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The Mode of Existence of the Criticism  
of Literature: An Argument

*I - CAY DOLLERUP*

AS my title is intended to suggest I have one eye, perhaps both eyes, on René Wellek. In the crucial Chapter Twelve of Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* the work of art is defined by Wellek as 'a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective. They must be assumed to exist in a collective ideology, changing with it, accessible only through individual mental experiences based on the sound structure of its sentences.'

Wellek admits that the literary work of art is not identical with any individual experience of it. It is nevertheless obvious from the frequent use of such terms as 'incorrect', 'false' and 'bad' that he believes some people's experience and interpretation of a poem are more correct and valuable than those of others. In the same way, I. A. Richards says that the right kind of reader will have some kind of standard experience (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 226-27).

The assumption that there exists some kind of superior experience of a poem, an 'ideal reception' which *per se* characterises the literary work of art intersubjectively is widespread. This assumption, however, often forces a critic to assert or imply that his experience (response) is *a priori* 'correct', i.e: his interpretation will be intersubjective because of his specialised education or his

cultivated taste (see, e.g. Rodway and Lee, 'Coming to Terms', *Essays in Criticism*, April 1964; Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, p. 135; I. A. Richards, *Principles*, p. 37); or because of his greater maturity (C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, pp. 1-39); or because of some 'supersensitivity' that is often attributed to both the critic and that ubiquitous phantom, 'the sensitive reader', who so admirably agrees with the writer of criticism.

These individual claims to be 'objective', in so far as one's experience is free from any idiosyncratic features, appear to be related to the fact that 'as we experience in ...// 421 ... art something sacred it automatically leads many people to consider art as a crystallisation of absolute objective values' (Honkavaara, *On the Psychology of Artistic Enjoyment*, pp. 152-57; also Kris, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, pp. 254-56). Basically this means that what intersubjectively entitles a work of art to be considered such is that it is *subjectively* felt to be one. This attitude understandably tends to be unpopular among critics, who feel that this challenges their special right to interpret a work of art, and they tend to dismiss this attitude as pure and undiluted anarchy (e.g. Wellek and Warren, op. et loc. cit.).

Can any student of literature, however, seriously suggest that the reaction and evaluation, and hence the response, of even the 'best' critic may not be determined by idiosyncratic factors such as his 'parole' (in Saussure's sense) or his imagery? Being at 'a low ebb' of neural potency (Richards, *Principles*, p. 204), or having a headache (Frye, op. cit., p. 134) do not apparently prevent the critic from exerting his 'superior' judgment. Is it not relevant that I. A. Richards (see his *Practical Criticism*) should have found serious differences between the responses of readers of whom 'the majority were undergraduates reading English with a view to an Honours Degree'? Does anybody believe that the students involved in the experiment went forth into the world, once Richards had exposed their errors, purified and rendered infallible - or that you or I are so much better than they were?

All literary works are, of course, linguistic entities. And we know that language is the best means of intersubjective communication we have. A sentence is relatively rarely misunderstood in everyday speech. Even though each of us may be in a particular social situation which differs more or less imperceptibly from that of others, we generally 'know what we are talking about'.

Why, then, should anybody at times 'misunderstand' a work of literature (=have a 'response'<sup>1</sup> that is not intersubjective). (The protocols used by I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* and Gunnar Hansson's *Dikten och Läsaren* provide good examples of such 'misunderstandings'.) Well, in everyday life the linguistic message is usually fairly short ...// 422 ...and simple. It also refers to things that are well known to both the speaker and the listener, and if any misunderstanding should arise it can be immediately and effectively corrected.

The work of literature, on the other hand, is a complex and many-faceted linguistic entity, though it admittedly conforms to certain more-or-less well-defined rules and laws. To put it the other way round, in our re-creation or experience of it we meet with an aesthetic reality which has some relationship to the world of everyday life, but is definitely not the same.

The three factors which make language an intersubjective means of communication in everyday life are thus weakened considerably in the aesthetic experience : the 'message' is complex, the intersubjective control, which is generally represented by the actual presence of both speaker and listener, is not at work, and finally the work of literature refers to or presents us with a reality, many elements of which are new and hitherto unknown to us. It is inevitable that we should relate these elements to things that are well known to us, and here - in the critic and in the ordinary reader alike - the reader's intelligence, knowledge, personality and attitudes come into play.

