**HUMA 301 – Dr. Paul Munson**
**An Experiment in Criticism, (Chapters 1-3, 9) by C. S. Lewis**
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# I

## THE FEW AND THE MANY

In this essay I propose to try an experiment. Literary criticism is traditionally employed in judging books. Any judgement it implies about men's reading of books is a corollary from its judgement on the books themselves. Bad taste is, as it were by definition, a taste for bad books. I want to find out what sort of picture we shall get by reversing the process. Let us make our distinction between readers or types of reading the basis, and our distinction between books the corollary. Let us try to discover how far it might be plausible to define a good book as a book which is read in one way, and a bad book as a book which is read in another.

I think this worth trying because the normal procedure seems to me to involve almost continually a false implication. If we say that *A* likes (or has a taste for) the women's magazines and *B* likes (or has a taste for) Dante, this sounds as if *likes* and *taste* have the same meaning when applied to both; as if there were a single activity, though the objects to which it is directed are different. But observation convinces me that this, at least usually, is untrue.

Already in our schooldays some of us were making our first responses to good literature. Others, and

these the majority, were reading, at school, *The Captain*, and, at home, short-lived novels from the circulating library. But it was apparent then that the majority did not 'like' their fare in the way we 'liked' ours. It is apparent still. The differences leap to the eye.

In the first place, the majority never read anything twice. The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers 'I've read it already' to be a conclusive argument against reading a work. We have all known women who remembered a novel so dimly that they had to stand for half an hour in the library skimming through it before they were certain they had once read it. But the moment they became certain, they rejected it immediately. It was for them dead, like a burnt-out match, an old railway ticket, or yesterday's paper; they had already used it. Those who read great works, on the other hand, will read the same work ten, twenty or thirty times during the course of their life.

Secondly, the majority, though they are sometimes frequent readers, do not set much store by reading. They turn to it as a last resource. They abandon it with alacrity as soon as any alternative pastime turns up. It is kept for railway journeys, illnesses, odd moments of enforced solitude, or for the process called 'reading oneself to sleep'. They sometimes combine it with desultory conversation; often, with listening to the radio. But literary people are always looking for leisure and silence in which to

read and do so with their whole attention. When they are denied such attentive and undisturbed reading even for a few days they feel impoverished.

Thirdly, the first reading of some literary work is often, to the literary, an experience so momentous that only experiences of love, religion, or bereavement can furnish a standard of comparison. Their whole consciousness is changed. They have become what they were not before. But there is no sign of anything like this among the other sort of readers. When they have finished the story or the novel, nothing much, or nothing at all, seems to have happened to them.

Finally, and as a natural result of their different behaviour in reading, what they have read is constantly and prominently present to the mind of the few, but not to that of the many. The former mouth over their favourite lines and stanzas in solitude. Scenes and characters from books provide them with a sort of iconography by which they interpret or sum up their own experience. They talk to one another about books, often and at length. The latter seldom think or talk of their reading.

It is pretty clear that the majority, if they spoke without passion and were fully articulate, would not accuse us of liking the wrong books, but of making such a fuss about any books at all. We treat as a main ingredient in our well-being something which to them is marginal. Hence to say simply that they like one thing and we another is to leave out nearly

the whole of the facts. If *like* is the correct word for what they do to books, some other word must be found for what we do. Or, conversely, if we *like* our kind of book we must not say that they *like* any book. If the few have 'good taste', then we may have to say that no such thing as 'bad taste' exists: for the inclination which the many have to their sort of reading is not the same thing and, if the word were univocally used, would not be called taste at all.

Though I shall concern myself almost entirely with literature, it is worth noting that the same difference of attitude is displayed about the other arts and about natural beauty. Many people enjoy popular music in a way which is compatible with humming the tune, stamping in time, talking, and eating. And when the popular tune has once gone out of fashion they enjoy it no more. Those who enjoy Bach react quite differently. Some buy pictures because the walls 'look so bare without them'; and after the pictures have been in the house for a week they become practically invisible to them. But there are a few who feed on a great picture for years. As regards nature, the majority 'like a nice view as well as anyone'. They are not saying a word against it. But to make the landscapes a really important factor in, say, choosing the place for a holiday—to put them on a level with such serious considerations as a luxurious hotel, a good golf links, and a sunny climate—would seem to them affectation. To 'go on' about them like Wordsworth would be humbug.

# II

## FALSE CHARACTERISATIONS

It is, in the logical sense, an 'accident' that readers of the one kind are many and those of the other few, and the two kinds are not characterised by these numerical terms. Our business is with different ways of reading. Common observation has already enabled us to make a rough and ready description, but we must try to penetrate further. The first step is to eliminate some hasty identifications of the 'few' and the 'many'.

