Down With Dons

From the viewpoint of non-dons, probably the most obnoxious thing about dons is their uppishness. Of course, many dons are quite tolerable people. But if you ask a layman to imagine a don the idea will come into his head of something with a loud, affected voice, airing its knowledge, and as anyone who has lived much among dons will testify, this picture has a fair degree of accuracy. The reasons are not far to seek. For one thing, knowledge – and, in the main, useless knowledge – is the don's *raison d'être*. For another, he spends his working life in the company of young people who, though highly gifted, can be counted on to know less than he does. Such conditions might warp the humblest after a while, and dons are seldom humble even in their early years. Overgrown schoolboy professors, they are likely to acquire, from parents and pedagogues, a high opinion of their own abilities. By the time they are fully fledged this sense of their intellectual superiority will have gone very deep and, because of the snob value attached to learning and the older universities, it will almost certainly issue in a sense of social superiority as well. Modern young dons sometimes feel guilty on this score, and break out in jeans, sweat-shirts and other casual wear in the forlorn hope that they will be taken for persons of the working class. However, the very deliberateness of their disguise is an earnest of their real aloofness.

Anyone wishing for a whiff of the more old-world, unashamed brand of donnish uppishness could scarcely do better than thumb through *Maurice Bowra* (Duckworth), a sheaf of tributes which, besides giving a complete anatomical run-down of Sir Maurice from his 'curiously twisted navel' to his private parts (resembling, Francis King bafflingly reports, 'Delphi in microcosm'), casts some telling light on the social assumptions of its contributors and subject. The editor is Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford. His is a name that sticks in my mind because of a contribution he made, two or three years back, to some correspondence in *The Times* about dons' pay. It was at a time when the miners or the power-

workers or some other vital body were having one of their strikes, and an English tutor at University College called Peter Bayley wrote in suggesting that, by comparison with such people, dons were perhaps paid too much. Professor Lloyd-Jones replied that, if Bayley thought that, he could never have done any worthwhile teaching or research. The discourtesy of this retort was, I suppose, calculated: a reminder of professorial eminence. But what struck me as weird was that Professor Lloyd-Jones should apparently have no inkling that, as against a miner or a power-worker, his own contribution to the community was of uncommonly little consequence, and that what he deemed worthwhile teaching or research would impress most of the people whose taxes went towards paying his salary as a frivolous hobby. Humility, it seemed to me, was the only becoming attitude for academics in the debate about pay, since their avocations, and their maintenance at the public expense are, if they don't happen to be nuclear physicists or doctors, notoriously difficult to justify. How these aspects of the matter could have escaped Professor Lloyd-Jones puzzled me for a goodish while. In the end I attributed it to the insulating effect of donnish uppishness. Years of self-esteem had, as it were, blinded the Professor to his true economic value.

Bumptiousness and insolence are the quite natural outcome of such a condition, and the Bowra volume has some excellent examples of both. When holidaying abroad, we are told, Sir Maurice would size up other tourists and, though they were perfect strangers to him, 'pronounce with shameless clarity on their social origins: "English LMC" '. We learn, too, of his behaviour at a Greek play to which he was taken:

> He drew attention, shortly after the rise of the curtain, to the knees of the Chorus, and engaged those on either side in such brisk conversation that a cold message was delivered to me during the interval to keep him quiet or get out.

Behind such conduct can be detected the unhesitating donnish assumption that the comfort and pleasure of ordinary people are of no account when set against the need to advertise one's superiority.

Don-fanciers love this rudeness, of course, and suck up to those who dole it out. The kind of people who work as secretaries and dogsbodies in the various Faculties, for instance,

can often be heard relating, with many a titter, the latest offensive outburst of Professor This or Dr That. Dons' children, too, are likely to admire and imitate their parents' ways, and this can make them peculiarly detestable. A good many Oxford (and, I suppose, Cambridge) citizens must have bitter memories that would bear this out, but an experience of my own will serve as an illustration of the general truth. For a while I lived opposite a don's family. The father, a philosopher, was a shambling, abstracted figure, whom one would glimpse from time to time perambulating the neighbourhood, leering at the milk bottles left on doorsteps and talking to himself. If he had any contact with the outside world, or any control over his numerous children, it certainly wasn't apparent. To make matters worse, the mother was a don too, and the house was regularly left in the children's sole charge. The result was bedlam. The din of recorded music resounded from the place at all hours, and it never seemed to occur to anyone to shut a window or moderate the volume. One summer afternoon, when I was doggedly trying to mark a batch of A-level papers, my patience gave out, and I crossed the street to protest. As usual, every gaping window blared: it was like knocking at the door of a reverberating three-storey transistor set. Not surprisingly I had to pound away at the knocker for a good while before anyone heard. Eventually a teenage girl, one of the daughters, answered, and – with the familiar upsetting mixture of outrage and humiliation that one feels on such occasions – I asked if she would mind playing the music a little more quietly. The girl gave a supercilious smile. 'Oh,' she said, 'it's no good your complaining about that. The whole street got up a petition about us once, but it didn't have any effect.' And with that she shut the door.

