

Holding fast to the heart: an Apologia and a Manifesto.

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Man soll sein Herz festhalten; den lässt man es gehn, wie bald geht einem da der Kopf durch!
One should hold fast to one's heart; for if one lets it go, how soon one loses one's head too!

Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, II, 'Von den Mitleidigen' (Of the compassionate).

What does this work of art mean to me? How does it affect who I am, what I feel and think, and how I act? How has it come about that, being who I am, or being who I wish to become, I understand it in the ways I do?

These questions have been asked before. They are natural questions for any engaged reader reflecting on real experiences of reading. However, when I asked them in *Blake's Heroic Argument* they were not usual in academic criticism. They had been in large measure driven out by scholarship, by historically based reading, and more generally by professionalization and the ways in which the institutions in which criticism is based shape its nature.

The book therefore ends with a manifesto, which is fundamentally about the seriousness of criticism – that it should have commitments in lived experience, and that it should be explicit about how these are arrived at so that the reader can understand how they are operative in the criticism. The discussion will be judged by some extravagant, and it did arise from a sort of desperation.

As a young university teacher I felt I had lost my way. I had lost it some while before, first as an undergraduate. I went to university to study Music, which I loved, and which was my only serious love in the Arts. In the form in which I was offered it the academic study of Music turned out not to be what I wanted. I loved playing and I loved listening, but writing counterpoint according to rules derived from the style of Palestrina, or harmony according to rules derived from the style of Bach, or making formal analyses according to patterns that great composers seemed regularly to violate, and which were in any case analysed purely as patterns, not discussed as sources of aesthetic experience, had little to do with the pleasures of playing and listening. In the university to which I had gone (Sheffield) the head of English was William Empson, and he seemed – as he was – exactly what I was looking for: clever, eccentric, at once both passionate and humorous about his interests, creative and engaged. So I changed to studying English. This worked perfectly. Though at one level diverted (from music), at another – for what I loved in the music – the diversion seemed like keeping on track.

I supposed that the study of English would continue to be as I found it incarnated in Empson, so when I went to Oxford as a postgraduate I was more than disappointed, I was downright dismayed by the nature of what I found there – classes in bibliography, palaeography, textual criticism: in general modes of study that were historical, objective, having nothing so far as I could see to do with the passions and pleasures of art, but endorsed with all the prestige of that ancient and in many ways beautiful institution. In those days of more flexible university organisation, I transferred back to Music, and became a sort of literary musicologist. But still that study was dominated by the general drive to the historical and objective. Otherwise I diverted myself with student drama, music in college chapels, and whatever else I could find engaging the real pleasures of art to deflect attention from intellectual and aesthetic desiccation. But intellectually I was lost. I was acquiring research skills in literature and music that I had no desire to use. I had no idea how to tackle subjects that would engage the passions that had prompted me to study the arts in the first place.

If this were a purely personal history it would be of interest only to me, but I came to think that it was exemplary. The arts are a mystery. Criticism must respond to this mystery creatively, recognising the personal and idiosyncratic nature of real interest in the arts. Without this people regularly find themselves lost, as I was, in the impersonal mass-production processes of education which over-emphasise the importance of historical and objective elements of scholarship and criticism because these are what is readily articulable in an institutional context.

So what did I think I could do? It was not easy to find or create opportunities to contemplate my situation. I had to satisfy the teaching requirements of my job, which in those days were fortunately not, as they have become, specialized. I was a lecturer in English Literature, teaching everything from late Medieval to Modern. This meant that I had first to teach myself all that had not been part of my undergraduate degree. I had also to satisfy the requirements of some sort of research productivity – which I was only in a position to do as a musicologist. And I had a young family. Time for creative contemplation was in short supply. I decided to write about Blake as a poet I loved, whose work I knew had made a difference to who I was, and I experimented with writing entirely privately, attempting to find, outside the confines of the disciplines that asserted themselves when I thought of writing for any academic purpose, modes of writing that could reflect that engagement. It was a struggle, and it took a long time.