Some critics write of those who constitute the literary 'many' as if they belonged to the many in every respect, and indeed to the rabble. They accuse them of illiteracy, barbarism, 'crass', 'crude' and 'stock' responses which (it is suggested) must make them clumsy and insensitive in all the relations of life and render them a permanent danger to civilisation. It sometimes sounds as if the reading of 'popular' fiction involved moral turpitude. I do not find this borne out by experience. I have a notion that these 'many' include certain people who are equal or superior to some of the few in psychological health, in moral virtue, practical prudence, good manners, and general adaptability. And we all know very well that we, the literary, include no small

percentage of the ignorant, the caddish, the stunted, the warped, and the truculent. With the hasty and wholesale *apartheid* of those who ignore this we must have nothing to do.

If it had no other defect it would still be too diagrammatic. The two sorts of readers are not cut off by immovable barriers. Individuals who once belonged to the many are converted and join the few. Others desert from the few to the many, as we often sadly discover on meeting an old schoolfellow. Those who are on the 'popular' level as regards one art may be deeply appreciative of another; musicians sometimes have deplorable preferences in poetry. And many whose responses to all the arts are trivial may yet be people of great intelligence, learning and subtlety.

This latter phenomenon does not surprise us much because their learning is of a different sort from ours, and the subtlety of a philosopher or physicist is different from that of a literary person. What is more surprising and disquieting is the fact that those who might be expected *ex officio* to have a profound and permanent appreciation of literature may in reality have nothing of the sort. They are mere professionals. Perhaps they once had the full response, but the 'hammer, hammer, hammer on the hard, high road' has long since dinned it out of them. I am thinking of unfortunate scholars in foreign universities who cannot 'hold down their jobs' unless they repeatedly publish articles each of

which must say, or seem to say, something new about some literary work; or of overworked reviewers, getting through novel after novel as quickly as they can, like a schoolboy doing his 'prep'. For such people reading often becomes mere work. The text before them comes to exist not in its own right but simply as raw material; clay out of which they can complete their tale of bricks. Accordingly we often find that in their leisure hours they read, if at all, as the many read. I well remember the snub I once got from a man to whom, as we came away from an examiners' meeting, I tactlessly mentioned a great poet on whom several candidates had written answers. His attitude (I've forgotten the words) might be expressed in the form 'Good God, man, do you want to go on *after hours*? Didn't you hear the hooter blow?' For those who are reduced to this condition by economic necessity and overwork I have nothing but sympathy. Unfortunately, ambition and combativeness can also produce it. And, however it is produced, it destroys appreciation. The 'few' whom we are seeking cannot be identified with the *cognoscenti*. Neither Gigadibs nor Dryasdust is necessarily among them.

Still less is the status seeker. As there are, or were, families and circles in which it was almost a social necessity to display an interest in hunting, or county cricket, or the Army List, so there are others where it requires great independence not to talk about, and therefore occasionally to read, the

approved literature, especially the new and astonishing works, and those which have been banned or have become in some other way subjects of controversy. Readers of this sort, this 'small vulgar', act in one respect exactly like those of the 'great vulgar'. They are entirely dominated by fashion. They drop the Georgians and begin to admire Mr Eliot, acknowledge the 'dislodgement' of Milton, and discover Hopkins, at exactly the right moment. They will not like your book if the dedication begins with *To* instead of *For*. Yet, while this goes on downstairs, the only real literary experience in such a family may be occurring in a back bedroom where a small boy is reading *Treasure Island* under the bed-clothes by the light of an electric torch.

The devotee of culture is, as a person, worth much more than the status seeker. He reads as he also visits art galleries and concert rooms, not to make himself acceptable, but to improve himself, to develop his potentialities, to become a more complete man. He is sincere and may be modest. Far from trotting along obediently with the fashion, he is more likely to stick too exclusively to the 'established authors' of all periods and nations, 'the best that has been thought and said in the world'. He makes few experiments and has few favourites. Yet this worthy man may be, in the sense I am concerned with, no true lover of literature at all. He may be as far from that as a man who does exercises

with dumb-bells every morning may be from being a lover of games. The playing of games will ordinarily contribute to a man's bodily perfection; but if that becomes the sole or chief reason for playing them they cease to be games and become 'exercise'.