I withdrew, trembling with impotent rage and quite unfit, needless to say, to mark any more scripts that day, even if the row across the street had abated – which it didn't. For a while after that I got into the way of asking after this girl whenever I was talking to anyone who knew the family, in hopes that I would hear she had been run over or otherwise incapacitated. Unfortunately she never was, so far as I know. But it was through one of these conversations that I came to hear of another of her escapades. My interlocutor on this occasion was a Professor of Moral Philosophy, and he explained that the girl had caused considerable consternation at her school because she had discovered how to manufacture (using clay, All Bran and

other ingredients) a compound which closely resembled human excrement, and had left quantities of this in little heaps around the classrooms. How they found out it was her I don't know, but apparently they did. My informant was immensely tickled by the affair, and shook with laughter when relating the discomfiture it had caused to the school staff.

In a moral philosopher that might seem a surprising reaction to such foulmindedness. But in fact he was illustrating another common donnish attitude, namely, contempt for authority, particularly the authority of those whom, like schoolteachers or policemen, the don feels to be in a lowly position compared to himself. Dons' children are notoriously arrogant at school, and it's hardly to be wondered at since they find that their elders, like my moral philosopher, greet their misdemeanours with asinine hilarity. The donnish cult of liberty extends further than this, of course. One frequently encounters letters in the press, for instance, with strings of academic signatories, gravely informing some foreign government that the way it deals with its refractory minorities does not tally with donnish notions of freedom. No doubt those who put their names to these documents get a pleasurable feeling of importance, but in fact a don is about as well placed to start clamouring for liberty as a budgerigar. Like the bird, he lives in a highly artificial, protected environment, in which all his wants are catered for. Any appreciable degree of liberty conceded to his fellow beings would quickly put an end to his existence. For it cannot be supposed that the ignorant, philistine majority would go on supporting the universities financially if it had freedom of choice in the matter, since it receives no benefit from these institutions, or none that it could be brought to appreciate, beyond, I suppose, the annual Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, and even that is less popular than it used to be.

In the Bowra volume much hearty commendation is given to Sir Maurice's lifelong sympathy with those who 'desired to resist authority', and his support for 'all libertarian causes'. In his youth, one gathers, the causes he mostly spoke out in favour of were buggery and masturbation, though he also encouraged:

> open snobbishness, success worship, personal vendettas, unprovoked malice, disloyalty to friends, reading other people's letters (if not lying about, to be sought in unlocked drawers) – the whole bag of tricks of what most people think

> and feel and often act on, yet are themselves ashamed of admitting they do and feel and think.

The commentator on human nature here is Anthony Powell. He does not record whether smearing ersatz excrement on school furniture would count as 'unprovoked malice' and therefore as a libertarian cause in the Bowra code. However, it seems much on a par with the rest.

But though Sir Maurice continued, apparently, to decry authority long after youth had passed, he himself represented authority for the greater part of his life. He became a Fellow of Wadham in 1922, Warden in 1938, and Vice-Chancellor of Oxford in 1951, and he was an inveterate university politician, adept at imposing his will on committees and at bulldozing himself and his protégés into positions of power. One need go to no hostile account to discover this domineering side to his nature, for his friends who contribute to the memorial volume are effusive about it. For a man so constituted, supporting 'libertarian causes' would plainly entail constant and self-deluding doublethink. Not that Sir Maurice was, in that respect, an untypical don. Dons are inalienably responsible for the government of the colleges and the university, so when they indulge in anti-authoritarian polemics it always involves a lie.

Regrettably undergraduates cannot be counted on to realize this. In their trusting way, they believe that dons are perfectly sincere when they prate of revolution and liberty. It is a misunderstanding that can lead to painful disappointment, for the young tend to carry their beliefs into action, and they then find that the dons, who had seemed such pals, have suddenly turned nasty. Bowra, it appears, was in his early days one of those dons who curry favour by hobnobbing with the undergraduates, and Anthony Powell tells of an occasion on which the conviviality wore thin.

