CHAPTER III

PRINCIPLES OF CRITICISM
For the principles of art and criticism Murry went back to the Greeks who, he thought, were the perennial life-giving source for a continuous stream of critics who, soaked in the Grecian springs, made lasting contributions to criticism. The Greeks alone, in his view, were the true critics because their approach to life and their approach to art were the same,¹ because to them life and art were one, and because the standards by which they judged life and art were the same. Any dichotomy was bound to strike a false note in either. A poet must live a good life. Only one who lived a good life could be a good poet. In Plato's *Republic* a man is a good citizen because he lives the good life. The good life and the life of the good citizen are identified. Life is good not with reference to any external end. It must have internal coherence. "The good life is that," defines Murry, "in which man has achieved a harmony of the diverse elements in his soul."² This is fundamental to any understanding of Murry's conception of art and criticism. For Murry repeatedly lays much emphasis on the harmony of the diverse elements in the soul. Harmony in the soul is source of aesthetic expression. This inevitably led him to declare that "the basis and root of poetry is spontaneous utterance of the undivided being."³ Or that "poetry must be the spontaneous utterance of the complete self."⁴ The poet must possess in himself this 'internal coherence', this 'harmony', this necessary 'wholeness' which is a natural product of complete fusion between the good and the beautiful. It is again this profound sense implicit in the word 'soul' in
the wise sentence of Anatole France to which Murry adhered wholeheartedly throughout his career, that "criticism is the confession of the adventures of a man's soul among books." The poetic soul strives "after full communion with the spirit of essential Beauty", and the critic creates "the history of the souls of those men whose writings are thus passionately remembered." This too is the sense implied in that "apprehensive condition of the soul" which determines a writer's "mode of experience and gives unity to his work." It is this special meaning which Murry attaches to the word 'soul' in the famous sentence of Baudelaire: "In certain states of the soul the profound significance of life is revealed completely in the spectacle, however commonplace, that is before one's eyes: it becomes the symbol of this significance." It is this harmony of the soul which gives 'unique universality' to the works of the great master of literature. Murry constantly tries to seek this 'soul-making' element in the works of writers because he knows that beneath the words lies "the soul", as Flaubert said, "which gives the words their being." Murry himself produced the best criticism in periods of perfect harmony in his soul during his struggle in life.

An ideal of the good life must inevitably be aesthetic. We can imagine or conceive it, says Murry, only by our aesthetic intuition. We can express it only in aesthetic terms. The identity between the good and the beautiful is therefore absolute. Complete mingling of the good and the beautiful breeds internal coherence and organic force.
Art, then, is the creative revelation of the ideal in human life. Art is active and organic like the ideal itself. The ideal is actively at work in human life. As the ideal is never achieved, the process of revealing it is creative in the truest sense of the word. The ideal can be discerned by divination or intuition. "The artist," according to Murry, "divines the end at which human life is aiming, he makes men who are his characters completely expressive of themselves, which no actual man ever has been. If he works on a smaller canvas he aims to make himself completely expressive of himself. That, also, is the aim of the greater artist who expresses himself through the medium of a world of characters of his own creation." Moreover, every act of intuition or divination of the ideal must be set in relation to the absolute ideal. In subordinating its particular intuitions to the absolute ideal art is merely exercising its own sovereign autonomy. Art is autonomous, because it comprehends the whole of human life, because it is indicative of a more comprehensive and unchallengeable harmony in the spirit of man. "It does not demand," writes Murry, "impossibilities, that man should be at one with the universe or in tune with the infinite; but it does envisage the highest of all attainable ideals, that man should be at one with himself, obedient to his own most musical law."  

