnecessary blunders. There has hardly ever been a critical rule, principle or maxim which has not been for wise men a helpful guide but for fools

a will-o'-the-wisp. All the great watchwords of criticism from Aristotle's "Poetry is an imitation" down to the doctrine that "Poetry is expression," are ambiguous pointers that different people follow to very different destinations. Even the most sagacious critical principles may, as we shall see, become merely a cover for critical ineptitude; and the most trivial or baseless generalisation may really mask good and discerning judgment. Everything turns upon how the principles are applied. It is to be feared that critical formulas, even the best, are responsible for more bad judgment than good, because it is far easier to forget their subtle sense and apply them crudely than to remember it and apply them finely.

The astonishing variety of human responses makes irksome any too systematic scheme for arranging these extracts. I wish to present a sufficient selection to bring the situation concretely before the reader, reserving to the chapters of Part III any serious attempt to clear up the various difficulties with which the protocol-writers have been struggling. I shall proceed poem by poem, allowing the internal drama latent in every clash of opinion, of taste or temperament to guide the arrangement. Not all the poems, needless to say, raise the same problems in equal measure. In most, some one outstanding difficulty, some special occasion for a division of minds, takes precedence.

It is convenient therefore to place here a somewhat arbitrary list of the principal difficulties that may be encountered by one reader or another in the presence of almost any poem. This list is suggested by a study of the protocols themselves, and drawn up in an order which proceeds from the simplest, infant's, obstacle to successful reading up to the most insidious, intangible and bewildering of critical problems.

If some of these difficulties seem so simple as to be hardly worth discussion, I would beg my reader who feels a temptation to despise them not to leap lightly to his decision. Part of my purpose is *documentation* and I am confident of showing that the simple difficulties are those

that most need attention as they are those that in fact receive least.

We soon advance, however, to points on which more doubt may be felt—where controversy, more and less enlightened, still continues—and we finish face to face with questions which no one will pretend are yet settled and with some which will not be settled till the Day of Judgment. In the memorable words of Benjamin Paul Blood, "What is concluded that we should conclude anything about it?"

The following seem to be the chief difficulties of criticism or, at least, those which we shall have most occasion to consider here:—

A. First must come the difficulty of *making out the plain sense* of poetry. The most disturbing and impressive fact brought out by this experiment is that a large proportion of average-to-good (and in some cases, certainly, devoted) readers of poetry frequently and repeatedly *fail to understand it,* both as a statement and as an expression. They fail to make out its prose sense, its plain, overt meaning, as a set of ordinary, intelligible, English sentences, taken quite apart from any further poetic significance. And equally, they misapprehend its feeling, its tone, and its intention. They would travesty it in a paraphrase. They fail to construe it just as a schoolboy fails to construe a piece of Caesar. How serious in its effects in different instances this failure may be, we shall have to consider with care. It is not confined to one class of readers; not only those whom we would suspect fall victims. Nor is it only the most abstruse poetry which so betrays us. In fact, to set down, for once, the brutal truth, no immunity is possessed on any occasion, not by the most reputable scholar, from this or any other of these critical dangers.

B. Parallel to, and not unconnected with, these difficulties of interpreting the meaning are the difficulties of *sensuous apprehension.* Words in sequence have a form to the mind's ear and the mind's tongue and larynx, even when silently read. They have a movement and may have a rhythm. The gulf is wide between a reader who naturally and immediately perceives this form and movement (by a conjunction of sensory, intellectual and emotional sagacity) and another reader, who either ignores it or has to build it up laboriously with finger-counting, table-tapping and the rest; and this difference has most far-reaching effects.

C. Next may come those difficulties that are connected with the place of *imagery,* principally visual imagery, in poetic reading. They arise in part from the incurable fact that we differ immensely in our capacity to visualise, and to produce imagery of the other senses. Also the importance of our imagery as a whole, as well as of some pet particular type of image, in our mental lives varies surprisingly. Some minds can do nothing and get nowhere without images; others seem to be able to do everything and get anywhere, reach any and every state of thought and feeling without making use of them. Poets on the whole (though by no means all poets always) may be suspected of exceptional imaging capacity, and some readers are constitutionally prone to stress the place of imagery in reading, to pay great attention to it, and even to judge the value of the poetry by the images it excites in them. But images are erratic things; lively images aroused in one mind need have no similarity to the equally lively images stirred by the same line of poetry in another, and neither set need have anything to do with any images which may have existed in the poet's mind. Here is a troublesome source of critical deviations.