> I remember the unexpectedness of a sudden reminder of his own professional status, sense of what was academically correct, when, after a noisy dinner-party at Wadham, someone (not myself) wandering round Bowra's sitting-room suddenly asked:
> 'Why, Maurice, what are these?'
> Bowra jumped up as if dynamited.
> 'Put those down at once. They're Schools papers. No, indeed . . .'

> A moment later he was locking away in a drawer the candidates' answers to their examination, laughing, but, for a second, he had been angry. The astonishment I felt at the time in this (very justifiable) call to order shows how skilfully Bowra normally handled his parties of young men.

Quite so. And his skill consisted in concealing from them the truth, which was that his comfortable job depended on keeping them under. Young Powell's astonishment was, surely, quite reasonable. For had not the libertarian Bowra positively recommended the reading of other people's private papers?

The chagrin and surprise undergraduates feel when they come up against reality in this way was recently demonstrated, on a larger scale, at the trial of eighteen students before the Oxford University Disciplinary Court. They were accused (and eventually found guilty) of having staged a sit-in at the University Registry. In fact they had been ejected from the building, after a short occupation, by irate Registry staff, who got in through a window. This brush with ordinary, hard-working citizens, who wanted to get on with their jobs, was in itself a disillusioning experience for youngsters intent upon organized idleness, and elicited howls of protest from the undergraduate press. But worse was to follow. Brought to trial, the defendants at first treated the court room as an arena for libertarian high-jinks, volubly aided by their friends who packed the public gallery. The proceedings were adjourned in uproar. But the court was then reconvened in a small room; the revolutionary claque was excluded; and the trial went ahead. Defendants who continued to rant and sermonize and interrupt were first warned, then asked to leave, then, after they had refused, forcibly removed.

As it happened, I was on duty as an usher, so I had a ringside seat. The undergraduates linked arms to form a tight bunch against one wall. The barristers and solicitors, clutching armfuls of papers, huddled against another wall to avoid the mêlée. Eventually a squad of specially conscripted university police, decked out in ill-fitting bowler hats for the occasion, marched in, methodically dragged each offender from his clinging companions, and carried him, kicking and shouting, from the room. There was, I suppose, little violence – much less, say, than you could see on the rugby fields round the university any afternoon of the week. But in the elegantly panelled court room the

panting and scuffling and the bellows of rage from the undergraduates seemed crude and debasing. The defendants who remained behind were stunned. It had plainly never dawned on them that the university would actually enforce discipline. Several wept. I remember particularly a graduate student, who must have been in his early twenties, and whom no one had laid a finger on, blubbing tempestuously in the middle of the court room. Nor could the students be blamed for this reaction. They had been led astray by their upbringing – by the unquestioning approval of liberty which modern education encourages from nursery school on, as well as by the revolutionary attitudinizing of a few leftist dons who, it should be noted, did not appear before the court to take any part of the blame, but retained their lucrative posts after the undergraduates they had beguiled had been sent down.

Bowra, of course, had died a couple of years before any of this took place. One can be pretty sure that he would have felt nothing but regret at the recurrent sit-ins, protest-marches and other diversions by means of which students who have no academic motivation try to justify being at university. However, the support for 'all libertarian causes' celebrated by his obituarists exemplifies, as I have suggested, a widespread donnish cast of mind which inevitably provokes student indiscipline. His response to what he saw of undergraduate militancy was tolerant and lacking in foresight.

> When, in 1968, some undergraduates wanted to have their objections to the proctorial system heard by the Privy Council, Bowra was the first to give them public support, and in answer to the objection 'Why should they?' answered simply 'Because they are entitled to and because they want to.'

To anyone less filled with the notion of the special importance of Oxford and its doings, it might surely have occurred to enquire why these already highly privileged youngsters should be 'entitled' to occupy eminent public men with their little upsets, any more than the pupils at any polytechnic or training college or kindergarten throughout the land. Bowra's assumption here partly reflects the Oxford of his youth, adorned with gilded sprigs from the foremost families who would naturally deem it their right to be heard before the highest tribunal. But it also represents a grandiose and typically donnish sense of the university's place in the scheme of things. This, incidentally, is

something dons share with militant students, who invariably believe that their grouses are of national importance. In placards and graffiti around Oxford the disciplinary court was referred to as a 'show trial', and the defendants were labelled 'The Oxford Eighteen', as if they were at least on a level with the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