That is what lies behind the form of *Blake's Heroic Argument*, particularly the decision to have a final chapter arguing for more creative use of form and more explicit personal engagement in criticism, and enacting this in varied forms of writing, fragmentary quotation, invocations of music and visual art, and accounts of personal experience and commitments in politics, religion, sexuality and the arts – the areas which I understood as underlying and interacting with the view of Blake in the book as a whole.

That part of the book must speak for itself as it stands; but where it led is perhaps surprising and also bears on the issues. It may seem a paradox, but giving the fixity of articulation to the views on which the book is based positively released me from some of them. Almost as I finished the book my views on politics, on religion, and on sexuality began to shift. Articulation clarified for me the presence in the ideas of undigested experiences that in the course of time, and with changes of cultural and personal circumstances, came to challenge their coherence. The British university system's transformation in the late 1980s by Thatcherism, the (to me) surprising and dismaying absence in the system of permanent standards, and its severe vulnerability to manipulation by economic pressure, in contrast to the Church's resistance by reference to permanent standards; a careful reading during the same period of the *Divina Commedia*, which showed me for the first time a religious view of the world I found imaginatively powerful and intellectually coherent; a heightened sense in social and personal life of the egotism which I came to believe only reference to standards outside of one's own construction could mitigate; my love of sacred music, which opened up for me a feeling for the drama of liturgy and more generally the symbolic power of Christian ritual and mythology: these in some mixture were the catalysts of change. Whether I have become wiser or fallen away from the wisdom of youth I cannot judge. But for the validity of the book's fundamental critical argument this seems to me neither here nor there. The final chapter articulates accurately the experiences and ideas on which the view of Blake in the body of the book is based, or with which it is in dialogue. Were I to write about Blake now, even in those cases where I would say similar things, I would say them differently; but I find in the book nothing about Blake that seems to me other than true from the point of view from which the book was written. So my fundamental view of criticism has not changed: it remains that in real and serious engagement with the arts what you see should, and inevitably will, interact with who you are, and that this can valuably be made explicit.

It may also seem paradoxical that, in writing about principles and practices of criticism I was not eager to embrace the 1980s fashion for theoretical self-consciousness. The critique of that fashion in the final chapter (pp. 250-55) still seems to me accurate – that it had more to do with the needs of career building in universities, where the factiously new is overvalued, than with the needs of art and audiences. Reading this part of the book again – which I believe I partly view with a kind of detachment, as though it were written by somebody else (somebody I once knew well) – I am surprised that the treatment of the virtues and vices of the fashion for theory seems to me so even-handed – which perhaps means no more than that this too is an area in which my ideas have not changed. I have remained sceptical about how confident intellectuals address the mysteries of the arts, and especially the mysteries of the art of poetry. I also saw the eager embrace of theory as the herd instinct choice of that cultural moment, and (not inevitably, but in practice often) congruent with just the kind of arid intellectuality I was trying to avoid. In this, though it presented itself as dissident, the fashion was at one with the academy's fundamental norms – which is in part why it so flourished there. For me, anything that absorbed me into the expectations of educational institutions needed to be avoided; and a feeling of not belonging (for reasons of class and sexuality described in the book) also alienated me from what I saw as a dissentient-cum-congruent fashion. But the even-handed account (if that is what it is) surprises me because it was scarcely a choice – more a visceral repudiation of (as it seemed to me) philistinism that regularly showed it had no understanding of the aesthetic, which, often with offensive confidence and self-congratulation, it was righteously undermining and destroying. Probably this aggression can be sensed in the writing, and, if I had not been residually restrained by academic decorum, it might have been allowed to appear more than it does. But I was trying to see all round the subject.