Art, therefore, is obedient to no other law save its own inner law. It is living and organic. It grows from within. Subservient to no outside authority it reveals to us the principle of its own governance. The function of criticism is
merely to apply it. The critic who applies it may not necessarily have the actual aesthetic ideal in life, but he should have at least a vision and a sense of it. Criticism does not demand impossible tasks from the critic. The highest virtue it demands is that he should be, like the artist, at one with himself, the diverse elements in his soul composed. Indeed, the principle of criticism is the same as the principle of artistic creation. It is not a dead and mechanical principle but living and organic. Criticism, in this respect, is creative. The critic is as much engaged in the task of creation as the artist. Reviewing Herbert Read's Reason and Romanticism for Times Literary Supplement in July 1926 Murry wrote: "For criticism that is critical is the expression of a real spiritual energy and the satisfaction of a real spiritual need. It is autonomous. That is not to say merely that criticism is the satisfaction of an individual's need for self-expression, which is obvious enough, but that it is not a secondary and derivative means of self-expression." Therefore it becomes the first duty of the critic to approach a work of art "as a thing in itself"; his second duty is to seek with it "the most intimate and immediate contact." For "a great work of literature does not satisfy the reason as bring it to birth within ourselves. We experience its potency long before we can appreciate the worth and significance of the experience; it works in ways beyond our conscious control." To control it is an error and to make ourselves immune from its 'beneficent operation'. But when a creative contact has been established
it is the manifest duty of the critic "to bring details of
the strange process into the full light of our consciousness." The critic who ignores the poetic experience as an isolated miracle is not merely uncritical, he is not truly alive. To refine his power of discrimination he must refer to the 'finest work of the past', so that he may judge whether a particular piece of work is "the expression of an aesthetic intuition at all." Moreover, the critic, as Murry points out, "will never forget the hierarchy of comprehension, that the active ideal of art is indeed to see life steadily and see it whole, and that only he has a claim to the title of a great artist whose work manifests an incessant growth from a merely personal immediacy to a coherent and all-comprehending attitude to life." This ideal which is actively at work in human life is reflected in all its parts in the work of a great artist. Apprehension of this ideal is absolutely necessary for the artist's comprehension. "As the apprehension of the ideal is more or less perfect, the artist's comprehension will be greater or less." The critic should not be satisfied merely with this. In order to make true evaluation of authors he must "judge between Homer and Shakespeare, between Dante and Milton, between Cézanne and Michelangelo, Beethoven and Mozart." He will also declare that "some are true artists and some are not, and that among true artists some are greater than others." This comparative study, Murry stresses, is most essential in order to avoid the danger generally associated with aesthetic criticism which assumes as an axiom that every
true work of art is unique and incomparable. Such a wrong assumption betrays the unworthiness of such criticism. "The function of true criticism," Murry rightly holds, "is to establish a definite hierarchy among the great artists of the past, as well as to test the production of the present; by the combination of these activities it asserts the organic unity of all art." The true critic must always make a backward and forward reference to great works of art in order to convey the unique value of a work of art.

No proper assessment of literature could, however, be made unless it is approached from the inside because literature is a means of self-expression. The literary artist is a man with more than ordinary sensitiveness. Analysing the psychology of creative writing Murry writes: "Objects and episodes in life, whether the life of every day or of the mind, produce upon him a deeper and more precise impression than they do upon the ordinary man. As these impressions accumulate, unless the artist is one of the most simple, lyrical type, who reacts directly and completely to each separate impression, they to some extent obliterate and to a greater extent reinforce each other. From them all emerges, at least in the case of an artist destined to mature achievement, a coherent emotional nucleus. This is often consolidated by a kind of speculative thought, which differs from the speculative thought of the philosopher by its working from particular to particular. The creative literary artist does not generalise; or rather, his generalization is not abstract. However much he may think,
his attitude to life is predominantly emotional; his thoughts partake much more of the nature of residual emotions, which are symbolized in the objects which aroused them, than of discussing reasoning. Out of the multitude of his vivid perceptions, with their emotional accompaniments, emerges a sense of the quality of life as a whole. It is this sense of, and emphasis upon, a dominant quality pervading the human universe which gives to the work of the great master of literature that unique universality which Matthew Arnold attempted to isolate in his famous criterion of the highest kind of poetry - 'Criticism of life'.

"It is, "Murry goes on, "by virtue of this mysterious accumulation of past emotions that the writer, in his maturity, is able to accomplish the miracle of giving to the particular the weight and force of the universal." That objects and incidents stimulate emotions is not sufficient, they must impress upon him with 'a peculiar weight and significance'. The spectacle unfolded before the eyes must reveal the profound significance of life. Not general judgements about life, as Matthew Arnold gave narrow interpretation to his definition 'Criticism of life', but the profound significance of life that a poet gives utterance to. "The great writer does not come to conclusions about life; he discerns a quality in it." It was this accent on significance of life which led Murry to appreciate in Thomas Hardy's choice of a title for the volume which contained his finest lyrical poetry, Moments of Vision. For similar reasons Murry considered infinitely precious a passage in Wordsworth's
preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. "All good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, has also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connexion with each other, that the understanding of the reader must necessarily be in some degree heightened and his affections strengthened and purified." The same is true of the play or the novel. The plot that the dramatist or the novelist chooses will be one in which the deep significance of life reveals itself in its entirety. "The incident," says Murry, "of historical, actual, or imaginary life will be as it were saturated with the quality of life which the writer discerns; its various parts and characters will be of such a nature that the writer's accumulation of emotional experience will be able to form itself about them, like crystals about a string dipped
into a saturated solution. "Life," Murry explains, "means the universe of the writer's experience; its 'deep significance' is the emotional quality which is the common element in the objects and incidents which have habitually made the most precise and profound impression on his mind, a quality that is in part the creation of the poet himself, but in part also a real attribute of the existing world, which needs the sensitiveness of the creative writer in order to be discerned."  