D. Thirdly, more obviously, we have to note the powerful very pervasive influence of *mnemonic irrelevances.* These are misleading effects of the reader's being reminded of some personal scene or adventure, erratic associations, the interference of emotional reverberations from a past which may have nothing to do with the poem. Relevance is not an easy notion to define or to apply, though some instances of irrelevant intru-

sions are among the simplest of all accidents to diagnose.

E. More puzzling and more interesting are the critical traps that surround what may be called *stock responses*. These have their opportunity whenever a poem seems to, or does, involve views and emotions already fully prepared in the reader's mind, so that what happens appears to be more of the reader's doing than the poet's. The button is pressed, and then the author's work is done, for immediately the record starts playing in quasi- (or total) independence of the poem which is supposed to be its origin or instrument.

Whenever this lamentable redistribution of the poet's and reader's share in the labour of poetry occurs, or is in danger of occurring, we require to be especially on our guard. Every kind of injustice may be committed as well by those who just escape as by those who are caught.

F. *Sentimentality* is a peril that needs less comment here. It is a question of the due measure of response. This over-facility in certain emotional directions is the Scylla whose Charybdis is—

G. *Inhibition*. This, as much as Sentimentality, is a positive phenomenon, though less studied until recent years and somewhat masked under the title of Hardness of Heart. But neither can well be considered in isolation.

H. *Doctrinal adhesions* present another troublesome problem. Very much poetry—religious poetry may be instanced—seems to contain or imply views and beliefs, true or false, about the world. If this be so, what bearing has the truth-value of the views upon the worth of the poetry? Even if it be not so, if the beliefs are not really contained or implied, but only seem so to a non-poetical reading, what should be the bearing of the reader's conviction, if any, upon his estimate of the poetry? Has poetry anything to say; if not, why not, and if so, how? Difficulties at this point are a fertile source of confusion and erratic judgment.

I. Passing now to a different order of difficulties, the effects of *technical presuppositions* have to be noted. When something has once been well done in a certain fashion we tend to expect similar things to be done in the future in the same fashion, and are disappointed or do not recognise them if they are done differently. Conversely, a technique which has shown its ineptitude for one purpose tends to become discredited for all. Both are cases of mistaking means for ends. Whenever we attempt to judge poetry from outside by technical details we are putting means before ends, and—such is our ignorance of cause and effect in poetry—we shall be lucky if we do not make even worse blunders. We have to try to avoid judging pianists by their hair.

J. Finally, *general critical preconceptions* (prior demands made upon poetry as a result of theories—conscious or unconscious—about its nature and value), intervene endlessly, as the history of criticism shows only too well, between the reader and the poem. Like an unlucky dietetic formula they may cut him off from what he is starving for, even when it is at his very lips.

These difficulties, as will have been observed, are not unconnected with one another and indeed overlap. They might have been collected under more heads or fewer. Yet, if we set aside certain extreme twists or trends of the personality (for example, blinding narcissism or grovelling self-abasement—aberrations, temporary or permanent, of the self-regarding sentiment) together with undue accumulations or depletions of energy, I believe that most of the principal obstacles and causes of failure in the reading and judgment of poetry may without much straining be brought under these ten heads. But they are too roughly sketched here for this to be judged.

More by good luck than by artful design, each poem, as a rule, proved an invitation to the mass of its readers to grapple with some *one* of the difficulties that have just been indicated. Thus a certain sporting interest may be

felt by the sagacious critic in divining where, in each case, the dividing line of opinion will fall, and upon what considerations it will turn. No attempt will be made, in the survey which follows, to do more than shake out and air these variegated opinions. Elucidations, both of the poems and the opinions, will be for the most part postponed, as well as my endeavours to adjudicate upon the poetic worth of the unfortunate subjects of debate.

A very natural suspicion may fittingly be countered in this place. Certain doubts were occasionally expressed to me after a lecture that not all the protocol extracts were equally genuine. It was hinted that I might have myself composed some of those which came in most handily to illustrate a point. But none of the protocols have been tampered with and nothing has been added. I have even left the spelling and punctuation unchanged in all significant places.