Psychologists use single words for determining personal associations - and experiments have been made on the total effect of single words (see A. Chandler, *Beauty and Human Nature*) which show interesting personal interventions. Unfortunately, it is not easy to determine how far similar things happen in the spoken sentence : whether it is fully intended or understood by only one of the participants : whether it is only meaningful to either the speaker or the listener and so definitely not intersubjective. The 'parole' may thus not only characterise our own style, but also our way of understanding what others say, no matter how imperceptible this is the case in everyday communication. It is taken for granted by criticism that every author has his own more or less pronounced style - a use of his 'parole' which is represented in his literary work and is influenced by personal factors like his reading, experience, etc. There is, however, no reason for believing that this is not also the critic.

Here, in fact, is the crux in Wellek's definition. Criticism, as it is practised today, has nothing to do with a 'collective ideology'. It is an affair between one critic whose response can only be *his*, and the reader of this particular protocol who has also formed a personal opinion of the work of literature in question. This means that 'the norms and ideal concepts', however tempting it is to believe in them, and however ingenious they seem, are irrelevant to what criticism is.

So far I have been speaking only of academic criticism written for a more or less learned audience. But there is also the criticism that appears in newspaper reviews, etc. What is significant in this type of criticism, and hence what its performers believe will be intersubjective is a perfunctory description of the work under review. This differs widely from what is of interest to the learned reading public. It is inconceivable that any audience or group of readers of a work of criticism can be so homogeneous that there will be complete agreement as to what is intersubjective. What A considers nonsensical seems brilliant to B or C.

There is thus a shading off between the two extremes: at one extreme there is something which can be discussed with any other human being, at the other something which is completely idiosyncratic. And criticism must acknowledge the existence and the influence of both extremes. Is this conclusion really absurd, as Wellek maintains? It is the only one surely which tallies with what we find in practice.

The impact of a single item of criticism is probably greatest on the reader who has no formulated opinion about the literary work(s) in question. In a thesis based on the same system of readers' protocols as I. A. Richards' *Practical Criticism* (Gunnar Hansson's *Dikten och Läsaran*, with an English summary), the author tried to affect his subjects' written responses. 'Attempts to influence the readers' experiences of the poems by means of reviews, analyses, and group discussions gave rather limited results. Most of the readers could add details and nuances to their experiences but more radical changes were rather few and not always for the better.' (Mr. Hansson then goes on to sum up four tendencies.) ...// 425//... There is little reason to assume that a work of criticism can correct us fundamentally, deepen our understanding, clarify our ideas, or make a work of literature more meaningful. An individual reader may, in fact, be perfectly happy with his own idiosyncratic and totally non-intersubjective interpretation of a work of art. The reader of criticism may find that a critical piece makes his *response* to a work of art more meaningful in relation to the response of somebody else. Criticism is an opinion upon the whole, or any facet of, the work of art; but the degree of agreement so far reached about this or that work of art hardly justifies an appeal to intersubjective norms and ideal concepts existing in an undefined collective ideology.

If a collective ideology is irrelevant to criticism it follows that the work of art we speak about in criticism is the one we experience individually. The response, critic or no critic, is idiosyncratic. The critic is wrong to speak of the author as a person fully cognizant of all the elements and factors that have influenced him and 'fused' in the making of a work of literature. This would presuppose a critic who has found these elements and factors because he has 'ideal reception'. In fact, he can only guess, or believe, or try to show that it is so; but he cannot say his findings are objective. We cannot be certain that Swift consciously exerted his literary skill to make us believe that a certain Gulliver met pigmies called Lilliputians. You and I can, at best, say that such and such passages made us believe he did - or you and I can dismiss the book as being silly. The evaluation, the acceptance, or the rejection of any and every work of art is individual to the reader. It is not inherent in the work. Terms implying some 'psychological characteristic' in the work should not be ascribed to the author (as 'Tone' is by Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Fiction*), but to our personal re-creation of the events. There are variations from reader to reader, and with the same reader at

different times.

The function of criticism is to record an individual opinion of a work of art. Criticism has fulfilled this function, more or less, up to the present day. .. // 426 ... And I fail to see why this is not sufficient for criticism to claim to be a worthwhile pursuit. On the other hand, the epistemological approach to criticism accepted by many new critics who believe that 'close reading' makes criticism an exact discipline opens it up to ridicule.

No critic worth his salt must close his eyes to the fact that his interpretation and evaluation cannot be 'ideal', unquestionably right, the only true ones, no matter how he has arrived at his conclusions. In particular, he cannot be certain that he has got closer than anybody else to an intersubjective collective ideology, which - if it exists at all - because of its inassessable and indeterminable nature is at least irrelevant to present-day criticism?

