

Introduction

The academic visitor to Washington, after he passes the Supreme Court Building and the Library of Congress, comes on up to the Folger Shakespeare Library, where he sees cut in stone across the building, "THIS THEREFORE IS THE PRAISE OF SHAKESPEARE, THAT HIS DRAMA IS THE MIRROR OF LIFE." Written in 1765, this critical appraisal by Samuel Johnson no longer bespoke the highest praise for the majority of readers who purchased his edition; instead a new critical doctrine, insinuated first in the early years of the century, had by this time replaced the Italian neoclassic concept of mimesis and would, in another two decades, provide one of the touchstones for the formulation of the Romantic concept of the imagination.

Even as early as mid-century, this doctrine, which stressed the immediately affective character of art, had already pre-empted the older critical precepts and become the reigning principle of practical and theoretical criticism. Essayists as important as Burke, as insignificant as Hildebrand Jacob, and a whole gamut of commentators in-between, were writing criticism governed to a large extent by the newly evolved criterion of aesthetic affectivity. So that Johnson's splendidly ringing tribute to Shakespeare was, by the time it was written, less in the mainstream of eighteenth-century criticism than the ponderous if ecstatic remarks by John Gilbert Cooper, set forth in 1755. Taking as his text the line from *The Merchant of Venice*: "How sweet the Moonlight Sleeps upon that Bank! " he states: "That verb, taken from animal life, and transfer'd by the irresistible magic of poetry, to the before lifeless objects of the Creation, animates the whole scene, and conveys an instantaneous idea to the imagination what a solemn stillness is requir'd when the *peerless Queen* of Night is, in the full splendor of her majesty, thus lull'd to repose."¹

1. *Letters Concerning Taste*, (London, 1755), No. vii.

Thus exemplified by Cooper, the new doctrine emphasized not the mimetic-reflective powers of the artist, but rather that special quality possessed by the highest genius for taking us directly into the ambience of his invention and causing us to experience it immediately. As such, this doctrine was developed importantly in the middle and later years of the century by critics and essayists whose attentions were engrossed by the mutually relevant subjects of "taste," "sublimity," "literary associationism," "genius," and "imagination." Consistently and steadily elaborated throughout the century, the new doctrine introduced a characteristic of response as a criterion of aesthetic value, and created a functional basis for judgment in the synthesis of man's mental faculties.

Even by the early eighteenth century it was becoming increasingly clear that the moral purposefulness of art was frequently predicated on emotive effect, that certain aesthetic characteristics occasioned an immediate response, and that this, by implication, led to serious questions about the inter-relation of moral and aesthetic values. Thus the interest in an immediate intuitive faculty, an interest sustained from Addison to Coleridge, is one of the important corollary facts of eighteenth-century literary theory. "We are struck," says Addison in *Spectator* 411, "we know not how, with the Symmetry of any thing we see, and immediately assent to the Beauty of an Object, without enquiring into the particular Causes and Occasions of it."² Some hundred years later the modulated echo of this comment reaches us from the pages of Coleridge's essay "On the Principles of Genial Criticism": "*The sense of beauty subsists in simultaneous intuition of the relation of parts, each to each, and of all to a whole: exciting an immediate and absolute complacency, without intervenence, therefore, of any*

2. *The Spectator*, ed. Donald Bond, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), III, 538.

interest, sensual or intellectual."³ It is, thus, with the continuous effort made throughout the century to locate in man's mind an intuitional principle to explain both his aesthetic judgments and his capacity for aesthetic creativity, that this study is concerned. Hopefully, the work will contribute to the history of literary criticism a record of that unifying principle which brought together the various orientations of eighteenth-century criticism within a broad pattern of relevance.

This work is, it seems to me, in the pattern of scholarship that has grown out of Samuel Holt Monk's classic treatment of *The Sublime*.⁴ Following his lead, recent studies have emphasized the progressive and accretive nature of literary debate in the eighteenth century. The old shibboleths have been laid to rest. It is no longer feasible to think in terms of arbitrarily closed compartments of literary thought, no more than it is wise to demarcate boundaries or areas within the archaic terms of pre- or post-romantic. Traditions blur and fuse; ideas inter-penetrate and cross-fertilize. One task of the scholar is to point out how ideas, like Lucretian atoms, link together to form new and surprising shapes, disintegrate and come together again in still more surprising and unexpected configurations. Yet all is not mere anarchy. The eighteenth century was forming its own image of man, shaping a criticism to fit that image, and perhaps under the impress of some unconscious

3. *Biographia Literaria*, with his *Aesthetical Essays*, ed. with introd. by J. Shawcross (London, 1958), II, 239.