But another falsification may perhaps be charged against me, falsification through bias in selection. Space, and respect for the reader's impatience, obviously forbade my printing the whole of my material. Selected extracts alone could be ventured. With a little cunning it would be possible to make selections that would give very different impressions. I can only say that I have been on my guard against unfairness. I ought to add perhaps that the part of the material least adequately represented is the havering, non-committal, vague, sit-on-the-fence, middle-body of opinion. I would have put in more of this if it were not such profitless reading.

PART TWO

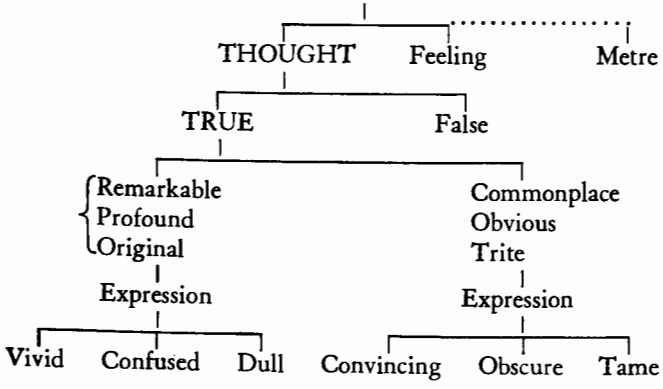
DOCUMENTATION

But enough of this; there is such a variety of game springing up before me, that I am distracted in my choice, and know not which to follow. It is sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty.

DRYDEN on the Canterbury Pilgrims.

Life's more than breath and the quick round of
blood.
'Tis a great spirit and a busy heart;
The coward and the small in soul scarce do live.
One generous feeling, one great thought, one deed
Of good, ere night, would make life longer seem
Than if each year might number a thousand days
Spent as is this by nations of mankind.
We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not breaths;
In feelings, not in figures on a dial.
We should count time by heart-throbs. He most lives
Who thinks most, feels the noblest, acts the best.

POEM 1 Here, for once, in the opinions maintained about the central point, Nature shows a taste for system, and gives us the rare satisfaction of seeing nearly all the logical possibilities well represented in living and lively form. The central dispute concerned the place and value of the doctrine these verses propound, and whether that doctrine be well or ill expressed. Differing replies upon these matters were associated with high degrees of delight or disgust. That the thought contained is true; that, on the contrary, it is false; that, though true enough, it is commonplace; that it is original and profound; that, as a commonplace or as a paradox, it is finely or tamely, clearly or confusedly expressed; these were the questions agitated. The various possible answers were so well represented that it seems worth while making up a table:—



First let the advocates of its excellence be heard.

1.11.[1] Truth is the essence of art, and the outstanding feature of this passage is truth. The poet has expressed in vivid terms his conception of the higher, if not the highest plane of life and we who read his work, cannot fail to appreciate its *nobility of thought*[2] and realise its challenge to mankind. The verse is full of sentiment, but sentiment of the best kind.

Alas! we often fail to appreciate it, as is lamentably shown in what follows. But let those of more elevated temper continue.

1.12. Here is *noble thought* clothed fittingly and strikingly in *powerful verse*. The first nine lines especially appeal to me, ending, as they do, in effective antithesis.

1.13. A noble message, well conveyed by the form chosen.

"Noble" seems indeed a key-word to this passage.

1.14. These lines express the thoughts of a lofty soul in a simple yet impressive manner. They are lines which are

[1] This numbering of the protocols is primarily introduced to facilitate reference. But the decimal system allows me also to use it to suggest certain groupings. The number before the decimal point (1.— to 13.—) indicates the poem which is being discussed. The first number after the point suggests, when it remains the same for a sequence of extracts, that the same general problem, approach, or view is being illustrated. Thus 1.11, 1.12, 1.13 . . . have some cognate bearing, but with 1.2 a different general topic has taken its place. Similarly with the later decimal places. For example, 1.141, 1.142 . . . may be especially considered along with 1.14, all being concerned in different ways with the same secondary point. (Here the metrical qualities of the passage.)

But I have not attempted to make this numbering strictly systematic. It is used as a rough indication of the moments when we pass over to a new question; it is a mere supplement to paragraphing, and any reader may neglect it at his discretion.