The relative insignificance of Oxford, and of universities in general, Bowra, like most dons, did not care to think about. Anthony Powell tells of how, in his undergraduate days, he once confessed to Bowra, then a rising star in the Oxford firmament, his own impatience with the university, how little he liked being there, and how he longed to get it over and go down. Bowra was so put out that it took thirty-five years for their relationship to recover. Jobs within the university, and who got them, mattered terribly to him. He fought and intrigued, on and off committees, to get his candidates in. He revelled in the bickering and gossip that surrounded contested elections to academic posts: they brought drama to his life, exercised his quick brain, and gratified his malicious sense of humour. 'To anyone outside a university,' Lord Annan condoningly remarks, 'the frenzy which elections and appointments produce seems petty and absurd.' To some inside, too, one would hope. The kind of scholar who is absorbed enough in learning and teaching to reckon every hour spent on administration and committees wasted may, it is true, leave the field clear for the hardened business-fixers, and is to that extent a liability. Still, he is and must be the life-blood of any university worth the name. He will have something larger and more permanent in view than inter-departmental wrangling or the pursuit of his career, and will consequently be exempt from the degradations attendant on ambition. Bowra's craving for honours, on the other hand, was voracious. When E. R. Dodds, rather than himself, succeeded Gilbert Murray as Regius Professor of Greek, he was bitterly disappointed and, it appears, purposely made things difficult for the new professor. Small-mindedness isn't something one easily associates with Bowra, but it is hard to see his reaction here as the outcome of anything else, and the species of small-mindedness involved is persistently if not uniquely nurtured by universities.

From the academic angle, of course, the chief danger is that the don who bothers himself with administration will get so tied up in it that he will have no time for the subject he's

supposed to be studying. The disastrous improvement in modern techniques of photo-copying and duplication has greatly added to this peril. Bushels of paper nowadays debouch from university and college offices every week and, as a result of the cry for 'participation', even the undergraduates have been sucked into the papery maelstrom. Some of them sit on committees almost full-time, and the busy-bodies in their ranks are agitating for sabbatical years, during which they will not have to study at all, but may devote themselves undistracted to needless circulars and memoranda. They will then be indistinguishable from the administrative dons. Even when administration doesn't oust learning (and it didn't in Bowra's case), there's a likelihood that the don who becomes attached to the idea of the university, as distinct from the culture which the university exists to serve, will apprehend that culture in a form which is processed and ordered for university consumption. What were originally great endeavours of the human spirit, the offspring of passion and inspiration, will decline for him into the material of lectures and syllabuses, of examinations and career-furthering books. The flat, pedestrian feel of much of Bowra's writing about Greek literature, which is rather harped on by contributors to this volume, may be relevant here. So may the awful donnishness of his jokes on the subject of art and literature. Traipsing round galleries and churches abroad, he would award points to the paintings on show. When you had totted up fifty, you were entitled to a drink. Another game was classing the poets, as if in the Final Honour School: 'Goethe,' we are told, 'notably failed to get a First: "No: the Higher Bogus", "Maurice, we've forgotten Eliot." "Aegrotat."' And so on.

If this carries a warning for present-day dons, the social set-up at Oxford in Bowra's era may seem too remote to have much relevance. Most undergraduates came from public schools. Often they had been friends at prep school or Eton or Winchester before they came up. It was a tiny, ingrown world. The public-school atmosphere of the memorial volume is appropriately heavy, several contributors debating, as if it were a matter of genuine concern, whether Bowra's explosive mode of speech should be traced to Winchester, via New College, or to his own old school, Cheltenham. As a matter of fact one is probably over-optimistic if one assumes that all this is a thing of the past. The public school element in the Oxford and Cambridge intake has never dropped much below a half, and is

bound to increase over the next few years. This is because the Socialist policy of converting the country's non-fee-paying grammar schools into massive comprehensives, in which the clever and the cretinous are jumbled together, means, in effect, that the non-public-school university entrance candidate will receive less individual attention from the teaching staff than formerly. The more crackbrained type of educational theorist will actually defend this, arguing that teachers should devote their time to the dullards, whose need is greater. But the result is that a candidate whose parents haven't the cash to pay public school fees is no longer able to compete with his intensively coached public school counterpart. Thus a policy which was, in concept, egalitarian, is now in the process of turning the older universities back into public school enclaves, as they were before the First World War. As the dons are, by and large, recruited from among the undergraduates, they too will revert to being exclusively public school before very long. This seems a pity, because the influx of grammar school dons into Oxford common rooms over the last twenty years or so has brought a good deal of sense to the place, and they usually turn out to be uninfected by the donnish follies and foibles I've been outlining. However, the Oxford of the future will not contain them.