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NOTES

'For the sake of clarity I distinguish between the final reaction to a work of art, which is the end-result, whether determinable or not, of our confrontation with the work of art, and the response, which is any part of the reaction that is gaugeable by present-day methods.

2 I am grateful to Nordisk Kulturfond whose grant to the investigation *Attempt Objectively to Determine the 'Intensity' of Short Stories* prompted the above considerations.



*II - F. W. BATESON*

Cay Dollerup's scepticism is pleasantly refreshing. Almost he persuades me to

sell *Essays in Criticism* to the first fool who will bid for it and spend my declining years in adventures among the masterpieces. But a problem then immediately presents itself. If criticism is such a bogus activity, and no doubt it often is, how shall I know which the masterpieces *are - for me?* Supposing as a more or less loyal son of Oxford I begin with the Newdigate Prize Poems (the annual event founded by the prosaic Sir Roger Newdigate, who represented the University in the House of Commons for thirty years)? The prize was founded in 1805, and in due course it was won by Ruskin (1839), Matthew Arnold (1843), Oscar Wilde (1878) and several other more or less eminent Victorians. ...// 427 ...But only one nineteenth-century Newdigate is *remembered* today - John William Burgon's *Petra* (1845); and even *Petra* survives on the strength of one line only:

A rose-red city-half as old as Time !

It is not a line that I would go to the stake in defence of, but in its derivative way it seems to me not without merit.' What are the chances at any rate of my finding a line that I would respond to individually in *any* of those old Newdigate Prize Poems with *more* enthusiasm? I have read the whole of *Petra*, and this is certainly, for me, the best line in that far from inspired work. I have also read Arnold's *Cromwell* - *with* no enthusiasm at all. And I have skimmed without reward several other mid-century Newdigates.

At what date Burgon's one line of poetry detached itself from the rest of *Petra* I have not been able to discover. A contemporary review in the *Athenaeum*, 12 July 1845, says of the poem that it 'seldom falls below the average standard [of prize poems], and occasionally rises above it', quoting in support of this tepid praise the passage that includes the 'rose-red city' line. Burgon's own preface to his collected *Poems (1840 to 1878)* of 1885 candidly confesses that there are not fifty lines in the entire collection which he really read with any satisfaction, and posterity has confirmed his general disillusionment. It is true his name has appeared in all the standard dictionaries of quotations from 1923 on (but not before), but it is always to repeat, more or less accurately, this one line from *Petra*.

Some such degree of critical consensus is surely *a fact*: in denying it Dollerup is closing his eyes to the evidence of common experience. Let me wind up the Burgon story with two personal confirmations of the consensus. One also relates to the Newdigate Prize Poem, of which I found myself some years ago the examiner with Catherine Ing and W. H. Auden, then the Professor of Poetry. Mrs. Ing and I were in agreement that one poem was much the best, by Newdigate standards, and we eventually persuaded Auden to agree with us. ...// 428 ... And so the prize went that year to Jon Stallworthy, who has since demonstrated himself a Yeats expert and a competent minor poet. His six or seven rivals for the

Prize, as far as I know, have never been heard of again. My second item of autobiography concerns a minor eighteenth-century poem, James Bramston's *The Art of Politics (1729)*. As a young man I came across the first edition by accident in the Bodleian and in the enthusiasm of youth I transcribed into my note-book what I thought its best passage. A few years later David Nichol Smith brought out his *Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse (1926)*, and there I found exactly the same passage, no more and no less, that I had been pleased by. The young man and the old man had thought as one !

I agree, however, with Dollerup that Wellek's definition of the work of literature is not altogether satisfactory. It will be advisable to quote the whole passage in *Theory of Literature* :

The work of art, then, appears as an object of knowledge *sui generis* which has a special ontological status. It is neither real (like a statue) nor mental (like the experience of light or pain) nor ideal (like a triangle). It is a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective. They must be assumed to exist in collective ideology, changing with it, accessible only through individual mental experiences, based on the sound-structure of its sentences.

Dollerup omits the first two sentences of Wellek's definition - perhaps because they are irrelevant to his argument, perhaps because he finds them, as I do too, more than a little difficult to understand. I have always been tempted to interpret the 'special ontological status' as in effect a synonym for 'aesthetic', in the sense in which the term was elaborated by German Romanticism. I suspect that the clause 'neither real (like a statue)' should really read 'neither a physical object (like a rock)'. To exclude statues from being works of art is obvious nonsense. Again the denial that a work of art is 'mental' and 'ideal' seems to be contradicted by the terms 'mental experiences' and 'ideal concepts' in the definition that follows. ...// 429 ...

