

The Function of Criticism and Theology 318

by Phil Beisly

To move away from a dogmatic allegiance, from a commitment to a worked-out system of beliefs, is not unusual today; nor is it unusual, having done this, to retain a profound conviction about the power and richness of the tradition underlying the theology. Many people can no longer assent to Christian theology—not only to the theology they have known, but to any theological system—and yet they may still want to read the Bible and other Christian literature, and, perhaps, to participate in the liturgy. From an older and more established viewpoint their position is curious, even dishonest, for it seems an evasion of the responsibilities of belief and commitment that the Bible and the liturgy are all about. To say this often enough, however, is to provoke an answering attitude which remarks, in tones of pragmatic commonsense, that there is nothing wrong in this at all, for surely the Bible is to be read and the liturgy attended; if the Bible *is* being read and the liturgy *is* being attended, then all is well; for the *fact* of the continuing response not being tied automatically to a dogmatic allegiance does not in itself invalidate the response—whether it does or not is a question which directs attention to the kinds of response which the Bible and the liturgy themselves seem to demand. And to put it like that is to pose not a theological, but a critical, question.

To recognize the question thus is to move much nearer to the non-dogmatic person who isn't starting out with a set of preconceptions called beliefs. That this person continues to attend to the Bible and the liturgy should suggest areas of meaning which the predominant orthodoxies have not taken into account, but of course the very perplexity of established dogmatism at the sight of this new type of reader or participant comes from an inability to entertain this possibility: what the Bible and the liturgy mean is what theology says they mean—surely there is nothing else! To this point of view the newer type of response is necessarily meaningless.

The dogmatically uncommitted reader or participant will not be regarded as a proper Christian by established orthodoxy, not because he does not act conventionally, but because he does not seem to believe anything. His reading or participation seems unconnected with any assent to dogma or any act of faith, and this is what seems so strange. No amount of response of another kind—imaginative, sensitive—can make up for it, for this kind of reaction has always been subordinated to what passed for belief and its own inherent logic and intrinsic life has been, in practice, denied. Every time a theologian talks about the liturgy as an expression of belief, no matter how much he refines the notion, this climate of attitude is reinforced and whatever intrinsic and creative life the liturgical experience may have in itself is devalued. Similarly, every time it is

pointed out that the Church has always shown a true respect for the imaginative life by taking over and christianizing cultural forms, the argument condemns itself by betraying its view of imaginative life as a secondary subservient affair. It needs to be asserted that early Christianity did not take over and use imaginative expressions from cultural life: it *was*, essentially, a complex and organized imaginative response.

The person who has disowned theology and who is happier, for example, to 'read the Bible as literature' will probably not worry about whether or not the name of 'Christian' can be applied to him: it isn't *his* category. What follows is that the person who is, on his own terms, a Christian wins by default.¹ He comes to have a monopoly on Christianity. The other person's attitude is not Christianity, properly speaking—so runs the argument, and if it were merely an argument about names one would not feel drawn to join in. But it isn't just that. Along with the appropriation of the name goes a claim, for example, about true and false readings of the Bible—if you don't accept these beliefs you aren't reading it properly. It is the believing Christian who can 'interpret' Scripture: that is what he thinks Scripture demands and that is what he can provide. The assumption passes for truth, and the Bible comes to be regarded as *his* book. If you accept it you need an interpretation to help you read it; if you reject the interpretation you reject the Bible. Either way the assumption remains unchallenged. What the non-theologizing reader of the Bible wants to say will, therefore, have to involve a dislodging of the category of believing Christian, for he wants to insist on the independence of the book from subsequent readings-off, the *integrity* of the work as we have it in front of us, and consequently the *availability* of it through attentive reading rather than interpretation.

The analogy which this suggests is with literary criticism: the idea that there is a close relationship between criticism of poetry and novels, and of drama, and the understanding of the Bible and the liturgy. Perhaps the word 'analogy' seems to beg as many questions as it offers to answer, but the imprecision must be tolerated for the sake of progress; it would not have worried a thinker like Blake, whose work is of major importance in exemplifying what is under discussion. (People still find it possible to disregard Blake's impressive theological intelligence and label him a heretic because of the incompatibility of his ideas and their concepts, which seems more self-damning than anything else.)