Presumably because of the preponderance of public school boys, there was a fair amount of dandified sodomy around in Bowra's Oxford, and one gathers that he was a participant. Lord Annan says that he regarded sex as something 'to be luxuriously indulged with either boys or girls', and Isaiah Berlin connects his love of pleasure, 'uninhibited by a Manichean sense of guilt', with his enthusiasm for Mediterranean culture. But his homosexuality seems to have been furtive and saddening rather than blithely Hellenic. He was terrified of blackmail. One of his friends, Adrian Bishop, had lost his job in an oil company because of his homosexual escapades, and Bowra dreaded similar exposure. When Gide came to Oxford to collect his honorary degree, he refused to put him up in the Warden's Lodgings for fear of scandal. To commemorate Bishop, he wrote a homosexual parody of *The Waste Land* entitled *Old Croaker*, enough of which is printed here to show that he, like Forster, had only to touch on this topic for his literary sense to desert him. He wasn't, of course, at all like the popular notion of the donnish fairy queen. On the contrary, he was robustly masculine, and seems to have coveted a stable heterosexual relation-

ship. He dallied with the idea of marriage more than once. 'Buggers can't be choosers,' he retorted, when someone deplored the plainness of a girl he was wooing. But he never married, and his aloneness was recurrently a misery. When a woman friend referred to him in his hearing as a 'carefree bachelor', he flared up: 'Never, *never*, use that term of me again.' He loved children, and the thought of him having to make do with kindness to other people's is not a happy one.

It seems arguable that his homosexuality did not satisfy the deeper demands of his nature, and maybe it should be regarded as something foisted on him by his education rather than an inherent trait. The Oxford he grew up in was unrelievedly male, so the undergraduates, especially the outgoing and social ones, almost inevitably drifted into flirtations with members of their own sex. In these conditions it was hard to learn how to get on, or off, with girls, and Bowra didn't. He never developed much instinct for what they were thinking or feeling, a friend recalls. His bitterest jokes seem to have been about love and marriage. Given all this, it's rather staggering to consider that, half a century later, most of Oxford's colleges are still single sex, and many dons are determined to keep them that way. Their reasons, when you bother to enquire, never boil down to anything but the obtusest male prejudice. However, they are aided by the fact that the women's colleges also oppose co-education, fearing that mixed colleges, though they would give girls a fairer chance of getting to Oxford, might have an adverse effect on their own class-lists – an ordering of priorities which shows that women, in an emergency, can be just as donnish as men.

Perhaps Bowra's profound interest in eating and drinking was a kind of compensation for the lack of sexual satisfaction in his life. His hospitality was 'gargantuan', we learn, 'his digestion and head ironclad'. The friends who commemorate him plainly regard these as entirely fitting attributes for the successful academic. Indeed *The Times* obituary recorded, as if it were one of his signal achievements, that he had 'greatly raised the standard of hospitality' shown to honorands at Oxford. But to an impartial observer it may perhaps admit of question whether scholarship necessarily entails passing large quantities of rich food and fermented liquor through the gut. True, it is a traditional part of Oxford life. But even Oxford's traditions need reconsideration from time to time, and with Britain rapidly

dwindling into a small, unimportant, hungry nation, it seems unlikely that corporate gluttony will flourish in its universities for much longer. Nor need its disappearance be greatly lamented. The spectacle of a bevy of dons reeling away from one of their mammoth tuck-ins is distinctly unappealing, and would be even if there were no such thing as famine in the world. Nevertheless, one may be sure that dons will hotly defend their right to swill and guzzle. Their feelings of social superiority, earlier referred to, unfailingly come into play when this issue is raised, and I have known quite young dons seriously contend that college feasts should not be discontinued because, if they were, they would have nowhere to entertain their grand friends. The question is not a minor one but reflects on the way in which university shapes the personality, and therefore on the justification for having universities at all. If it can be shown that the effect of higher education is to stimulate greed and self-indulgence, the public, whose money keeps universities open, may be excused for feeling that these attributes could be picked up more cheaply elsewhere.