Unless otherwise expressly stated a different number implies a different writer.

[2] The italics in all cases are mine and are introduced not to distort the protocols (the reader will become used to them) but to direct the reader's attention without toil to the points with which, for the moment, my commentary is concerned—or to indicate where comparisons may be interesting.

worth remembering both on account of their thought and their concise and clear expression. The last phrase haunts the mind, but apart from this *the whole passage moves forward with a gentle motion* which tends to infix the words on the memory.

It may seem strange that the phrase "acts the best" should haunt the mind, but this is possibly not what the writer intended.

Not all those who agree about the lofty nobility of the passage and who most admire its expression are at one as to why this expression is to be admired.

1.141. The rather rugged metre makes the best possible setting for the *noble idea* of the poet. It carries one along with it, conveying the idea of someone speaking rapidly, his *words almost tumbling over each other,* in the stress of emotion: an instance of how a *noble theme* can inspire a poet to clothe it in *noble diction,* without any of the verbal embroideries often employed by poets, to make inferior themes palatable.

Words which "almost tumble over one another" and yet "move forward with a gentle motion" would seem impossibly versatile if we did not know how much this kind of movement in verse depends upon the reader. Several other views about the verse qualities are also found even among admirers.

1.142. The thought is the most important thing about this poem. The hint of paradox arrests the reader's attention, the truth of it gives one a feeling of satisfaction. It is expressed in *plain, straightforward speech* which is the best medium for a didactic poem.

1.143. I admire this because I think the thought expressed is true and interesting, and original in that it gives the impression of vivid personal experience, and it is of interest to all since it concerns all. The choice of common everyday words drives home the thought, by connecting it closely to ordinary life. The passage *gains little from* the beauty of

rhythm and might with little or no loss have been written in prose.

1.144. A stimulating thought well expressed. The Author protests against half-heartedness. The theme, dealing with the true way of living, is naturally of a lofty character, and *blank verse* suits the subject-matter with peculiar felicity.

1.145. The short phrases in line four and the long sweep in 5, 6 dying away in 7, are magnificent.

The last four lines clinch the argument perfectly.

Let us now hear something of the other side of the case before turning to the extreme enthusiasts.

1.15. The poem is worthless. The underlying idea, that life must be measured by its intensity as well as its duration is a familiar one. Consequently the poem is to be judged by its strength and originality of expression. The author has brought no freshness to his material; *his thought is flabby and confused; his verse is pedestrian.* Away with him!

The next writer adds a complaint which looks as though it might apply to much blank verse.

1.16. The moralising of this poem is too deliberate to be swallowed without a grimace. The poet had a few trite precepts of which to deliver himself, and failed to make the pills palatable by poetic wrappings. The metre and necessary accentuations are awkward, and *no relief is offered by any sort of rime scheme.*

Still more severe upon the same point is 1.161; it is left to 1.162 to restore the balance.

1.161. Excellent prose but not good verse; *not even smallest attempt at metre or rhyme.* Writer probably more of a philosopher than a poet: too matter-of-fact, too little Imagination and Fancy.

1.162. It is difficult to express one's attitude to this. The sentiment is very proper, but fails to rouse one to enthusiasm. What does the vague phrase "Spent as this is by nations of mankind," mean? And the construction from lines 4 to 7 is

very clumsy. The thing could have been said five times more quickly—and would have been so in poetry. *This is prose, chopped up to fit a metrical scheme.* Contrast its rhetorical phrases with the concentration and fullness of No. 3.

An approach through comparisons is also made by 1.163 which is more introspective and shows more emancipation from the tyranny of the "message."

1.163. Reminded of the pitched-up movement or strong artificial accent of post-Elizabethans. But this is without their complexity of thought, especially shown in metaphor. Imitative. Here the movement becomes more reflective, less an experience; a deliberate loading of rhythm—influence of the didactic pretentions. Wordsworth? Spurious. Mid-Victorian poetic drama? A collection of commonplace aphorisms on borrowed stilts. I accept the statements with indifference. It might have been written for a Calendar of Great Thoughts. Reading it aloud, I have to mouth it, and I felt ridiculously morally dignified.

Truth, of some kind, has hitherto been claimed or allowed by all, but more than one of the poet's assertions challenged a division.