My antagonism was also, of course, fear: the effects of the fashion in the culture, particularly as promulgated in tool kits and short guides which shrivelled exploration into dogma, undermined any view based on the kind of libidinal relation with art I was struggling to articulate. I found it difficult then to say with due emphasis that unselfconscious absorption in art (Eliot's 'you are the music while the music lasts') has a validity that cannot be measured by articulation, and can be quite as profound and satisfying as detached multiple-perspective commentary. The self-consciousness of modern criticism is all very well when a genuinely sophisticated emotional intelligence is capable of combining passionate identification with other perspectives (irony, humour, scepticism). But I thought then, as I think now, that to regard self-consciousness and detachment as the only modes of sophisticated relation to art is corrupt – in a reader is pitiful; in a critic is fearful. The reader-listener who cannot unselfconsciously give him- or herself to a work of art, as to a lover, is incapacitated for the mode of knowledge that many kinds of art expect and require. Sophisticated intelligence is not always able to understand why works of art affect us as they do. Criticism needs sometimes to be humble in its pretensions and recognise the limitations of conscious understanding – perhaps precisely with works that affect us most strongly, where their power may be related to feelings impossible to bring to consciousness. Intuition is not an uncultivated faculty: it is in part the spontaneous consequence of conscious thought. In an adequate criticism there has to be interaction between spontaneous feeling and conscious thinking in which feeling can correct thought as much as thought feeling. Without this, in the delicate balance of thinking and feeling in relation to art, thinking has a corrupt dominance.

So there are fundamentals of criticism on which my views have not changed – though experiment has developed some different practices.

Most of *Heroic Argument* is concerned not with discussing the practice of criticism but with the detailed exploration of a view of Blake as a philosophical poet-painter. The book presents his work in detail, and presents it as a whole (poetry and illuminations) and in

context – invoking different contexts in relation to different works. Criticism of Blake was dominated at the time of writing by views, established by the brilliant structural myth account of Northrop Frye (*Fearful Symmetry*, 1947), that tended to treat his work as static – each separate piece a fragment of one great coherent articulation. This had carried over into views with quite different emphases from Frye’s – from the political allegories of David Erdman (*Prophet Against Empire*, 1954, revised 1969) to the anti-historicist eternal (Platonist) philosophy view of Kathleen Raine (*Blake and Tradition*, 1968). Also common to these ways of reading Blake was the element of a concealed key – for Frye, *The Four Zoas*, at Blake’s death (and for long after) unpublished; for Erdman, encoded politics, because, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and during the Napoleonic Wars, Blake was a radical living in a world of political persecution; for Raine, encoded philosophy, because the eternal wisdom could be rightly understood only by initiates. Each of these writers was a powerful critic – Frye a magisterial stylist, and a theorist who derived from his reading of Blake a whole structural theory of Western literature, professedly impersonal, criticism as a descriptive science; Erdman a politically engaged and detailed historical commentator on a range of Romantic Period writers; Raine a distinguished poet, cultural critic, and commentator on poets (especially Yeats) in an esoteric tradition. But I thought that all of them were wrong in their overall view of Blake. As I saw it, his views in politics, religion, sexuality, and the arts changed, in some ways radically; for Blake politics and religion were one, not to be understood separately (but Erdman had no interest in religion, and Raine no interest in politics); while Blake was undoubtedly difficult, the difficulties of his work were not those of a concealed key but of articulating struggles against the fundamental drift of his culture; and, underlying this, and congruent with my fundamental argument about criticism, the Blake they each constructed was a Blake partly – but inexplicitly, and perhaps not entirely consciously – in their own image.

The strategy in the book’s discussions of Blake is to foreground my own view in an argument about his work as a whole carried on through detailed expositions of individual works. The main text is about those works considered in detail, as they lead one to another, in their social, intellectual and artistic contexts, and with each allowed to generate the terms in which it is best understood. The critique of existing views is largely confined to the notes. This still seems to me the proper way to write – to say what one has to say directly: not constantly to turn aside to duck and nod with acknowledgements about how an argument fits in with the views of X, Y, and Z. One should know what other informed, intelligent and imaginative views are, but there is no need to distract the reader with parading this knowledge, which seems often done for no higher purpose than to signal membership of a professional group. The scope of ingestion implied by some characteristic modern scholarly procedures in criticism, modelled (falsely) on advances in knowledge in the objective sciences, rather saps the energy for the main matter, which is independent thinking. ‘Listen to all sides and filter them from your self’ is Whitman’s sound principle (*Song of Myself*, 2).