To mention the names of Arnold and Leavis is to remind the reader that 'criticism' is a central and still potent force in the history of our society's struggle to understand itself. It is a complex notion, one that needs to be both defined and demonstrated. The critic believes

¹For an example of what happens when literary criticism does consider the Bible, reducing the work by evading the central questions, see T. R. Henn, *The Bible as Literature* (London, 1969).

in the existence of a cultural tradition which is defined through qualitative discrimination, and he sees in the understanding and exploration of life which it communicates a source of strength and orientation which is vital for life in his own time. Criticism is the necessary response to that tradition if it is to remain alive and potent, and it involves 'the disinterestedness which culture enjoins' (Arnold), the attempt to overcome the limitations and partiality of one's own particular biases. If this should seem an impossible ideal (for surely we are all conditioned) it must be remembered that Arnold's notion of disinterestedness cannot be summarized as classlessness or intellectualist non-involvement; it is meant to describe the response to a body of work and thought, a response arising out of an ability which has been achieved. There is no question of a condition of absolute disinterestedness; Arnold's notion presupposes the cultural tradition (itself a conditioned social product, although more profoundly than we can ever conveniently summarize) which demands what is, in us, a disinterested response. Criticism is the attempt to give the tradition a response which is worthy and fitting, so that Leavis can describe the literary critic as the man who attempts to read a work fully and completely.

Arnold called *Culture and Anarchy* 'An Essay in Political and Social Criticism', and to condemn this critical tradition as some kind of aestheticism is wholly to miss the point. Criticism of the great and challenging, and rewarding, works of literature becomes criticism of life; the abilities and the sensibility achieved in literary criticism are not other than those demanded in the negotiation of everyday life, and must be present centrally if the negotiation is to be adequate.

I don't believe in any 'literary values', and you won't find me talking about them; the judgments the literary critic is concerned with are judgments about life. What the critical discipline is concerned with is relevance and precision in making and developing them. To think that to have a vital contemporary performance of the critical function matters is to think that creative literature matters; and it matters because to have a living literature, a literary tradition that *lives* in the present—nothing lives unless it goes on being creative—is to have, as an informing spirit in civilization, an informed, charged and authoritative awareness of inner human nature and human need.¹

If it be said that there are objections to be made to Leavis' account of criticism and its role in life, one must agree. There *are* limitations, but they are not the ones so often brought out against him, the ones by means of which his work has been, for some people, caricatured out of existence. The conventional charges—social naïveté, literarism, minority élitism—won't stand up to a thorough reading of Leavis, especially as he meets them head on and is quite aware of their import. These charges must turn into something much more carefully thought out, and something which has enjoyed a much

¹F. R. Leavis, *Lectures in America* (London, 1969), p. 23.

more sustained 'meeting' with Leavis, if they are adequately to continue the discussion in the areas where limitations are to be noticed. And my fear is that this is not happening. That irreducible activity of criticism which Leavis insists on and demonstrates is often barely present in the work of critics who want to summarize Leavis and move beyond him. There are manifold achievements in fields that Leavis never enters; whole new worlds of relevance are made available from sociology, ideology, political analysis, phenomenology and the rest. These things earn their place, and I am impressed. But then there is the ritual tribute to Leavis, the acknowledgment that 'in his field' he is pre-eminent, which is not followed by emulation, either as something achieved or even as something desirable; one isn't quite certain what the attitude is, or whether it exists in a thought-out form at all. But the impression is that in Leavis' 'field'—the complete reading of the work—there has been, on the part of those wanting to supersede him, a loss.