1.17. On reading this my mind jumps up and disagrees—*if living is measured by intensity of feeling, cowards live as much as heroes.* Line 3 might be parodied with equal truth—

"One wounded feeling, one foul thought, one deed
Of crime, ere night, would make life longer seem"—

The impression received was one of the self-satisfaction of the author (I do not say "poet"):—a spinster devoted to good works, and sentimentally inclined, or perhaps Wordsworth.

Large query to the last line.

Why Wordsworth's name should be considered such a telling missile is uncertain.

Still more vigorous is dissent upon the temporal issue.

1.18. Finally I disagree entirely that "great thoughts," "good deeds" or "noble feelings," make life seem longer, personally I feel *they make it seem shorter.*

But there are some who refuse to let a little difference like this come between them and the poet.

1.181. This poem expresses for me just that view of the difference between existence and life which seems truest. I never can conceive of time as some measurement indicated "in figures on a dial." Thought is the chief activity regarded as foolish or with complete indifference by *those with whom one comes in contact oftenest, i.e. "the small in soul."* I do not speak in any bitterness but from my normal experience. It is this conclusion *to which I seem to be forced* which makes *such a stanza as this* seem to me to be fit to be "shouted from the house tops." That is why it appeals to me.

I do not agree however that "one great thought, one deed of good . . . would make life *longer* seem," than it does to men each humdrum day, *but rather think "shorter" would express the idea better.* I may think of it in a special sense however, which would not appeal to most and which I should find it almost impossible to explain, and in any case metaphysics is banned. I am sorry, for the idea is always the chief joy to me in poetry.

I must have been responsible for the ban on metaphysics by some request that the protocols should deal with the poetry rather than with the Universe. The "stanza" remark may offset 1.16 and 1.161. The misanthropy finds a slight echo in 1.182 which again expresses doubt based on the facts of temporal perception; but a balm for disillusionment is discovered by 1.183.

1.182. Good on the whole, though it is doubtful if life really seems longer to the good than to the wicked or to the merely passive.

The lines are worth reading twice because they really do express something instead of just drivelling on like those of number 2.

1.183. Suggests Browning to me, and is more interesting for that reason. But there is in this piece a more all-round handling of the idea than Browning would have given it. It seems to be the product of *a man of middle age, who has taken the sweets of life and proved them mere vanity, but who has not turned cynic.* It is at once *healthy and profound.*

Browning figures again in 1.19, where Wordsworth has some amends made to him.

1.19. One thought clearly and forcibly expressed. Idea expressed in the first two lines, amplified in the next seven and finally summed up in the last two. Chief effect—*a familiar thought brought home with new conviction.* The rhythm of blank verse—restraint combined with even flow—expressive of the meditativeness and yet obvious truth of the idea. The passage reminiscent of the whole effort and accomplishment of the greatest poets, and in a secondary way of passages in Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, Browning, etc.

1.191. The thought a little obvious and *I don't find anything in the expression to drive it home.*

1.192. It is not a new thought, but *the symmetry and perfect meter* makes the old thought more impressive than if said in prose. The meter lends dignity, and makes it serious and profound.

After these jarring voices a more unanimous chorus will make a soothing close. It will be noticed that the central issue, the doctrinal aspect of the passage, becomes less and less prominent and that mnemonic irrelevances and the possibilities of sentimentality take its place.

1.193. I don't know why, but as soon as I read it, I linked it somehow with that poem of Julian Grenfell's, "Into Battle," and especially with this stanza, which immediately came into my mind.

> "The black-bird sings to him, Brother, brother,
> If this be the last song you shall sing,
> Sing well, for you may not sing another,
> —Brother, sing."

I think this was suggested by "we shall count time by heart-throbs" once again. A phrase of Robert Lynd's also came into my mind "the great hours of life—hours of passionate happiness and passionate sorrow—." And I thought to myself

"how true that is. These ARE the only hours in life that mean anything. Any why? Because they lift one to the infinite . . . *"le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie!"*

1.194. Appeals to me because it *sums up my creed* as a Socialist, *of service not self.* A further appeal lies in its emphasis of a fact we are too apt to forget, namely, that the real test of life is action and nobility of thought and feeling, not length of years. This amounts to a solemn warning, and as befits the solemnity of the theme the movement is wedded to the thought. The long line and the slow movement, rendered more impressive by the number of long vowels, *hammer the thought into the mind.*

But even the "lofty ideal" of the passage has its turn to be challenged.