No doubt, a man who has a taste for games (and for overeating as well) may very properly act on the medical motive when he makes for himself a rule to give general priority to his taste for games. In the same way, a man who has a gust both for good literature and for mere time-killing with trash may reasonably, on cultural grounds, on principle, give a priority to the former. But in both instances we are presupposing a genuine gust. The first man chooses football rather than a gargantuan lunch because the game, as well as the lunch, is one of the things he enjoys. The second turns to Racine instead of E. R. Burroughs because *Andromaque*, as well as *Tarzan*, is really attractive to him. But to come to the particular game with nothing but a hygienic motive or to the tragedy with nothing but a desire for self-improvement, is not really to play the one or to receive the other. Both attitudes fix the ultimate intention on oneself. Both treat as a means something which must, while you play or read it, be accepted for its own sake. You ought to be thinking about goals not about 'fitness'. Your mind ought to be absorbed—and, if so, what time have you for so bleak an abstraction as Culture?—in that spiritual chess where 'passions exquisitely

carved in alexandrines' are the pieces and human beings are the squares.[1]

This laborious sort of misreading is perhaps especially prevalent in our own age. One sad result of making English Literature a 'subject' at schools and universities is that the reading of great authors is, from early years, stamped upon the minds of conscientious and submissive young people as something meritorious. When the young person in question is an agnostic whose ancestors were Puritans, you get a very regrettable state of mind. The Puritan conscience works on without the Puritan theology—like millstones grinding nothing; like digestive juices working on an empty stomach and producing ulcers. The unhappy youth applies to literature all the scruples, the rigorism, the self-examination, the distrust of pleasure, which his forebears applied to the spiritual life; and perhaps soon all the intolerance and self-righteousness. The doctrine of Dr I. A. Richards in which the correct reading of good poetry has a veritable therapeutic value confirms him in this attitude. The Muses assume the role of the Eumenides. A young woman most penitently confessed to a friend of mine that an unholy desire to read the women's magazines was her besetting 'temptation'.

It is the existence of these literary Puritans that has deterred me from applying the word *serious* to the right sort of readers and reading. It suggests

[1] I owe this characterisation of Racine to Mr Owen Barfield.

itself at first as just the word we want. But it is fatally equivocal. It may mean, on the one hand, something like 'grave' or 'solemn'; on the other, something more like 'thoroughgoing, whole-hearted, energetic'. Thus we say that Smith is 'a serious man', meaning that he is the reverse of gay, and that Wilson is 'a serious student', meaning that he studies hard. The serious man, far from being a serious student, may be a dabbler and a *dilettante*. The serious student may be as playful as Mercutio. A thing may be done seriously in the one sense and yet not in the other. The man who plays football for his health is a serious man: but no real footballer will call him a serious player. He is not whole-hearted about the game; doesn't really care. His seriousness as a man indeed involves his frivolity as a player; he only 'plays at playing', pretends to play. Now the true reader reads every work seriously in the sense that he reads it whole-heartedly, makes himself as receptive as he can. But for that very reason he cannot possibly read every work solemnly or gravely. For he will read 'in the same spirit that the author writ'. What is meant lightly he will take lightly; what is meant gravely, gravely. He will 'laugh and shake in Rabelais' easy chair' while he reads Chaucer's *faibliaux* and respond with exquisite frivolity to *The Rape of the Lock*. He will enjoy a kickshaw as a kickshaw and a tragedy as a tragedy. He will never commit the error of trying to munch whipped cream as if it were venison.

II

This is where the literary Puritans may fail most lamentably. They are too serious as men to be seriously receptive as readers. I have listened to an undergraduate's paper on Jane Austen from which, if I had not read them, I should never have discovered that there was the least hint of comedy in her novels. After a lecture of my own I have been accompanied from Mill Lane to Magdalene by a young man protesting with real anguish and horror against my wounding, my vulgar, my irreverent, suggestion that *The Miller's Tale* was written to make people laugh. And I have heard of another who finds *Twelfth Night* a penetrating study of the individual's relation to society. We are breeding up a race of young people who are as solemn as the brutes ('smiles from reason flow'); as solemn as a nineteen-year-old Scottish son of the manse at an English sherry party who takes all the compliments for declarations and all the banter for insult. Solemn men, but not serious readers; they have not fairly and squarely laid their minds open, without preconception, to the works they read.

Can we then, since all else fails, characterise the literary 'few' as *mature* readers? There will certainly be this much truth in the adjective; that excellence in our response to books, like excellence in other things, cannot be had without experience and discipline, and therefore cannot be had by the very young. But some of the truth still escapes us. If we are suggesting that all men naturally begin by

treating literature like the many, and that all who, in their general psychology, succeed in becoming mature will also learn to read like the few, I believe we are wrong. I think the two kinds of readers are already foreshadowed in the nursery. Before they can read at all, while literature comes before them as stories not read but listened to, do not children react to it differently? Certainly, as soon as they can read for themselves, the two groups are already divided. There are those who read only when there is nothing better to do, gobble up each story to 'find out what happened', and seldom go back to it; others who reread and are profoundly moved.