But if Wellek has expressed himself rather clumsily what he is getting at is in general clear enough. It is the 'norms' - on which I remember arguing privately with Wellek himself one summer morning in the garden of Linton Lodge Hotel in North Oxford - that are the crux of the whole definition, and a proper understanding of their implications may help to allay Dollerup's scepticism. As Dollerup recognises, 'normal' speech, with its various conventions of communication and its various devices to prevent misunderstanding, is the proper point of theoretical departure. (In *ending* his definition with 'the sound-structure of its sentences' Wellek was really putting the cart before the horse.)

In what respect or respects, then, does literature, considered as 'memorable words' (or even 'the best words in the best order'), appeal to norms different from those of everyday speech? Dollerup tells us that in such speech (i) 'the linguistic message is *usually fairly* short and simple' (my italics), (ii) 'refers to things that

are wellknown' [*how well?*] 'to both the speaker and the listener', (iii) 'if any misunderstanding should ' arise it can be immediately and effectively corrected' (my italics again). In other words, literature differs from language in degree and not in kind. These are certainly differences of some substance, but they are not necessary differences. Some speakers are content with short and simple sentences, which refer to familiar matters, and they are careful to ensure that they are not misunderstood; others, on the other hand, prefer to use a mode of speech that is, as Dollerup describes literature, 'a complex and many-faceted linguistic entity'. They may be in the minority, but a long extempore prayer, or sermon, or legal or political argument is still unquestionably speech. And 'the actual presence of both speaker and listener' provides no guarantee at all that misunderstandings will not occur. In general, indeed, a misunderstanding of the written word is less likely than one of the spoken word, as society has recognised by insisting on transferences of property and similar transactions being in writing and being *signed* by both parties in the presence of witnesses. ...// 430 ...

In other words, what we ordinarily think of as language (Saussure's *parole*) and what we ordinarily think of as literature both presuppose an intersubjective relationship. When A asks the way in an English-speaking town which he does not know and B, a stranger, instructs him to take the first turning on the left, the meaning of the interchange is approximately identical. The fact that *left* can have other meanings in English and other associations, e.g. political, for A and B does not impede a successful linguistic communication because the other meanings and possible associations are not relevant in this linguistic context (*parole* again). And in literature context controls textual meaning in exactly the same way. This is not to deny that there are occasional failures of communication, or that some speakers and writers are more lucid, more persuasive, more memorable than others - just as there are 'good listeners' and unusually competent readers. But without an intersubjective relationship and the controls against misuse provided by the relevant context there could be no possibility either of language or of literature.

These considerations may seem self-evident and even trite. Wellek reduces them in his definition to the concept of a 'collective ideology'. What he has failed to do is to relate the concept of human gregariousness to the 'norms' of criticism. When I say that *Hamlet* is better than *Titus Andronicus* - or even that Burgon's one famous line is better than all the earlier Newdigate Prize Poems put together - what is the authority to which I am appealing? If Dollerup is right, there can, of course, be no justification for such critical confidence. Wellek too seems to reduce the concept of aesthetic normality to one of 'correctness' (correct literary behaviour). To what, then, are we to appeal against them? 'Tradition'? Or some even vaguer authenticating abstraction such as 'culture' or 'civilisation'?

I prefer to invoke two of the tools of the critical trade. When I wrote, at break-



neck speed, my critical primer *English Poetry: a Critical Introduction* some twenty years ago I devoted several pages to what I called the Principle of the Semantic Gap. ...// 431 ... Although I did not utilise it then, I might have quoted in support of the concept Johnson's generalisation about similes from the life of Addison in *The Lives of the Poets*: 'A simile may be compared to lines converging at a point, and is more excellent as the lines approach from greater distance'. Johnson's dictum has the advantage - which I presume to have been unintentional of illustrating itself : the nature of a simile, an artistic device of style, is exemplified by a simile from the alien science of geometry.

Why, then, did Johnson deplore Donne's 'comparison of a man that travels and his wife that stays at home with a pair of compasses' (a simile in which 'it may be doubted whether absurdity or ingenuity has the better claim') in the life of Cowley? The answer that he gives there is that such conceits are 'a voluntary deviation from nature'; and with the word 'nature' (human realities) he introduces an essential limitation on the Principle of the Semantic Gap. The gap must be wide but not too wide; the distance from which the lines converge should be great but it must not be intolerably prolonged. It is in the reconciliation of the two ideals that criticism finds its most useful function. Because critical judgments are useful, a measure of disagreement can be tolerated in their application. One reader is not identical with another and 'collective ideologies' change from continent to continent and from century to century. If we find nothing objectionable in the 'compasses' (which we should, I suppose, call 'dividers') in the 'Valediction forbidding Mourning', it is because a more democratic society has modified our concept of literary decorum.