1.195. This appeals; not as a passion, not by sympathetic interests nor as beauty, but by its simple truth and teaching—a teaching which *seems to come from a fellow human being,* and one to which we may all attain. *There is no lofty ideal,* the regard of which makes us feel poor creatures and realise the impossibilities of perfection. True it may be judged sentimental if carefully dissected, but some amount of sentiment appeals naturally to the instincts of every one: what moral teaching is successful without some appeal to sentiment? It is a call not to sense, nor to the soul but to the heart.

A Transatlantic smack[3] now makes itself unmistakably felt and continues through several extracts.

1.2. This is *fine*—a grand appeal to us to make our lives bigger, greater, more sublime, to put aside the petty and material interests which shut in our souls and *let forth our big and generous impulses.* It is an appeal to us to *live,* and not merely to exist, and this appeal culminates in a grand climax in the last two lines.

[3] I cannot plume myself that my literary acumen alone is responsible for this perception. I have other evidence.

The superb luxuriance of the style in 1.21 has as characteristic a savour as the looser idioms of 1.22. Nor are the contents less significant in their rendering of one powerful trend of that western world.

1.21. It successfully catches the rythm of the human heart beat—the fundamental rythm of all music and of all poetry. The swing catches the heart and the emotions, *the thought leads the mind on to inspiration.* The more you read the verse the more the rythm and the theme, the two together, catch your soul and carry you completely in tune on to the end; and you wish there were more.

Even the first reading takes you into its cadence and its spirit. It wears better with each succeeding reading that you really have concentrated on.

It is *an inspirational bit,* yet full-blooded and perfectly conversant with life as it is in its sorrows, despairs, and its fulfilled and unfulfilled hopes. More than much poetry it has a taste of life—life as Shakespeare knew it and Hugo, not as Shelley or Keats, or a shallow modern novelist know it. In it is a punch, an energy and *the vigour of red-blooded manhood tinged with a deep tone* of "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world" *if you do your own fighting* to live your own full, rich life.

It surely has inspired something here!

1.22. Worldly ideals and philosophy run through it. It is modern, speaking of self-expression. *It says to self-express a full emotional and a rich intellectual life.*

It is clear in parts at first. Subsequent readings show subtlety as well as clarity.

Not poetic in comparison with the Romantic age, it being *too serious and too of the soil and the streetcar for the average romantic.*

We go back now to English speech-rhythm, but the crescendo of praise does not flag.

1.3. After reading over this passage for the first time, I received one impression—"How much every one of those words

means,—o[illegible]ry words they are, too, such as I myself probably u[illegible]very day—'every rift loaded with ore.'" And then I re[illegible] again. And this impression deepened, and others arose. The vividness of the thing! What a sure hand guided this pen . . . how strong it is! And what a gradual rise to the glorious lifting of the veil in the last line but one *"we should count time by heart-throbs."* The voice has risen for an instant to passion. And then it dies away, firm and masterful to the end.

From this high peak of admiration to the complete union of hearts, with all the appropriate trappings of a romantic attachment thrown in, is a mere *glissade*.

1.31. Yes, intensely. This is first rate. Why? [in order].

(1) Curious way it suggests immediately great intimacy with the author. FRIENDSHIP. A room at night, curtains drawn, roaring log fire, chimney corner, author musing, old inns, you and him alone.

One of those rare and inexplicable moments which stand out as REAL in a world of phantasms. When your mind seems to touch another's, and you realise that far beyond our being brothers, we are all ONE person.

(2) Most loveable nobility [unconscious] to which I immediately respond.

(3) Artistic reasons

a. Topping condensation of language. No vapid and ineffectual adjectives. Each word contains multitudes.

b. Freedom and balance of lines. Like wonderful music.

Could the variety of the human garden be better displayed, even in the sunlight, than in this potpourri of academic lucubrations?

With Poem 1 we have been concerned chiefly with the problem of the "message," the truth and worth of the doctrine embodied in the poem. Discussion of this general question of the place of "messages" and doctrines in poetry is postponed until Part III, especially Chapter 7. (The Index may also be consulted.) With Poem 2 we pass to a different group of critical difficulties.