All these attempts to characterise the two sorts of reader are, as I have said, hasty. I have mentioned them to get them out of the way. We must attempt to enter for ourselves into the attitudes involved. This ought to be possible for most of us because most of us, with respect to some of the arts, have passed from one to the other. We know something about the experience of the many not only from observation but from within.

# III

## HOW THE FEW AND THE MANY USE PICTURES AND MUSIC

I GREW up in a place where there were no good pictures to see, so that my earliest acquaintance with the draughtsman's or the painter's art was wholly through the illustrations to books. Those to Beatrix Potter's *Tales* were the delight of my childhood; Arthur Rackham's to *The Ring*, that of my schooldays. I have all these books still. When I now turn their pages I by no means say 'How did I ever enjoy such bad work?' What surprises me is that I drew no distinctions in a collection where the work varied so vastly in merit. It now stares me in the face that in some of Beatrix Potter's plates you find witty drawing and pure colour, while others are ugly, ill-composed, and even perfunctory. (The classic economy and finality of her writing is far more evenly maintained.) In Rackham I now see admirable skies, trees, and grotesques, but observe that the human figures are often like dummies. How could I ever have failed to see this? I believe I can remember accurately enough to give the answer.

I liked Beatrix Potter's illustrations at a time when the idea of humanised animals fascinated me perhaps even more than it fascinates most children;

and I liked Rackham's at a time when Norse mythology was the chief interest of my life. Clearly, the pictures of both artists appealed to me because of what was represented. They were substitutes. If (at one age) I could really have seen humanised animals or (at another) could really have seen Valkyries, I should greatly have preferred it. Similarly, I admired the picture of a landscape only if, and only because, it represented country such as I would have liked to walk through in reality. A little later I admired a picture of a woman only if, and only because, it represented a woman who would have attracted me if she were really present.

The result, as I now see, was that I attended very inadequately to what was actually before me. It mattered intensely what the picture was 'of'; hardly at all what the picture was. It acted almost as a hieroglyph. Once it had set my emotions and imagination to work on the things depicted, it had done what I wanted. Prolonged and careful observation of the picture itself was not necessary. It might even have hindered the subjective activity.

All the evidence suggests to me that my own experience of pictures then was very much what that of the majority always remains.

Nearly all those pictures which, in reproduction, are widely popular are of things which in one way or another would in reality please or amuse or excite or move those who admire them—*The Monarch of the Glen*, *The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner*,

*Bubbles*; hunting scenes and battles; death-beds and dinner parties; children, dogs, cats, and kittens; pensive young women (draped) to arouse sentiment, and cheerful young women (less draped) to arouse appetite.

The approving comments which those who buy such pictures make on them are all of one sort: 'That's the loveliest face I ever saw'—'Notice the old man's Bible on the table'—'You can see they're all listening'—'What a beautiful old house!' The emphasis is on what may be called the narrative qualities of the picture. Line or colour (as such) or composition are hardly mentioned. The skill of the artist sometimes is ('Look at the way he's got the effect of the candlelight on the wine glasses'). But what is admired is the realism—even with an approximation to *trompe-l'œil*—and the difficulty, real or supposed, of producing it.

But all these comments, and nearly all attention to the picture, cease soon after it has been bought. It soon dies for its owners; becomes like the once-read novel for the corresponding class of reader. It has been used and its work is done.

This attitude, which was once my own, might almost be defined as 'using' pictures. While you retain this attitude you treat the picture—or rather a hasty and unconscious selection of elements in the picture—as a self-starter for certain imaginative and emotional activities of your own. In other words, you 'do things with it'. You don't lay yourself open

to what it, by being in its totality precisely the thing it is, can do to you.

You are thus offering to the picture the treatment which would be exactly right for two other sorts of representational object; namely the ikon and the toy. (I am not here using the word *ikon* in the strict sense given it by the Eastern Church; I mean any representational object, whether in two dimensions or three, which is intended as an aid to devotion.)

A particular toy or a particular ikon may be itself a work of art, but that is logically accidental; its artistic merits will not make it a better toy or a better ikon. They may make it a worse one. For its purpose is, not to fix attention upon itself, but to stimulate and liberate certain activities in the child or the worshipper. The Teddy-bear exists in order that the child may endow it with imaginary life and personality and enter into a quasi-social relationship with it. That is what 'playing with it' means. The better this activity succeeds the less the actual appearance of the object will matter. Too close or prolonged attention to its changeless and expressionless face impedes the play. A crucifix exists in order to direct the worshipper's thought and affections to the Passion. It had better not have any excellencies, subtleties, or originalities which will fix attention upon itself. Hence devout people may, for this purpose, prefer the crudest and emptiest ikon. The emptier, the more permeable; and they want, as it were, to pass through the material image and go

beyond. For the same reason it is often not the costliest and most lifelike toy that wins the child's love.