There have been major developments in Blake studies since the 1980s. Blake’s unique book production methods mean that he has long attracted the attention of critics interested in the meanings of the book as material object, and, with improved knowledge of individual copies, this interest has taken a major new turn with new theories – much contested – of how Blake worked, in engraving individual plates and in making up complete copies. The digital age has also given rise to the Blake Electronic Archive (<http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/>), making original copies available online, not only of the illuminated books but of almost everything else. While material developments have governed the focus of research, there has also been Derridean Blake, Lacanian Blake, feminist Blake, queer Blake, Blake measured by feminism and found wanting, and other Blakes for which the zeitgeist issued prompts. Much of this would have delighted Blake, especially the extraordinary world-wide dissemination,

and the contribution that has made to other cultures: what a justification of his single-minded dedication to a vision out of step with his age. But his own methods of reading, as evinced by his dialogue with other poets in illustrations, his dialogue in new creations (*Milton*), his criticism (*On Homer's Poetry and on Virgil*), and his marginalia sturdily based in personal interaction (in modes more pungently idiosyncratic than I was attempting) – none of this has been much considered in relation to the practices of criticism.

The precise experiment of *Blake's Heroic Argument* I could attempt only once: as anything of a formula it would cease to have the essential element of feeling one's way with problems of understanding. And though, now it is distant from me, I like it, and am very glad to see it reprinted, at first seeing it in print made me feel sick. What had I done? In any case I felt (as the final chapter says) that the explanations of perspective lacked the fluidity with which the views formulated from the experiences involved were actually held. If I were to attempt something like this again, I saw that I might want to find a different mode, more fully integrating criticism, experience and values; and that this might be done more obliquely, which would require a different style, in which sensibility, experience, and values could be conveyed less by direct treatment, more by ways in which form and language were used.

I was also determined not to become a specialist, with all the false implications that idea carries of methodological or period expertise as essential to understanding, and more generally the detachment of professionalization. So I tried different things, many of which were eventually to lead back to some kind of development or elaboration of experiments explicit or implicit in *Heroic Argument*.

I next wrote at length about Joyce and *Ulysses* (Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1992), choosing Joyce as another writer I loved, but positively imposing novelty because so different from Blake in period and mode – humorous, ironic, sceptical, detached, largely a-political and anti-religious. It was a guarantee that I would not be doing the same things again. Mainly my view of the necessarily personal nature of interpretation prompted experiments with kinds of work that avoided interpretation altogether. This included annotated editing, purist (Marlowe, unmodernised; Clarendon, 1998) and interventionist (Blake, modernised; Longman Annotated Texts, 2000), with the aim of giving readers the information needed to understand works in their contexts – of course selected information, not without implications for meaning – and then leaving them as far as possible free to interpret for themselves. I accepted then, as I accept now, T. S. Eliot's view that providing the information needed for interpretation is one of the best ways of helping people to see culturally remote work afresh ('The Function of Criticism', *Selected Essays*) – and that the judgement required to decide what information is likely to be useful, while lacking the alluring glamour of more ego-engaging forms of criticism, is a high and rare skill. (I am just returning to editing and, in brief, while I am exposing all my prejudices, I would say that critics should not leave editing to editors. Editing is in part a quasi-science, but it also continuously and fundamentally involves literary judgement, and critics should not be intimidated by the scientific aspects of editing into treating it as a closed shop confined to licence-holders. Those who specialise in the quasi-science are not invariably well equipped to make literary judgements, and often make them poorly.) Alongside editing I wrote about the fundamental orientations from which specific interpretations arise: on religion as a form of poetry, poetry as requiring its own *credo ut intelligam*, a proper reverence for words and symbols (the most elaborated form of this is 'A Sensibility for the Infinite', *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture*, ed. MacSwain, Oxford, 2012); and critiques of Error, especially Romantic Period New Historicism as antithetical to personal, engaged reading, and as an approach that shows in extreme form the characteristic hubris of criticism, fostering the illusion that criticism can stand apart from its own commitments and purport to offer forms of awareness transcending those of the art on which it comments ('Keats and Anti-Romantic Ideology', *The Challenge of Keats*, ed.