Murry was convinced that great works of literature must be referred back to a 'peculiar originating emotion'. In the case of the greatest writers the emotion may be infinitely complex, infinitely difficult to define or to describe. To overcome this difficulty Murry recommends the safe old rule that a critic is to be judged by his quotations. Quotations are not only a proof of his good taste but also a safeguard against abstraction and irrelevancy. Where the critic fails to define the essential quality of his author he can show by quotations that he is aware of it. In order to apprehend the unique and essential quality of his author the critic needs to have frequented him until he is imbued with his mode of experience. Until he has moved into the 'creative centre' of a work, he cannot extract its full significance, its essential beauty at the moment of his first external contact. "He is, in fact," remarks Murry, "in a position analogous to that of the great writer himself. He, in search of a plot, looks for an incident that shall be completely congruous to his harmonized experience of life; the critic, in search of
a quotation, looks for one that shall be completely congruous to his harmonized experience of the author's work. He has become - in all but name - a creative artist in miniature himself. He looks for some conjuncture, some incident in the work of a great writer, which was so precisely fitted to his complex mode of experience that it served in the office of a prism, through it the whole spectrum of his emotions is suddenly concentrated into a ray of intense, pure light - the perfect condensation of a whole universe of experience into a dozen lines, or a hundred words."  

Murry was also convinced that the writer projected his personal emotion into the created thing. The emotion of art is personal. Contrary to T.S. Eliot who advised the writer to eschew personal emotions, Murry observed that "it is impossible to be an impersonal artist in literature, if you are an artist at all ... Real impersonality is only achieved by the writers of diplomatic dispatches and leading articles in newspapers." Even the French realists and the French Parnassians, in spite of their heroic efforts to suppress their personality, could not help expressing it. But to keep one's personality in the background is another thing. It is a 'splendid discipline' which the writer of genius should cultivate. It has several advantages. "It not only saves him from some of the dangers of sentimentality; it enables him to express himself more wholly; it steadies and it frees him, it helps him to explore his own resources and his powers."
The function of criticism therefore is primarily the function of literature itself. It provides a means of self-expression for the critic. The critic must be a creative artist in his criticism. "The first part of his work," points out Murry, "is to convey the effect, the whole intellectual and emotional impression made by the work he is criticizing: without this foundation his criticism will be jejune and insubstantial. In this respect his task is strictly analogous to that of the creative writer. Instead of trying to communicate the emotions liberated in him by a primrose, or life as one mysterious whole, he is trying to recreate in his reader the peculiar emotion aroused in him by a work of literature. He has other things to do besides this, and to do at the same time; but if he is successful in this primary task, it will follow necessarily that the general terms he may use to elucidate his impressions will have a particular colour and quality, if not a definite sense, given to them. If, for example, a critic has been successful in communicating a sense of the majestical, symphonic effect of Milton's Areopagitica, and he goes on to talk of its style, he will hardly need to define the meaning of the word. He has already given it a fuller content than any definition can convey." Criticism is a record of all the impressions and reactions produced by a literary work on the mind of the critic. The critic has to express himself by expressing his opinion on a given work of literature. He has to draw conclusions on the subject-matter, promulgate and propagate them. He succeeds or fails
by the closer or more remote approximation of his views to 
the common experience of the human race. He should therefore 
make sure that his opinion is his true opinion. He should 
safeguard himself against accidental and temporary distur­
bances of his sensibility, momentary enthusiasms and passing 
disgusts. To free himself from these pitfalls, he needs a 
system of principles. In this connection Murry quoted from 
Remy de Gourmont's Le Problème du Style (1902): "The whole 
effort of a sincere man was to erect his personal impressions 
into laws." The stress falls more upon the law-making than 
upon the personal basis of the impressions. Personal impre­
ssions must be based on a sound system of rules. "But it must 
be," asserts Murry, "his own law, his own system, refined by 
his own effort out of his own experience." Even though he 
submitted to the precept of Anatole France that criticism is 
the adventures of a man's soul among books, Murry was never 
for a rudderless criticism. Though he regarded criticism 'an 
intensely personal affair', his whole endeavour was to set forth 
a system of laws, refined out of his constant reactions. He 
said: "Every honest critic - and by an honest critic I mean a 
man who builds his schemes and classifications solely on the 
basis of his own reactions - makes a great cross-section of the 
universe of literature in accordance with his temperament."