If this is how the many use pictures, we must reject at once the haughty notion that their use is always and necessarily a vulgar and silly one. It may or may not be. The subjective activities of which they make pictures the occasion may be on all sorts of levels. To one such spectator Tintoretto's *Three Graces* may be merely an assistance in prurient imagination; he has used it as pornography. To another, it may be the starting-point for a meditation on Greek myth which, in its own right, is of value. It might conceivably, in its own different way, lead to something as good as the picture itself. This may be what happened when Keats looked at a Grecian urn. If so, his use of the vase was admirable. But admirable in its own way; not admirable as an appreciation of ceramic art. The corresponding uses of pictures are extremely various and there is much to be said for many of them. There is only one thing we can say with confidence against all of them without exception: they are not essentially appreciations of pictures.

Real appreciation demands the opposite process. We must not let loose our own subjectivity upon the pictures and make them its vehicles. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations. We must make room for Botticelli's Mars and Venus,

or Cimabue's Crucifixion, by emptying out our own. After the negative effort, the positive. We must use our eyes. We must look, and go on looking till we have certainly seen exactly what is there. We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.)

It is not only our own 'ideas' about, say, Mars and Venus which must be set aside. That will make room only for Botticelli's 'ideas', in the same sense of the word. We shall thus receive only those elements in his invention which he shares with the poet. And since he is after all a painter and not a poet, this is inadequate. What we must receive is his specifically pictorial invention: that which makes out of many masses, colours, and lines the complex harmony of the whole canvas.

The distinction can hardly be better expressed than by saying that the many *use* art and the few *receive* it. The many behave in this like a man who talks when he should listen or gives when he should take. I do not mean by this that the right spectator is passive. His also is an imaginative activity; but an obedient one. He seems passive at first because he is making sure of his orders. If, when they have

been fully grasped, he decides that they are not worth obeying—in other words, that this is a bad picture—he turns away altogether.

From the example of the man who uses Tintoretto as pornography it is apparent that a good work of art may be used in the wrong way. But it will seldom yield to this treatment so easily as a bad one. Such a man will gladly turn from Tintoretto to Kirchner or photographs if no moral or cultural hypocrisy prevents him. They contain fewer irrelevancies; more ham and less frill.

But the reverse is, I believe, impossible. A bad picture cannot be enjoyed with that full and disciplined 'reception' which the few give to a good one. This was borne in upon me lately when I was waiting at a bus stop near a hoarding and found myself, for a minute or so, really looking at a poster—a picture of a man and a girl drinking beer in a public house. It would not endure the treatment. Whatever merits it had seemed to have at the first glance diminished with every second of attention. The smiles became waxwork grins. The colour was, or seemed to me, tolerably realistic, but it was in no way delightful. There was nothing in the composition to satisfy the eye. The whole poster, besides being 'of' something, was not also a pleasing *object*. And this, I think, is what must happen to any bad picture if it is really examined.

If so, it is inaccurate to say that the majority 'enjoy bad pictures'. They enjoy the ideas suggested

to them by bad pictures. They do not really see the pictures as they are. If they did, they could not live with them. There is a sense in which bad work never is nor can be enjoyed by anyone. The people do not like the bad picture *because* the faces in them are like those of puppets and there is no real mobility in the lines that are meant to be moving and no energy or grace in the whole design. These faults are simply invisible to them; as the actual face of the Teddy-bear is invisible to an imaginative and warm-hearted child when it is absorbed in its play. It no longer notices that the eyes are only beads.

If bad taste in art means a taste for badness as such, I have still to be convinced that any such thing exists. We assume that it does because we apply to all these popular enjoyments in the gross the adjective 'sentimental'. If we mean by this that they consist in the activity of what might be called 'sentiments', then (though I think some better word might be found) we are not far wrong. If we mean that these activities are all alike mawkish, flaccid, unreasonable, and generally disreputable, that is more than we know. To be moved by the thought of a solitary old shepherd's death and the fidelity of his dog is, in itself and apart from the present topic, not in the least a sign of inferiority. The real objection to that way of enjoying pictures is that you never get beyond yourself. The picture, so used, can call out of you only what is already there. You do not cross the frontier into that new region which

the pictorial art as such has added to the world. *Zum Eckel find' ich immer nur mich.*

In music I suppose that most of us, perhaps nearly all of us, began life in the ranks of the many. In every performance of every work we attended exclusively to the 'tune'; to just so much of the total sound as could be represented by whistling or humming. Once this was grasped, all else became practically inaudible. One did not notice either how the composer treated it or how the performers rendered his treatment. To the tune itself there was, I believe, a twofold response.