May I offer Dollerup a specific challenge? I am going to propose a familiar modern poem which I think overrated, and I hope to be able to use the two devices of the Semantic Gap and the Human Context to convince him that I am right. The poem is A. E. Housman's 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries' :

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled, Followed their mercenary  
calling,  
And took their wages and are dead.  
Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay; What God abandoned,  
these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.  
... // 432 ....

When as a callow Oxford undergraduate I deserted the Classics for English I was told *by my* English tutor at my second or third tutorial that Housman's 'Epitaph' had served him as a 'touchstone', in Arnold's sense, which enabled him to distinguish between what was good and what was less good in modern poetry.

And he recommended this infallible test to me. I was not convinced at the time, and I am even less impressed by the poem today. But can my distaste be communicated effectively to other readers? For Dollerup it is *a priori* impossible. He knows what he likes and the rest of us know what we like - and never the twain shall meet ! If he will agree to waive his theoretical prejudice for a few minutes, I think I *may* be able to persuade him that there are valid intersubjective defects in the poem which at least detract substantially from its aesthetic pretensions. (Of course, it has *some* merit.)

A Semantic Gap certainly exists. Between Kaiser Wilhelm II's dismissal of the British Expeditionary Force of 1914 as contemptible mercenaries and the cosmic powers of salvation attributed to them by Housman the gap could hardly be wider. Unfortunately one side of the gap is distressingly literary. Did the sky fall on 4 August 1914? And is not the 'hour' of 1.2 simply an elegant variation on the 'day' of 1.1? The Professor of Latin at Cambridge is also too prominent in the second verse. It was Atlas who first 'held the sky suspended', and 1.7 had been better put by Lucan (whom Housman edited) :

*Victrix causa deis placuit, sed victa Catoni.*

Finally, the sum of things clearly derives from Lucretius's *summa rerum* (for whom, however, it had a more prosaic meaning).

My critical objection, however, to the Shelleyan poetic diction of the first verse and the classical matter in the second is not so much that they are literary as that they are literary *commonplaces*, second-hand and tawdry. Their function in fact turns out to be merely to set off the one good line in the poem :

Followed their mercenary calling ... //433 ...

But to me - and surely to others too - it is the Human Context that is particularly distressing, reducing Housman's Semantic Gap here to empty rhetoric. This 'Epitaph' is presumably intended to recall the most famous of all epitaphs - that by Simonides on the Spartans at Thermopylae, of which the most successful English translation is still the anonymous eighteenth-century version :

Go, tell the Spartans, thou who passest by, That here obedient to  
their laws we lie.

But Leonidas and his heroic three hundred were killed to a man in the attempt to halt the whole Persian army at the pass of Thermopylae; the B.E.F. suffered severe casualties but a large proportion survived to make merry after the war as the Old Contemptibles. And the claims that Housman makes for their super-human gallantry at Mons, the Marne and the Aisne are simply not true. The French played a far more important part in 1914 in halting the German invasion.

Housman's jingoistic exclusion of the Germans as well as the French from our miraculous heroic virtue compares unfavourably with the 'laconic' dignity of Simonides, who does not even mention the Persians. Housman is indulging here in what used to be called 'Home Front' patriotism, a feature of World War I that those on leave from the trenches found particularly nauseating.

Dollerup will no doubt object that it is easier to demonstrate that a work of literature has intersubjective defects/errors of taste that almost every reader will deplore with more or less emphasis. But if a negative criticism is more immediately and more generally communicable than a positive appreciation, this is a general defect in human nature which does nothing to discredit the critical act *per se*. *Judex damnatur si nocens absolvitur* is the mirror-image of *judex laudatur si innocens absolvitur*. And the defect is to be cured by more criticism, not by less.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>C. J. Rawson reports in *T.L.S.* 21 May 1964, that 'half as old as Time' occurs in the satirical *Heroic Epistle to Burke* (1791); 'rose-red', a variant of earlier 'rosy-red' and its equivalents, is used by Tennyson in his 'Elednore', 1. 133 (in the 1833 *Poems*).



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