Christensen et al., Amsterdam, 2000). The aim here was to explore evasions and elisions by which critical procedures presented as objective and historically based can be seen to be distortions that reflect a variety of post-modern anxieties, including those (as I argue in *Heroic Argument*) that arise from the situatedness of criticism in educational institutions. So though miscellaneous, all this – the editing and the arguments on fundamental orientation – was looking for alternative ways of addressing the issues underlying *Heroic Argument* about criticism and personal engagement.

Thinking has an inherent tendency to disconnect from feeling – pursuing the idea, leaving behind the experience that prompted the pursuit; with knowledge of art, therefore – which must be whole-being knowledge – a tendency to become less than fully real, ‘academic’ in the sense ‘purely theoretical, with an etiolated relation to reality’. For an unetiolated relation, ‘God guard me from those thoughts men think / In the mind alone; / He that sings a lasting song / Thinks in a marrow bone’. Yeats’s ‘Prayer for Old Age’ is as true about reading poetry as about writing it: responding fully to the song also means thinking in a marrow bone. One issue pertinent to this raised only briefly in *Heroic Argument* is the importance of learning to love the sounds and shapes of poetry, which is discussed there with voice-workshop style proposals for how to think about those (pp. 89-93). This kind of approach has gradually become more central to my ideas of properly engaged criticism – performance as a mode of understanding that is practical and non-analytic. With poetry this means engaging the mind through the body, realising poetry’s music (rhythms, rhetoric, syntax, form), as vital to its meaning, in the physicality of voice. Learning really to use your voice as it exists in the rest of your life, and so reflects who you are, in all the inflections with which you have learned to express that thinking-feeling identity, but also so as to convey with natural feeling words structured by another mind into a shaped object – this is no small skill; but it is a skill that engages together the emotions and the intelligence. The emotions because voice draws on the whole body – mouth, larynx, lungs, diaphragm, and all their sinews and musculature; the intelligence because of the innumerable (usually intuitive) judgements about tone, inflection, intonation, pace, and emphasis that decisions about meaning require. I have described the issues, using discussions of reading aloud by Romantic, Victorian and modern poets, in the second part of a recent book on Shakespeare’s Sonnets (‘Dwelling in the Words’, *The Life in the Sonnets*, Shakespeare Now!, 2011), with the ideas exemplified in a complete recording of the Sonnets online (<http://www.bloomsbury.com/cw/the-life-in-sonnets/?pid=116582>); also, from different points of view, in essays on music and the poetry of T. S. Eliot (*Eliot in Context*, ed. Jason Harding, Cambridge, 2011), and on performances of Shakespeare (‘A Kind of Loving’, *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare*, ed. Tobias Döring and Ewan Fernie, 2015). No more to say about that, other than to observe that the issue evidently goes back to the fundamental dilemma about the emotional reality of criticism that prompted my undergraduate transfer from Music to English, and draws together its central elements – and to wonder, despite some evident changes, how much of life is concerned with articulating the consequences of what one knew inarticulately in youth. But this way of looking creates a pattern, perhaps too readily: what here appears as having at least a kind of coherence was experienced as distinctly incoherent, losing one’s way, and involved a lot of thrashing about with a sense of direction hard to find.