First, and most obviously, a social and organic response. One wanted to 'join in'; to sing, to hum, to beat time, to sway one's body rhythmically. How often the many feel and indulge this impulse we all know only too well.

Secondly, there was an emotional response. We became heroic, lugubrious, or gay as the tune seemed to invite us. There are reasons for this cautious word 'seemed'. Some musical purists have told me that the appropriateness of certain airs to certain emotions is an illusion; certainly that it decreases with every advance in real musical understanding. It is by no means universal. Even in Eastern Europe the minor key has not the significance it has for most Englishmen; and when I heard a Zulu war song it sounded to me so wistful and gentle as to suggest a *berceuse* rather than the advance of a bloodthirsty impi. Sometimes, too, such

emotional responses are dictated quite as much by the fanciful verbal titles which have been attached to certain compositions as by the music itself.

Once the emotional response is well aroused it begets imaginings. Dim ideas of inconsolable sorrows, brilliant revelry, or well-fought fields, arise. Increasingly it is these that we really enjoy. The very tune itself, let alone the use the composer makes of it and the quality of the performance, almost sinks out of hearing. As regards one instrument (the bagpipes) I am still in this condition. I can't tell one piece from another, nor a good piper from a bad. It is all just 'pipes', all equally intoxicating, heartrending, orgiastic. Boswell reacted thus to all music. 'I told him that it affected me to such a degree, as often to agitate my nerves painfully, producing in my mind alternate sensations of pathetic dejection, so that I was ready to shed tears, and of daring resolution, so that I was inclined to rush into the thickest part of the battle.' Johnson's reply will be remembered: 'Sir, I should never hear it, if it made me such a fool.'[1]

We have had to remind ourselves that the popular use of pictures, though not an appreciation of the pictures as they really are, need not be—though of course it very often is—base or degraded in itself. We hardly need a similar reminder about the popular use of music. A wholesale condemnation either of this organic, or this emotional response is out of

[1] Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, 23 September 1777.

the question. It could be made only in defiance of the whole human race. To sing and dance round a fiddler at a fair (the organic and social response) is obviously a right-minded thing to do. To have 'the salt tear harped out of your eye' is not foolish or shameful. And neither response is peculiar to the unmusical. The *cognoscenti* too can be caught humming or whistling. They too, or some of them, respond to the emotional suggestions of music.

But they don't hum or whistle while the music is going on; only in reminiscence, as we quote favourite lines of verse to ourselves. And the direct emotional impact of this or that passage is of very minor importance. When they have grasped the structure of the whole work, have received into their aural imagination the composer's (at once sensuous and intellectual) invention, they may have an emotion about that. It is a different sort of emotion and towards a different sort of object. It is impregnated with intelligence. Yet it is also far more sensuous than the popular use; more tied to the ear. They attend fully to the actual sounds that are being made. But of music as of pictures, the majority make a selection or précis, picking out the elements they can use and neglecting the rest. As the first demand of the picture is 'Look', the first demand of the music is 'Listen'. The composer may begin by giving out a 'tune' which you could whistle. But the question is not whether you particularly like that tune. Wait. Attend. See what he is going to make of it.

Yet I find a difficulty about music that I did not find about pictures. I cannot, however I try, rid myself of the feeling that some simple airs, quite apart from what is done with them and quite apart from the execution, are intrinsically vile and ugly. Certain popular songs and hymns come to mind. If my feeling is well-grounded, then it would follow that in music there can be bad taste in the positive sense; a delight in badness as such just because it is bad. But perhaps this means that I am not sufficiently musical. Perhaps the emotional invitation of certain airs to vulgar swagger or lacrimose self-pity so overpowers me that I cannot hear them as neutral patterns of which a good use might possibly be made. I leave it to true musicians to say whether there is no tune so odious (not even *Home sweet home*) that a great composer might not successfully make it one of the materials of a good symphony.

Fortunately the question can be left unanswered. In general the parallel between the popular uses of music and of pictures is close enough. Both consist of 'using' rather than 'receiving'. Both rush hastily forward to do things with the work of art instead of waiting for it to do something to them. As a result, a very great deal that is really visible on the canvas or audible in the performance is ignored; ignored because it cannot be so 'used'. And if the work contains nothing that can be so used—if there are no catchy tunes in the symphony, if the picture is of things that the majority does not care

about—it is completely rejected. Neither reaction need be in itself reprehensible; but both leave a man outside the full experience of the arts in question.