Literary criticism is not the one thing necessary for salvation, nor, seriously, has it ever offered itself as such. But it has offered itself as central to criticism of society, the criticism in terms of the wider range of disciplines which can together build up an adequate and necessarily complex human response to modern society. That was Arnold's idea, and in our time it has been, essentially, Leavis' also, involving necessarily 'the battle to assert and vindicate a profounder conception of "society" than the technologico-Benthamite world knows'. Leavis has never criticized sociology for being sociology, or political analysis for being political analysis; he has, in fact, gone to trouble to avoid being taken to say this. What he has criticized is the pretensions of these ventures to providing the total response to society which we desperately need, without being in real contact with the creative sources of imaginatively realized and explored experience and corrective intelligence that literary criticism offers to make available and because of which it can claim to be, in matters of 'standards', an exemplar for the wider criticism that radiates out from it. It is in this sense that Leavis has offered literary criticism as the rightful occupant of 'the absent centre' at the heart of English social criticism.

The lessons for the Christian tradition ought to be obvious; for Christianity *is* a tradition, is just such a tradition as Leavis speaks of, and has at its centre profoundly creative 'works'—in a sense the Christian tradition *is* the Bible and the liturgy essentially:

. . . a strong informing presence of 'reality and life'—of life as a potent reality that transcends the present—in the rapidly changing civilization of our time.

Pressed as to the nature of such a presence, one can only reply that it has to be created; it is created in the kind of implicit collaboration that creates and maintains a language.¹

Theology (or, if you like, Christian discourse) hasn't yet had its

¹F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University* (London, 1969), p. 7.

Leavis, although it has had, in the group associated with *Slant* and the Christian left, its Raymond Williams. There was not, for this group, a critical achievement to be appropriated before it could be superseded, of the kind that the name of Leavis suggests in literary criticism. In this area, during the present period of discussion, there is consequently a silence or an uncertainty about the centrality of the Bible and the liturgy; there is not an affirmation of the continuing vitality of the informing and recreative engagement with the primary works of Christian culture, the works which sustain and, in the case of the liturgy particularly, continually remake the Christian tradition.¹

In the desperate flight from latinized ultramontaniam over recent years we have fought shy of any affirmations of a Christian culture, a Christian tradition centred on works of human cultural achievement. Christian culture has had, in the past, unfortunate associations, tending towards the erection of an alternative Catholic world over against the secular world. Associated versions of this attitude have long ago been undermined in other fields, and in our own we have been late with the demolition work. Now that we have begun, and feel in need of new ways to define Christianity, the move is towards politics and history especially. But these definitions cannot give us what is, primarily, the Christian tradition; correct and necessary though they are, they are secondary interpretations. Ultramontaniam was not wrong in seeing Christianity as a culture—the mistake lay in its inability critically to appreciate the cultural tradition on which it had a monopoly. The necessary correction involves generating that criticism of the works that *are*, centrally, the Christian tradition. The elaboration of more convincing interpretations of Christianity, if they are not rooted in that kind of criticism, may very well delay it.

In envisaging the recreation of the Christian tradition, therefore, the initiation of genuine criticism seems a logical and tactical first step. To create a public which actually *read* the Bible would, in contrast with the present way in which the Bible is *used*, be a significant advance; and to encourage people simply to look at the liturgy and what goes on in it, directly and fully to experience it and respond intelligently to it, would be to interfere quite drastically with the way affairs are now run.² (The liturgical changes of recent years plainly come from, and lead back to, a modernized theology rather than a critical awareness; they work in terms of interpretations at one remove, rather than encouraging 'seeing things as they really are'.) What is involved in this idea is the possibility of people responding to Scripture or the liturgy with the complete range and

¹'What we haven't tackled properly is the question of faith', one of the editors of *Slant* said to me. My suggestion is that it is the same question.

²Of course I don't mean that there has been no critical activity in the past. The importance of the homily or the practice of meditation testifies that the tradition has been sustained by it. But I still think the general analysis is right, that criticism is abused, and that its importance needs positively to be worked out and asserted.

fullness of their powers, and with the complete range of possible relevance and connexions which may come into play from their lives and situations. It involves seeing in the Bible great literature, seeing comedy, drama, poetic use of language, complex authorial organization, tragedy, use of idiom, use of parable, etc.—in short, seeing in the Bible what makes a critical response the only adequate one. This giving of complete attention is what the response always is to impressive achievements of human (not divine) cultural collaboration; the central human faculties are engaged and challenged because of the stature of the work that is being attended to. A work which is offered as a form of divine special pleading, given under the sanction of miraculous revelation and received in the non-attention of superstition (which still persists), fails to engage these faculties because it does not ask for them. When the Bible is offered as by-passing full human intelligence, the delusion may be that something greater is being grasped by a higher faculty, but the reality will be that very little is being grasped, that the Bible has ceased to be, for that person, a work of any kind and has become an object, an idol.