For some time after *Heroic Argument* I avoided tackling again the issues of explicit personal involvement in criticism directly. The book had been so difficult to write, and, while I saw there would be other ways of addressing the subject, it also said everything I then knew how to say.

It is pertinent to how all this developed that in 2002 I gave up my full-time university job. Again, it seems to me that this was not simply a personal decision but in part an index of pressures of the time: the all but intolerable stress of having temporarily become a ‘manager’

(head of a large university department) in a culture to which managerialism traditionally had been, and to a degree still was, alien; and a response to a context in which, not only in academic life but in many other areas, on the plausible plea of ‘transparency’ (which should be judged, not by its declared intention but by its effects), energy is diverted from primary functions (in universities, teaching and research) to secondary (oversight, replacing the traditional guarantees of trust). These were the immediate causes of giving up my job: the ethos of managerialism and the immense waste consequent on bureaucratisation. But there were other reasons, prominent among which was a continuing unease about the degree to which criticism is shaped by the institutions in which it is based. I had long been impressed by the verdict of Rousseau: ‘Il est trop difficile de penser noblement quand on ne pense que pour vivre’ (It is too difficult to think nobly when one only thinks for a living: *Confessions*, Book 9, année 1756). Giving up my job was a leap in the dark – in the event, more than I foresaw – but in various ways my situation seemed to require it. My unease about the institutional shaping of criticism had only been heightened by the increasingly intrusive regulatory systems introduced into British universities during the 1980s and 90s in relation to both teaching and research. Since 2002 I have continued to work in the university system, but somewhat as an outsider, with a less full-time relation to thinking for a living, not administering systems of regulation, and less directly subject to them. Whether or not this has had any effect on my ability to think freely there is no control on the experiment that can show, but being less bamboozled by bureaucracy has certainly given me more time to think at all, and it also gave me time to experiment with writing in different modes, which has been crucial to recent projects.

From outside their bureaucracy universities can still appear places of sweetness and light. Students remain what they were – the best clever, eager, in love with their subjects, and idealistic. It is a pleasure and a privilege to be in contact with them. Their teachers – those who are not simply taking the world as they find it, developing what they think of as their ‘careers’ by swimming with the current – their teachers continue to do what they can to use regulation in a creative way. (It was not until the Thatcherised 1980s that I heard in universities the word ‘career’, with its implicit contradiction of the idea of teaching as a vocation and its vision of scholarship and criticism in the arts as instruments by which to mount a ladder of success.) But increased regulation and changes to funding make it much harder than it was to choose one’s own crooked path. Universities are increasingly dominated by the science models of knowledge which provide their funding. The effects of this are not simple, and do not admit of exhaustive discussion here; but funders (quite reasonably) want to know what they are paying for, and new material, especially now new material with a technological aspect, is a clearer product than new ideas; or than that other most delicious of intellectual fruits: old ideas brought to life anew. ‘Old ideas brought to life anew’ is hard to sell to funders; and accordingly the funding needs of universities tend to blank this out. But as I see it, it is an important part of the work of the humanities to keep alive traditions of thought – traditions of thought responsive to contemporary circumstances, but not simply reshaped to suit them: continuity with the past that may act as commentary on and critique of the present. Writing a more personal kind of criticism in a more creative way is (though I did not know it when I was struggling with the idea in *Heroic Argument*) in part arguing for a revival of the pre-professional modes of Pater and Wilde – Pater in *The Renaissance* (‘What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? ... How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?’); Wilde in ‘The Critic as Artist’ (on criticism as ‘the only civilized form of autobiography’). It is a kind of thinking that never was congruent with the university’s professionalization of criticism. Bureaucratisation, mass-production, and a standardisation of models of knowledge across different subject areas have only driven it further to the margins. Unless it may be – and of

this I think there are signs – that more emphatic exclusion prompts more conscious resistance.