In both, when young people are just beginning to pass from the ranks of the many to those of the few, a ludicrous, but fortunately transient error may occur. The young person who has only recently discovered that there is in music something far more lastingly delightful than catchy tunes may go through a phase in which the mere occurrence of such a tune in any work makes him disdain it as 'cheap'. And another young man, at the same stage, may disdain as 'sentimental' any picture whose subject makes a ready appeal to the normal affections of the human mind. It is as if, having once discovered that there are other things to be demanded of a house than comfort, you then concluded that no comfortable house could be 'good architecture'.

I have said this error is transient. I meant transient in real lovers of music or of painting. But in status seekers and devotees of culture it may sometimes become a fixation.

# IV

## THE READING OF THE UNLITERARY

We can easily contrast the purely musical appreciation of a symphony with that of listeners to whom it is primarily or solely the starting-point for things so inaudible (and therefore non-musical) as emotions and visual images. But there can never be, in the same sense, a purely literary appreciation of literature. Every piece of literature is a sequence of words; and sounds (or their graphic equivalent) are words precisely because they carry the mind beyond themselves. That is what being a word means. To be carried mentally through and beyond musical sounds into something inaudible and non-musical may be the wrong way of treating music. But to be similarly carried through and beyond words into something non-verbal and non-literary is not a wrong way of reading. It is simply reading. Otherwise we should say we were reading when we let our eyes travel over the pages of a book in an unknown language, and we should be able to read the French poets without learning French. The first note of a symphony demands attention to nothing but itself. The first word of the *Iliad* directs our

# IX

## SURVEY

It will now be convenient to sum up the position I am trying to develop as follows:

1. A work of (whatever) art can be either 'received' or 'used'. When we 'receive' it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we 'use' it we treat it as assistance for our own activities. The one, to use an old-fashioned image, is like being taken for a bicycle ride by a man who may know roads we have never yet explored. The other is like adding one of those little motor attachments to our own bicycle and then going for one of our familiar rides. These rides may in themselves be good, bad, or indifferent. The 'uses' which the many make of the arts may or may not be intrinsically vulgar, depraved, or morbid. That's as may be. 'Using' is inferior to 'reception' because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it.

2. When the art in question is literature a complication arises, for to 'receive' significant words is always, in one sense, to 'use' them, to go through and beyond them to an imagined something which

is not itself verbal. The distinction here takes a somewhat different form. Let us call this 'imagined something' the *content*. The 'user' wants to use this content—as pastime for a dull or torturing hour, as a puzzle, as a help to castle-building, or perhaps as a source for 'philosophies of life'. The 'recipient' wants to rest in it. It is for him, at least temporarily, an end. That way, it may be compared (upward) with religious contemplation or (downward) with a game.

3. But, paradoxically, the 'user' never makes a full use of the words and indeed prefers words of which no really full use could be made. A very rough and ready apprehension of the content is enough for his purpose because he wants only to use it for his present need. Whatever in the words invites a more precise apprehension, he ignores; whatever demands it, is a stumbling-block. Words are to him mere pointers or signposts. In the good reading of a good book, on the other hand, though they certainly point, words do something for which 'pointing' is far too coarse a name. They are exquisitely detailed compulsions on a mind willing and able to be so compelled. That is why to speak of 'magic' or 'evocation' in connection with a style is to use a metaphor not merely emotive, but extremely apt. That is why, again, we are driven to speak of the 'colour', 'flavour', 'texture', 'smell' or 'race' of words. That is why the inevitable abstraction of content and words seems to do such violence to great

literature. Words, we want to protest, are more than the clothing, more even than the incarnation, of content. And this is true. As well try to separate the shape and colour of an orange. Yet for some purposes we must separate them in thought.

4. Because good words can thus compel, thus guide us into every cranny of a character's mind or make palpable and individual Dante's Hell or Pindar's gods'-eye view of an island,[1] good reading is always aural as well as visual. For the sound is not merely a superadded pleasure, though it may be that too, but part of the compulsion; in that sense, part of the meaning. This is true even of a good, working prose. What keeps us happy, despite much shallowness and bluster, through a Shavian preface, is the brisk, engaging and cheerful cocksureness; and this reaches us mainly through the rhythm. What makes Gibbon so exhilarating is the sense of triumph, of ordering and contemplating in Olympian tranquillity so many miseries and grandeurs. It is the periods that do it. Each is like a great viaduct on which we pass, smoothly and at unaltered speed, over smiling or appalling valleys.