4. *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York, 1935). Professor Monk states as his purpose the "detailed study of one of the leading aesthetic ideas in eighteenth-century England. Beauty, sublimity, taste, imagination, and the picturesque are the most important of these ideas. Their rise, transformation, and progress are interesting and the complete history of any one of them should throw light upon the progress of taste, the change of values, and the gradual growth of critical and aesthetic theories in the period that lies between the flourishing of neo-classicism and the triumph of romanticism . . ." (p. 2).

wisdom preparing a legacy of ideas that would go into the making of later thought.

Such speculations will not, I hope, be taken as the symptoms of bemusement, the self-indulgent reveries of a midnight pondering student. The problem was what the problem always is: what is man? New tools for this inquiry were forged in the seventeenth century and tested in the eighteenth. If we begin with Locke, Professor Tuveson has instructed us that we will end in the aesthetics of romanticism.⁵ It is precisely this approach that I wish enthusiastically to emulate. In the spirit of Walter Bate's shifting premises of taste,⁶ or Gordon McKenzie's study of the psychological

5. E.L. Tuveson, *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960). Tuveson's thesis begins with an exploration of the new Lockean epistemology and the implications that arose from it, and directed the course of speculative literary thought. The shifting of the principle of reality to the subjective human consciousness prepared for a theory of the imagination as "both a means of receiving . . . the impressions of a nature that is an unfoldment of divinity, and, also, a creator of illusion shows after the manner of divine art" (p. 115). The romantic concept of the imagination has its roots in Locke's "sense of the living activity of the mind in all its phases . . ." (p. 41).

6. W.J. Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946). Bate derives the principle of "romantic relativism" from Shaftesbury and his followers. He argues that British empiricism forms the groundwork for "the somewhat heterogeneous body of assumptions . . . which is called romanticism" (p. 94). Addison's aesthetic categories are linked by Bate to the romantic stress on "suggestiveness" in art as an end in itself. He adds that as empirical psychology was fast culminating in a complete skepticism of immutable reason and ideal nature, "the extorting of a subjective activity in comparing and combining ideas became not merely a conscious aim but one of the fundamental purposes for the very existence of art" (p. 100). He explores the relation of British associationism to subjectivism and emphasizes the increasing elasticity of the meaning of imagination in later eighteenth-century thought.

current,⁷ I have turned to my own inquiries. I have, it will be seen, taken such hints quite literally and emphasized the organic continuity of eighteenth-century criticism. I have tried to trace a theme that runs now in shallow, now in deeper beds of thought, that like Coleridge's sacred river now disappears entirely only to break forth more vehemently. That this is so is, I hope, not more poetry than truth, not more fancy than fact. So that in writing this book my first task was to study the fascinating history of a theme in criticism; my second to reveal the urgencies that compelled this theme on its progress; my third to show the figure that thought makes.

The work is composed of four chapters, each of which corresponds to a different historical period and phase in the development of my theme. The first chapter discusses the beginnings of affective literary theory in Addison, Shaftesbury, and the Abbé du Bos, and comprises the period from the late Restoration to the death of Addison in 1719. Here I treat of the genesis of immediacy as a criterion of ontological value to Addison and to Shaftesbury, and as a standard of purely emotive effect to the Abbé du Bos. The second chapter reviews the critical situation during the years 1719-1744 as it is pertinent to comparative evaluations of the sister arts, poetry and painting. The relation between immediacy and pictorial

7. Gordon McKenzie, *Critical Responsiveness: A Study of the Psychological Current in Later Eighteenth-Century Criticism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1949). McKenzie states that "The importance of the psychological approach as one of the great transitional links in the history of thinking about books can hardly be overstated. This type of thought completes the account in the history of criticism of the gradual shift from an examination on a neoclassical basis of the external work of art to an attempt to understand and evaluate literary experience on the basis of the reactions of talented readers. It embodies the transition in method, in idea, and in motive, from Pope's *Essay on Criticism* to Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. It is in itself one important strand of criticism which develops continuously throughout the century . . ." (p. 5).