I was prompted to return again to experiments with writing partly by a piece of luck that I at first sincerely resisted because I did not see its opportunities. I was persuaded, just as I gave up full-time work, to become my university's orator, which meant presenting candidates for the award of honorary degrees. Over several years this allowed me to look round the whole university – finding out what was going on in advanced thought in Cosmology, International Jurisprudence, Theoretical Anthropology; meeting with alumni notable in commerce, journalism, sport, and so on. It was a liberal education. But more than this, it was also a practical education in rhetoric, prompting experiments with style required by a new mode of writing and a new audience. With the miscellaneous audience of a degree ceremony could I manage not only what one might think of intellectual journalism, conveying advanced thinking in a range of disciplines in comprehensible terms, but also a variety and play of tone not usual in writing criticism? Polemic? Comedy? And along with writing about new subjects, and in new modes, I was also writing for aural delivery – addressing in a practical way performance and the use of voice, and writing for my own voice. A basic requirement of effective aural delivery is shaping sentences which you can say taking their meaning with full seriousness – not passing words through the mouth, but passing them through the whole thinking-feeling mechanism, fully shaping them in the voice. For me this prompted a refreshed sense of how language means. It also encouraged a return to issues of experiment with writing that lay behind parts of *Heroic Argument*, though in a new way – not personal and semi-private. It persuaded me that I could again try different effects in critical writing. Its revelations about the importance of the physicality of voice also returned me with renewed conviction to issues about the importance of voicing to the real experience of poetry, and more generally to performance as a mode of criticism.

I returned to treating the subject of explicit personal involvement in criticism on the basis of this experience with a variety of experiments. The first half of *The Life in the Sonnets* ('Dwelling in the Feelings') aims to engage readers with the fundamental emotional realities of the subject of Shakespeare's sequence, the love of an older man for a youth, by approaching it through other ways of writing about that subject, in philosophy (Plato), in visual art (Michelangelo), in fiction (Thomas Mann), in music (Benjamin Britten), and in film (Derek Jarman – here with a variation of the topic more in the mode of modern gay consciousness). The two halves of the book – dwelling in the feelings; dwelling in the words – are meant to be complementary: fundamental orientation; detailed engagement. Both avoid usual kinds of analysis, and both are directed to the same end – emotional engagement negotiated between the works and feelings the reader brings to reading. More closely similar to the explicitly personal mode of *Heroic Argument* is 'Discovering Transgression: Reading from the Passions' (*Shakespeare and I*, ed. Will McKenzie and Theodora Papadopoulou, London, 2012), an account of discovering Shakespeare in the context of other aesthetic and (the disinfectant term would be) ethical experiences of being a teenager. I hope I may say that in this I found at last a mode and language better mingling the literary and the experiential. Looking at the same issues partly through a more exteriorized lens, a discussion of how Thomas Mann shows Hans Castorp's experiences of life and of art are integrated uses Hans's reflections on his aesthetic experiences again as a model for a more explicitly experiential criticism ('A Kind of Loving', *Thomas Mann and Shakespeare*). For the moment I think of the negotiation involved in this kind of reading between the work and the self as 'reading for one's preferences' – that is, highlighting elements genuinely present in the work, but with emphases coloured by the predispositions brought to it. Not meaning that ignores history and otherness – art as catalyst igniting only what is brought to it, which is solipsistic. Not meaning that confines itself to history and otherness – criticism as scholarship igniting no real

connection, which is sterile. But meaning that acknowledges the real otherness of a work, with no compromise of that, but also recognises that that otherness cannot become real to the present without taking some colouration from the new perspectives of the present, and of an individual life in that present. The negotiation should be, as far as possible, conscious: we should understand what we are doing insofar as we can – but that is never more than partially. The reality of a reading to experience is more important than the degree of its self-consciousness.

So where does this mean I am now with the issues raised in or set going by *Heroic Argument*?

