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Masterful Images

ENGLISH POETRY FROM
METAPHYSICALS TO ROMANTICS

A. E. DYSON
and
JULIAN LOVELOCK

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PREFACE

This book is intended primarily for those who are making a serious study of poetry for the first time, whether as undergraduates, sixth-formers, or as 'mature' students seeking to broaden their minds. It is hoped that it might also have its uses as a refresher course, perhaps for readers or teachers who are exploring new ground, or filling gaps.

The main aim is to supply a sense of tradition, of the unfolding and continuity of our poetry, but to do this through close and careful reading of the texts. In essence, such 'practical criticism' is a personal response to poems, made by readers alive to their excitement and keen to explore. Inevitably, this turns on strong and living impressions, not on dogma – but on impressions which are trained, rather than random, and related precisely to texts. The study of literature should aid and encourage this activity, treating both readers, and poems, with honest respect.

Nowadays most teaching concentrates on individual poems and poets, or on very short 'periods', and this study of 'topics' seems basically sound. The older 'chronological' method tended towards superficial generalisations, as any attempt to cover fifty or a hundred years in one course surely must. The danger with 'literary history' is its tendency to vagueness, its gravitation away from the particularity, the uniqueness, of the works it exists to serve.

Yet the new methods, too, have their problems, one of which is that students are apt to swing to the other extreme. Poems may be isolated from their context, discussed in a vacuum, until all sense of history and tradition is lost. Can the gap be bridged? We attempt here to do so, by combining two approaches in a new way. The Introduction and the Appendix on 'Dating' attempt general information – very pared down and compressed – about

literary 'periods', and the rest of the book studies particular works. In this way, the general can be checked against the particular, and the tension between the two can be underlined.

The generalisations in the Introduction and Appendix are offered, therefore, purely for their minimal usefulness, and the studies are the major part of the book. We hope that the generalisations will help students to grapple with 'dating' exercises – that is to say, with the challenge to look closely at poems or parts of poems removed from context, and to deduce where, in the history of poetry, they belong. This exercise is still the best general test of literary knowledge, since it depends upon wide and informed reading, and a true sense of the past. No one can 'teach' it as a skill, since it comes from experience, but there are certain hints, or tips, that students find useful to know. In the Introduction and Appendix, we restrict ourselves to those aspects which, in our own experience as readers and teachers, we have found most helpful, and which stand or fall by a pragmatic test.

In this context, we decided to visit the major poets in our 250-year period, and to concentrate on one work from each. When there is a famous 'long' poem, we have chosen it; otherwise, we have chosen a poem that seems typical and, inherently, 'great'. When discussing the 'long' poems, one typical passage has been chosen for close analysis, but in relation to the structure, tone and mood of the whole. In this way, it has been possible to include *Paradise Lost*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Rape of the Lock*, 'The Ancient Mariner' and *The Prelude*, and to allow our title 'masterful images', its fullest scope. These poems are central to our culture, and among its greatest achievements; they are 'images' which no literary critic, indeed no historian, can afford to ignore.

A final word on dialogue. The present book arose out of teaching situations in the University of East Anglia, where the seminar method is used. The authors belong to different generations and differ widely in temperament, so no uniformity of response exists. In most of these essays the insights converge and are held in tension, often through an agreement on the

questions that have to be asked. This method presupposes that readers will enter into the dialogue, either in groups (in formal seminars) or when reading alone. Once or twice, however, differences were highlighted, and then the original form of dialogue has been allowed to remain. Dialogue is, we believe, the essence of criticism – part of that chain of responses and explorations which poems need, and provoke.

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