If Christian tradition is to mean anything it must be seen, in the works which primarily embody it, not as absolving from the normal demands of attention and intelligence, but as something which supremely demands this attention and intelligence to the highest degree. And since works are only alive in being responded to, the Christian tradition is alive and offers reward and meaning only in its works being responded to—responded to critically in terms which they themselves suggest, terms appropriate to the written gospel or the eucharistic participation.

The nature of belief, in conclusion, can be reviewed in this light, since it can be seen as something intrinsic to giving the Christian tradition the kind of attention its works demand. *The Christian act of faith is the belief in the intrinsic authoritativeness and creative power of the works which are central to the tradition—for that is what adhering to the tradition means.* It is analogous to the belief in the greatness of a literary work and the stature of its author. One's belief in Shakespeare's greatness (apart from the conventionalities) cannot be located in a moment in time, nor can the venerable elders of Eng. Lit. apply a test to it to see if it is genuine (although they try). The belief, that is, is inseparable from the reading, not different from the total response of imagination, intelligence, and evaluation, nor from considerations of non-literary congruence with other fields of experience. It would be nonsense to demand assent to the notion of Shakespeare's greatness *before* he has been read, just as it would be a mistake to imagine that scholarship and background research can take the place of reading the text and seeing the performance. What will manifest the belief will simply be the continuing concern with Shakespeare, the reading and re-reading, and the willingness to discuss and differ over Shakespeare as if over something important.

In the case of the Bible, background knowledge is more necessary, and, some books of it being more accessible to us than others, there are fairly obvious distinctions to be made; but there can be no substitute for reading. This is not something that every person can easily and immediately begin to do, and some people are obviously in a better position to begin than others. Only if we have idealist notions of democracy will this upset us; the point is that the works of the Christian tradition are available, essentially—they are not specialist. They are available since 'there is a continuity from the inescapable creativeness of perception to the disciplined imaginative creativeness of the skilled artist'.¹ (The indebtedness to Blake in that remark emphasizes the centrality of creative literature; Blake gives us this truth a century before its theoretical implications begin to be spelt out.)

Criticism is concerned with establishing the poem—or the novel—as an object of common access in what is in some sense a public world, so that when we differ about it we are differing about what is sufficiently the same thing to make differing profitable.²

In that notion of the function of criticism there are many of the answers to our questions about the democratic nature of the Church; and in the wider conception there is much to help us understand what the Church is, before we continue our efforts to be relevant, meaningful, dialectical, historical, engaged in dialogue, and pursuing the right life-style.

¹F. R. Leavis in *Dickens the Novelist* (London, 1970), p. 236.

²F. R. Leavis, *English Literature in Our Time and the University*, p. 50.

The Manifestation of Baptism by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

In a previous article,¹ we were considering the Pentecostal doctrine of the 'baptism in the Spirit', and concluded that it all really belongs to the full New Testament understanding of baptism, of what it is to be a Christian at all. Baptism should be—indeed (so far as the evidence shows) clearly was—a real spiritual turning point, leading a person into a whole new world of experience, with its own canons of understanding and behaviour, its own distinctive principles of action, moral and charismatic. We saw that there was an indissoluble complex of faith in the exalted Christ, *metanoia* (conversion, new heart), renunciation of Satan the Prince of this world (dropping out, *apotaxis*), the experience of the Spirit of God 'who explores even the hidden things of God', who 'convicts the world', who 'leads us into all truth'.

¹*He will Baptize you with the Holy Spirit*. New Blackfriars, June 1971.