Inventing Criticism

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In his magisterial account of the formation of literary criticism from Dryden to Coleridge, James Engell made the following call for attention to be paid to the forms in which criticism issued:

The range [of kinds of criticism] is fluid, and one might ask whether it makes sense to delineate types: the kinds in which criticism appears are varied enough in length, tone, and audience. But there is a reciprocal relation between form, length, style, and intended audience on one hand, and the critical discourse and its boundaries on the other. Until these issues are more widely delineated, the roles played by criticism in society, education, and culture will be confused and made targets for easy generalisation. (Forming the Critical Mind: Dryden to Coleridge, pp.169-70)

It is now thirty years since Engell gave expression to the need to comprehend the relations between criticism and its forms. Notwithstanding the excellent work that has been done in the meantime on the emergence of modern literary criticism in the eighteenth century, it remains the case that the forms of criticism are still insufficiently understood. This course focuses on the relation between particular forms and genres of writing and their deployment in the literary criticism of the eighteenth century and Romantic period. There is a strong case to view this period as the origin of literary criticism as we know and practice it (see Michael Gavin’s ground-breaking The Invention of English Criticism for one version of this argument) and thus this course focuses on the process of inventing criticism as a process of generic innovation and experimentation, as well as of aesthetic argument, conceptual theorising, and ribald polemic. We will examine critical writing in four different forms: dialogue, lecture, review, and letter. Our examples will be drawn from major figures in the history of criticism and or literature more broadly – Dryden, Jeffrey, Coleridge, Keats – albeit examined from a relatively neglected perspective, and from critics only recently receiving scholarly attention – Reeve, Fuseli, Bradshaigh – but who were significant innovators in critical form.

It is perhaps necessary for a course concerned with the deployment of different forms for critical writing to be itself formally innovative. As you will be aware, coursework essays are bound by certain regulations, but I would like us to experiment (via Moodle) with how we compose our responses to the fortnight’s reading. And so, for the session in which we will be examining dialogues, I will pair you and ask you to produce a short dialogue in response to the reading; for the session in which we will be examining lectures, to produce a lecture (this may take the form of lecture-notes, such as those we have for Coleridge, a lecture-script, such as those we have for Hazlitt and others, or of a short recorded lecture, such as we could not have for any of the figures we will be discussing); for the session in which we will be examining reviews, I will ask you to submit a short review of the kind that appeared in one of the major Reviews of the period; and for the session in which we will be examining letters, I’ll pair you again and ask you to enter into a brief critical correspondence on the session’s reading. Please note: since these are formative tasks and will not, as such, form part of the summative assessment for the course, I will ensure that they are not onerous and will not take up too much time; details will follow – and there will be an opportunity in the final session to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of reflective critical practice.

There will be additional summative tasks for completion on Moodle and it is my hope that we will collectively compose a working bibliography to supplement this one using Moodle’s Wiki function (again, details to follow).

All reading for the seminar will be on Moodle and I will endeavour to put selections from the supplementary and secondary reading on Moodle too.
Session 1: Dialogue
The first examples of literary criticism in the West take the form of dialogue: Plato’s *Ion* and books 2, 3, and 10 of his *Republic*, which consider the nature and role of the poet, are dialogues between Socrates and different interlocutors. It is certainly the case that the much of the literary critical writing of the figure who many have envisaged as the first and one of the greatest of English literary critics – John Dryden – took the form of dialogue. In this session, we will begin with Dryden’s ‘Of dramatick poesie, an essay’ (1668) and contrast it with one of the most important early defences of the novel, produced just over a century later, Clara Reeve’s *The Progress of Romance, through Times, Countries, and Manners; with Remarks on the Good and Bad Effects of It, on Them Respectively; In a Course of Evening Conversations* (1785). Supplementary reading includes important examples of eighteenth-century philosophical dialogue (Shaftesbury, Ramsay) and significant German Romantic dialogues on the nature of poetry (Friedrich Schlegel) and (as in Reeve’s case) on the nature of the novel (Dorothea Veit Schlegel).