5. What bad reading wholly consists in may enter as an ingredient into good reading. Excitement and curiosity obviously do. So does vicarious happiness; not that good readers ever read for the sake of it, but that when happiness legitimately occurs in a fiction they enter into it. But when they demand a happy

[1] *Fragm.* 87+88 (58).

ending it will not be for this reason but because it seems to them in various ways demanded by the work itself. (Deaths and disasters can be as patently 'contrived' and inharmonious as wedding bells.) Egoistic castle-building will not survive long in the right reader. But I suspect that, especially in youth, or other unhappy periods, it may send him to a book. It has been maintained that the attraction of Trollope or even Jane Austen for many readers is the imaginative truancy into an age when their class, or the class they identify with theirs, was more secure and fortunate than now. Perhaps it is sometimes so with Henry James. In some of his books the protagonists live a life as impossible for most of us as that of fairies or butterflies; free from religion, from work, from economic cares, from the demands of family and settled neighbourhood. But it can only be an initial attraction. No one who chiefly or even very strongly wants egoistic castle-building will persevere long with James, Jane Austen, or Trollope.

In characterising the two sorts of reading I have deliberately avoided the word 'entertainment'. Even when fortified by the adjective *mere*, it is too equivocal. If entertainment means light and playful pleasure, then I think it is exactly what we ought to get from some literary work—say, from a trifle by Prior or Martial. If it means those things which 'grip' the reader of popular romance—suspense, excitement and so forth—then I would say that every book should be entertaining. A good book

will be more; it must not be less. Entertainment, in this sense, is like a qualifying examination. If a fiction can't provide even that, we may be excused from inquiry into its higher qualities. But of course what 'grips' one will not grip another. Where the intelligent reader holds his breath, the duller one may complain that nothing is happening. But I hope that most of what is usually called (in disparagement) 'entertainment' will find a place among my classifications.

I have also refrained from describing the sort of reading I approve as 'critical reading'. The phrase, if not elliptically used, seems to me deeply misleading. I said in an earlier chapter that we can judge any sentence or even word only by the work it does or fails to do. The effect must precede the judgement on the effect. The same is true of a whole work. Ideally, we must receive it first and then evaluate it. Otherwise, we have nothing to evaluate. Unfortunately this ideal is progressively less and less realised the longer we live in a literary profession or in literary circles. It occurs, magnificently, in young readers. At a first reading of some great work, they are 'knocked flat'. Criticise it? No, by God, but read it again. The judgement 'This must be a great work' may be long delayed. But in later life we can hardly help evaluating as we go along; it has become a habit. We thus fail of that inner silence, that emptying out of ourselves, by which we ought to make room for the total reception

of the work. The failure is greatly aggravated if, while we read, we know that we are under some obligation to express a judgement; as when we read a book in order to review it, or a friend's MS. in order to advise him. Then the pencil gets to work on the margin and phrases of censure or approval begin forming themselves in our mind. All this activity impedes reception.

For this reason I am very doubtful whether criticism is a proper exercise for boys and girls. A clever schoolboy's reaction to his reading is most naturally expressed by parody or imitation. The necessary condition of all good reading is 'to get ourselves out of the way'; we do not help the young to do this by forcing them to keep on expressing opinions. Especially poisonous is the kind of teaching which encourages them to approach every literary work with suspicion. It springs from a very reasonable motive. In a world full of sophistry and propaganda, we want to protect the rising generation from being deceived, to forearm them against the invitations to false sentiment and muddled thinking which printed words will so often offer them. Unfortunately, the very same habit which makes them impervious to the bad writing may make them impervious also to the good. The excessively 'knowing' rustic who comes to town too well primed with warnings against coney-catchers does not always get on very well; indeed, after rejecting much genuine friendliness, missing many real

opportunities and making several enemies, he is quite likely to fall a victim to some trickster who flatters his 'shrewdness'. So here. No poem will give up its secret to a reader who enters it regarding the poet as a potential deceiver, and determined not to be taken in. We must risk being taken in, if we are to get anything. The best safeguard against bad literature is a full experience of good; just as a real and affectionate acquaintance with honest people gives a better protection against rogues than a habitual distrust of everyone.

To be sure, boys do not reveal the disabling effect of such a training by condemning all the poems their masters set before them. A mixture of images which resists logic and visual imagination will be praised if they meet it in Shakespeare and triumphantly 'exposed' if they meet it in Shelley. But that is because the boys know what is expected of them. They know, on quite other grounds, that Shakespeare has to be praised and Shelley condemned. They get the right answer not because their method leads to it, but because they knew it beforehand. Sometimes, when they don't, a revealing answer may give the teacher cold doubts about the method itself.