values, and the transitional characteristics of pre-mid-century criticism constitute the major topics of this inquiry. The third chapter isolates three specific transitional topics at mid-century: the shift from a mimetic to a pragmatic bias; the decline of pictorialism in eighteenth-century criticism; the problem of immediacy in terms of its relevance to taste and associational criticism. As a criterion of aesthetic value, immediacy is further studied in relation to the works of Hogarth, Burke, Webb, and Kames. The fourth chapter details the history of immediacy in expressively oriented theories, particularly those concerned with the concepts of genius and imagination in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

It has not been my purpose to quarrel with the interpretations of other scholars. I have presented my own views on those subjects that have been commonly discussed and have acknowledged my frequent indebtedness to those scholars whose arguments I have employed to strengthen my own. Naturally, areas of disagreement exist. I concur for example, with W. J. Hipple's statement that "It is a curiously perverse tendency among modern scholars to argue that the philosophical critics of the eighteenth century, by tracing aesthetic responses to their roots in passions, senses, faculties, and association, subvert the neo-classical system of rules and absolutes, and thus open the way to rampant subjectivism."⁸ The tendency to rampant subjectivism was seldom if ever a problem in eighteenth-century criticism, but if a determined attempt was made to maintain the neoclassical absolutes, it was certainly not, as the century developed, on the basis of a neoclassical system of rules. This indeed is part of the exciting complexity of thought that the age experienced. The neoclassical system of rules (and can we agree on a single moment of consensus and codification?) was structured on the foundation

8. W.J. Hipple, Jr., *The Beautiful, the Sublime, & the Picturesque in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetic Theory* (Carbondale, 1957), p. 119.

of seventeenth-century rationalism, and survived intact and unimpaired only so long as that remained whole and entire. By 1700 classical rationalism was in the throes of a death agony, its confident assumptions of right reason as a ruling principle of mind already under serious attack. Surely no dedicated effort was made to "subvert" the neoclassical system, but the implications of sensationalism and empiricism opened the way for inquiries into the nature of man that were not in harmony with that neoclassical image of him.

Nor can I pass over René Wellek's neglect in confidently attributing many pre-Coleridgean ideas to German sources alone. To speak, for example, of "Kant's analysis of taste" as "an intermediate faculty between intellect and the senses"⁹ is almost willfully to disregard the formation of this concept in Addison and others. Nor does it seem appropriate to suggest that "the Kantian way" for deciding "the universality of taste" is that "we involuntarily claim that all other minds ought to think and feel the same,"¹⁰ without indicating that Kames had been quite as obstinate much earlier. Nor again is it judicious to remark that Kant had considered the sublime as subjective ("No object of sense is sublime in itself, but only as far as I make it a symbol of some Idea."¹¹ without noticing the independent development of this concept in the British tradition by Archibald Alison. Finally, though Wellek states that "As in Schelling or the Schlegels the poet is both conscious and unconscious,"¹² this idea is given some credence by Shaftesbury, and his influence would have helped keep it alive during the century.

On occasion I have found that my own estimations of

9. René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, Vol. II: *The Romantic Age* (New Haven, 1955), 161.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 160

12. *Ibid.*, 163.

minor eighteenth-century essayists are somewhat higher, or lower, than those accorded them by others. Infrequently I have entered some small plea for some now forgotten critic, if not entirely on the basis of his intrinsic distinction, then because of the light he sheds on the historical situation. Daniel Webb is one such case. I cannot quite concur with Professor Monk's judgment that he "wrote much, but said little, on the arts of painting, poetry, and music."¹³ I have sometimes found it necessary, however, to spend time on essayists who are beyond redemption. For this I ask the reader's patience in the hope that some pretension to a breadth of inquiry will justify the risk of occasional tedium.

Yet I do not assert definitiveness. Some writers whose commentary bears lightly upon this study have been excluded. When it has seemed to me that the remarks of an essayist did not materially enhance or forward my arguments, as in the case of Dennis's inquiry into the sublime,¹⁴ or add significantly to earlier critical positions, as is so with Hutcheson, I have restricted my treatment of him to an infrequent reference. I do not believe that the main lines of inquiry have suffered by these omissions. My method has been regulated by my intention, and my whole effort has been to bring to light a theme which was instrumental in forming and shaping much of eighteenth-century theory and criticism.

13. Monk, p. 108.

14. On this subject see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. (Ithaca, 1959), pp. 276 -289.