Reading for the Seminar
John Dryden, ‘Of dramatick poesie, an essay’ (1668)
Clara Reeve, selections from *The Progress of Romance, through Times, Countries, and Manners; with Remarks on the Good and Bad Effects of It, on Them Respectively; In a Course of Evening Conversations* (1785)

Supplementary Reading
Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, ‘Sensus communis, an essay on the freedom of wit and humour in a letter to a friend’ and ‘Soliloquy, or advice to an author’, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711)
Dorothea Mendelssohn Veit Schlegel, ‘A Conversation About the Latest Novels by French Women Writers’ (1803)
Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800)

Session 2: Lecture
If the first examples of literary criticism in the West are in dialogue form, then the second example takes the form of lectures: Aristotle’s *Poetics* comes down to us in the form of lecture-notes, tidied-up and shaped into a (more or less) coherent whole during that work’s complex reception history. In this session we will consider the role the lecture played in the formation of literary criticism as a discipline in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and pay particular attention to the vagaries of the transmission of lectures to their audiences – both in their own time and now. Required reading will juxtapose a highly finished version of a series of lectures – selections of the translation from the original Latin of Robert Lowth’s praelectiones given during his tenure of the Oxford professorship of poetry – and the rather more fugitive remains of some nevertheless enormously significant lectures – Coleridge’s lectures on Shakespeare and other literary topics. Additional reading will include Hazlitt’s important lectures on English poetry, one widely influential example from the prodigious lecturing career of August Schlegel, and De Quincey’s wonderful spoof lecture-cum-letter-to-Blackwood’s, ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’.
Reading for the Seminar
Robert Lowth, selections from Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews, tr. by G. Gregory (1787)
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, selections from Lectures on Shakespeare (1811-19)

Supplementary Reading
Thomas de Quincey, ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’ (1827)
William Hazlitt, Lectures on the English Poets: Delivered at the Surrey Institution (1818)
August Schlegel, A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature, tr. by John Black and A.J.W. Morrison (1815)

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Session 3: Review
Writing to George Ellis in 1838, Sir Walter Scott offered the following retrospective on the practice of reviewing (lower-case r) in the Reviews (upper-case) of the past century:

The common Reviews, before the appearance of the Edinburgh, had become extremely mawkish; and, unless when prompted by the malice of the bookseller or reviewer, gave a dawdling, maudlin sort of applause to everything that reached even mediocrity. The Edinburgh folks squeezed into their sauce plenty of acid, and were popular from novelty as well as from merit.

In this session, we will seek to test this assertion and to judge how palatable the acidic reviews of the Edinburgh Review, founded in 1802, are. In addition, we will consider the degree to which the Edinburgh really did institute the kind of revolution in reviewing practice with which it is often credited. But our central focus will be on the review as form: what are its key characteristics and can it be said to be a distinct form (distinct, say, from the essay) at all?

Reading for the Seminar
Francis Jeffrey, reviews of Robert Southey’s Thalaba in the Monthly Review and the Edinburgh Review (both 1802); review of Wordsworth’s The Excursion in the Edinburgh Review (1814)
Mary Wollstonecraft, selected reviews from The Analytical Review (1790)
Henry Fuseli, review of his own Remarks on the Writings and Conduct of J.J. Rousseau in the Critical Review (1767)

Supplementary Reading
Edward Copleston, Advice to a Young Reviewer: With a Specimen of the Art (1802)

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Session 4: Letters
The critical forms that we will have considered to this point are, albeit in differing respects, public forms. In our final session, we will turn to a critical form that complicates the view (advanced, for instance, by Peter Uwe Hohendahl in an influential history of literary criticism) that literary criticism is public evaluation and description of literary texts. Letters have a complex relationship to publicity. Important documents in the history of literary criticism – such as Richard Hurd’s Letters on Chivalry and Romance (1762) – adopt the form of correspondence, but were in fact always intended for publication; the correspondence
between Lady Bradshaigh and Samuel Richardson is another matter, though there were no previous ties between the two correspondents, other than the Bradshaighs’ admiration for Richardson’s novels; and Keats’s familiar letters are another case still. We will compare the affordances of the letter in these different literary critical deployments of it; supplementary reading include Schiller’s vitally important Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), published in the form of letters to his patron in Schiller’s journal *Die Horen*.

**Reading for the Seminar**

Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762)
Dorothy, Lady Bradshaigh, and Samuel Richardson, correspondence on *Clarissa* (1748-1754)
John Keats, selections from the letters

**Supplementary Reading**

Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795)

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**Secondary Reading: Some Initial Tips**

Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca, NY, 1982)