This was essential to meet the common charge made against 
aesthetic criticism that it led the critic astray from truth, 
that it presented criticism in a fanciful garb, or that it 
became capricious and very often unprincipled. Murry was
never content to merely register his impressions. He always made an effort to stabilise them in the shape of laws. "The critic, "he remarked, "stands or falls by the stability of his truth, and necessarily by his skill in communicating his truth." In this he was inspired by Dr. Johnson who said: "Nothing can please many or please long, but just representation of human nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can repose only on the stability of truth." That seems an ideal measure of judgement. Of course the critic has to be interesting to his readers but in exactly the same manner as every writer has to be interesting to his readers. The critic who embraces the view that he has to communicate 'gusto' to the readers will surely recede into oblivion. It is with the critic as it is with the poet that he should convey to his readers the essential truth in terms of his aesthetic intuition. "The necessary condition of creative criticism," emphasises Murry, "is to behold, and to be lost to self in contemplation of, the beauty that is truth, the truth that is beauty, in the living whole we study. It may not, it cannot, be all the truth, all the beauty, of that which we seek to comprehend: indeed, to comprehend all the truth, all the beauty, of any manifestation, would be to comprehend all things, and God who is All and in All."
It also becomes the binding duty of the responsible critic not to misrepresent those with whom he disagrees.\textsuperscript{41} Whether he likes it or not, it is his duty to see a work of art "as what it is, and not as something quite different."\textsuperscript{42}

Though literature is art and cannot have a moral purpose, yet great literature, Murry believed, "happens to be a great deal more than art, it is art used for the presentation of the deepest issues of human life."\textsuperscript{43} Murry's concern has always been that of a moralist. For him art and morality are one. "The vital centre of our ethics is also the vital centre of our art... The values of literature, the standards by which it must be criticised, and the scheme according to which it must be arranged, are in the last resort moral."\textsuperscript{44} He further wrote that "a work of literature, if it is to last, must have morality, simply because morality means significance, the power to engage the highest attention of man with feelings and thoughts derived from the faithful contemplation of human life."\textsuperscript{45} The critic, therefore, must exercise moral judgement. Murry draws a distinction between the 'scientists of art (Hegel and Croce) and the 'philosophic critic' (Coleridge, Arnold, Bradley). He himself belongs to the second class whose subject of inquiry is 'value' not 'existence'. The philosophic critic is concerned not with facts but with ranking intuitions in their right order. The critic, says Murry, "is not the mere investigator of facts; existence is never for him synonymous with value. He may accept from Croce the thesis that art is the expression of intuitions, but he will
not be extravagantly grateful, because his duty as a critic is to distinguish between intuitions and to decide that one is more significant than another. To elucidate the significance of the work is his main concern. Significance can vary from work to work. A literary work may possess historical, ethical, or aesthetic significance. A critic has a natural inclination towards one of these kinds of significance. He may be a historian like Saint-Beuve, a moralist like Matthew Arnold, or a technician like Dr. Bridges. A perfect critic may combine all these inclinations, but perfect critics, Murry thinks, are as rare as perfect writers. Indeed Murry repudiates the very notion of the perfect critic. "The perfect critic does not exist, and never has existed; critics succeed sometimes and fail at others; the best of them fail more often than they succeed." At the most the critic can try to correct his predilection by training his appreciation of other kinds.

Rules are, after all, for the guidance of the critic. Their application, however you will, can never yield all the richness and loveliness of a piece of writing. "Creative literature," says Murry, "of the highest kind is not amenable to logical analysis." But all true criticism should naturally aspire to one thing: "to understand that we may love, and love that we may understand." Love is the response awakened by beauty in the total being of man. And nothing could be true unless it could be loved. Understanding evokes love, and love promotes understanding. That is an ideal pursuit of criticism.