Fundamentally I remain an aesthete. ‘Immediate need of Pater’ is my mantra. With any work by which I am fully engaged, beauty is the first consideration and the last. In this I am still aiming to construct modes of criticism that the pleasures and passions of the love of music prompted me to look for as a teenager. Much of what I now do in teaching and writing aims to clear away the sort of intellectualizing typical of institutional study of the arts that gets in the way of taking those pleasures in beauty. It is a predisposition often associated with formalism, and so at first I supposed it. How far it can be from that, how this fundamental predisposition can draw in a range of political and ethical considerations, my most recent discussion attempts to show (‘Introduction’, *The Recovery of Beauty*, ed., with Corinne Saunders and Jane Macnaughton, 2015). Criticism has come to seem to me necessarily eclectic, multi- and interdisciplinary, not as the result of a plan to make it so, but by a gradual process, as I have experimented with different ways of bringing the whole person into more intense relation with the experience of individual works. The usual idea of ‘interdisciplinary’ gives too narrow a notion: the whole conception of disciplines implies a view corralled by frameworks of education, not the fundamental drive of the whole person to understand, which cannot be compartmentalized. That is the excitement of criticism – that it is a freewheeling subject without boundaries. Creative fluidity, methodological chaos, is among the things that make it so interesting. Anything can be relevant. As well as issues that are obviously literary – language, form, genre – there are always issues that potentially engage with other areas – thinking about society and politics, about the other arts, about all areas of intellectual and spiritual life. Disrupting learned methods of criticism by engaging with other modes of thought, especially areas outside the usual sphere of the literary, can open up kinds of thinking not readily conceivable within accepted assumptions. Anybody whose natural intelligence has not been channelled and compartmentalised by the rigidities of systematic education will scarcely take a solemn view of subject boundaries, which vary with fashion and are inevitably transcended or dissolved by education the effects of which pass into life beyond institutions of learning. There is, of course, another method: relying on special knowledge to limit the demands on intelligence, and saying more or less what other professionals say. Viewed positively, this may be seen as the academic world well attuned to the needs of contemporary society. Viewed negatively, it is the instinct to join the herd.

My ideas of criticism have changed as I have more and more accepted and tried to work from my basic feeling of how fundamentally incommensurate with critical formulation art often is, so almost anything may be brought to bear on understanding the mysteries. While beauty in art is first and last, between that alpha and omega there may be many detours. Art works of any depth will be amenable to being seen in many different ways. The perception of any work can be deepened by placing it in a variety of human contexts – that is, by reaching out into the worlds in which it was made, and the worlds in which it has had and now has meanings.

‘Make it new’. That is the slogan Ezra Pound devised from the characters on the bathtub of the Emperor he called Tching Tang: ‘cut underbrush, / pile the logs / keep it growing’ (Canto LIII). Wide reading, honesty to experience, varied practice in articulation,

and a thoroughly digested sense, worked into the intellectual and emotional bloodstream, of the immense variety of ways in which people have constructed understandings of texts: yes, but this is not a formula. There is no formula. Understanding is a venture into the unknown without maps – or with many maps, all potentially but none certainly useful. The arts are truly a mystery. The methods by which you can investigate and deepen your real relationship with a work of art are so various that finally you are on your own without a guide.

What is essential is to retain a sense of how mysterious understanding art is – how much it can depend on things apparently chance or random, how little it can be formulated into a programme, how much will always be not available to consciousness, and therefore how foolish are the shibboleths of method and the confident whistling in the dark that follows from them. Aesthetic experience is a form of wisdom, and no more than wisdom of any other kind is it to be had for the price of adherence to rules. If elements of any ‘formula’ for understanding can be adduced, they are scarcely learnable: passionate identification, complete but also often problematized; visceral pleasure in form – really visceral: the mind engaged through the body; and, not least, constant experiment with method. But the fundamental issue is not critical practices but modes of being, what Pater calls ‘temperament’. However much we attempt to engage with all that is other in the work, finally we come back to the reader. What does this work of art mean to me? How does it affect who I am, what I feel and think, and how I act?