Reading about Bowra and his Oxford teaches you, of course, not only what to avoid but also what to imitate, or try to. His positive qualities were immense. Above all, the breadth of his learning offers a challenge and a reproach to modern dons with their increasingly narrow specializations. He had travelled across Russia as a schoolboy, before the Revolution, and this gave him a lifelong interest in Russian poetry. He also read French, German, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Chinese. World literature to him was not a set of linguistic cupboards, mostly closed, but a warm and welcoming ocean in which he splashed about freely. He spanned time as well as space. From Homer, Pindar and Sophocles his love and knowledge extended to Yeats, Valéry, Rilke, George, Blok, Cavafy, Apollinaire, Mayakovsky and Lorca. Pasternak, Quasimodo, Neruda and Seferis were his personal friends. Set against these riches, the burrowings of the typical modern researcher shrivel into absurdity. The things that pass for education in graduate departments – hunting for subjects sufficiently devoid of interest not to have been researched before, manufacturing unneeded theses on unreadable authors – would have filled Bowra with horror and disbelief. He characterized the graduate student as a dinosaur, sinking into a bog under the weight of his erudition.

Another aspect of his approach to literature which looks

pretty healthy in retrospect was his indifference to the Cambridge emphasis on 'evaluation' which was all the rage in the thirties. Encouraging youths scarcely out of short trousers to deliver judgement on the masterpieces of the past was not at all what he went in for. He made his pupils aware of literature as a wealth they had still to inherit, rather than as a terrain of fallen idols and soured hopes into which it would be foolish to venture. As one contributor here puts it:

> The range of his reading challenged your own provinciality and sloth. In the post-war years he was always suggesting that one should read poets whom the new orthodoxy had dismissed as negligible or harmful – Tennyson, Swinburne and Kipling . . . He was a traveller forever suggesting that if only you would journey further some new and life-enhancing experience was yours for the asking.

He enlarged the imagination of his undergraduates, too, by becoming a legend long before his death. Like all legends, he was partly make-believe. People added to him bits and pieces from their own fancy, so that by the end he was not so much a man as a joint fictional venture. This is plain enough from the memorial volume, for we encounter there several different Bowras, according to the writer. He is variously likened to Yeats, Hardy, Swift, the *Royal Sovereign*, one of Napoleon's marshals, and the Heracles of the metope at Olympia. Cyril Connolly's Bowra 'rode high above academic honours' – quite unlike the envious careerist other contributors knew. There is disagreement, too, about his eyes. To Connolly they were *'gli occhi onesti e tardi*, eyes of a platoon commander in the First World War'. Lord Annan remembers them as 'pig's eyes', while for Susan Gardiner it was their 'passion and piercing intensity' that impressed. A passionate pig? Even the story about Bowra and Gide, which one would have imagined was readily verifiable, exists in two versions: the second, also printed here, has it that it was the Vice-Chancellor, not Bowra, who refused to entertain Gide at Oxford, and that Gide was looked after by Bowra and Enid Starkie instead. Far from mattering, the contradictions are proof of Bowra's success. Whatever else may seem obsolete about him, he inspired others to creativity, which is any teacher's most important job.

1975

Viewpoint from the *TLS*

The dislodgement of 'evaluation' has been effected with remarkably little fuss. Only ten or twenty years ago it was still widely held that literary criticism could and should issue in firm 'value judgements' and that these could attain general validity – some were 'right', others 'wrong'. Proponents of the belief invoked the very etymology of the word 'critic' to clinch their case, and took a severe line with those who felt that opinions about literary worth merely reflected personal taste. These doubters were accused of dilettantism, impressionism, belles-lettrism, and other deviations from a rational, progressive approach to literature.

Nowadays almost no one believes in the possibility of objective or 'correct' literary judgements any longer. But before the creed dies out entirely it is worth reminding ourselves how strong it was, what the reasons behind it were, and why they were mistaken. The hope that an advance towards certainty in assessment would make criticism more scientific was, of course, misconceived from the start, for science avoids value judgements altogether. The scientist can tell you that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, but asked which is the better will pronounce the question meaningless. It was not always so. In the Middle Ages, when the universe was arranged on a graduated scale, a scientist would certainly have known whether hydrogen was better than oxygen, supposing the two gases had been discovered, just as he would have known that an eagle was better than a wren. But scientists have outgrown the medieval era, whereas evaluative critics still reside in it.

Their medievalism comes out clearly in some remarks made by T. S. Eliot in 1931. 'We must assume,' Eliot writes, 'if we are to talk about poetry at all, that there is some absolute poetic hierarchy; we keep at the back of our minds the reminder of some end of the world, some final Judgement Day, on which the poets will be assembled in their ranks and orders. In the long run, there is an ultimate greater and less.' Behind all theories of objective literary value there hovers some version of Eliot's