

*A History of
Modern Criticism
1750–1950*

RENÉ WELLEK

VOLUME 3
THE AGE OF
TRANSITION

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By

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PREFACE TO VOLUMES 3 AND 4

THE THIRD and fourth volumes of this *History of Modern Criticism* have turned out much longer and have taken much more time than I originally thought possible. The incredible bulk of critical writing in the 19th century, the pattern of documentation established and imposed by the first two volumes, the long temporal span of these next two, and the need of expansion to two new countries, the United States and Russia, are, I trust, sufficient explanations for the delay in the execution and the size of the volumes. I postpone consideration of Spain, as Spanish criticism before the so-called generation of '98 seems largely a reflection of French and German developments. A backward glance at the 19th century in Volume 5 will, I trust, suffice.

Still, something should be said in definition of the aim, theme, and method of the work, which in part reasserts the Preface of the first volume and in part takes some account of the objections raised against it. I am mainly concerned with tracing the history of literary theory, i.e. poetics of all imaginative writing, whether in verse or prose. I try to keep a middle course between general aesthetics on the one extreme and literary history and mere literary opinion on the other. I am convinced that literary theory cannot be divorced from aesthetics and from practical criticism in the sense of judgment and analysis of single works of art. The attempts made, e.g. by Northrop Frye in the "Polemical Introduction" to his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to divorce theory (which he calls criticism) from the history of taste and to argue that "the study of literature can never be founded on value-judgments" (p. 20) are surely doomed to failure. Literary theories, principles, criteria cannot be arrived at *in vacuo*: every critic in history has developed his theory in contact with concrete works of art which he had to select, interpret, analyze, and, after all, judge. The literary opinions, rankings, and judgments of a critic are buttressed, confirmed,

and developed by his theories, and theories are drawn from and supported, illustrated, made concrete, and plausible by an inspection of works of art. The subject forms a totality from which we cannot abstract single strands without serious damage to its understanding and meaning.

There may be some doubt whether I have always preserved the right proportions of aesthetics, theory, literary history, and practical criticism but this, I believe, is not a theoretical question that can be settled *a priori* but an empirical decision that has to be made case by case. As long as I keep my general object steadily in mind, I must judge how much of general aesthetics, literary history, and the history of taste enters the argument. I am convinced that these subjects will enter differently in different ages, countries, and contexts. Thus in the 19th century more attention must be given to literary historiography than in earlier times; and in the later 19th century less attention may be devoted to abstract aesthetics than was necessary when discussing the early part of the century.

An author has the right to define for himself the nature and scope of his book. I cannot see that the divorce between theory and practical criticism is possible, nor did I want to write the kind of book Saintsbury provided when he deliberately rejected interest in theory and aesthetics. Nor can I be convinced by the objection that "criticism" does not constitute a unified subject at all. Erich Auerbach has argued in *Romanische Forschungen*, 62 (1956), 387-97, that literary criticism is not a unified subject because of the number of possible problems and crossings of problems, the extreme diversity of its presuppositions, aims, and accents. But this diversity (still aimed at a single subject—literature) is precisely the topic of the book: one of its basic motifs is the sorting out of the different emphases, approaches, methods, concerns, and interests. But these discriminations, judgments, and rankings do not require an Alexandrian eclecticism, an anarchical relativism; nor can they, on the other hand, imply a denial of a spirit of tolerance, of historical empathy, and of scrupulous accuracy. Complete relativism, as advocated by some scholars, leads to skepticism and finally to a paralysis of judgment: to a surrender of the very reasons for the existence of criticism. I keep, and want to keep, a point of view and am convinced of the truths of several

doctrines and the error of others, though I know that some doctrines may be acceptable with careful reservations, in special contexts. But this core of convictions (expounded elsewhere, in *Theory of Literature* and in many scattered writings now collected as *Concepts of Criticism*) is, I hope, never obtruded or imposed as a fixed, preconceived pattern. It is to emerge from the history, just as the history itself, in its turn, can be understood only with a net of questions and answers in mind. Neither relativism nor absolutism is my guiding standard, but a "perspectivism" that tries to see the object from all possible sides and is convinced that there is an object: the elephant in spite of all the diverse opinions of the blind men. How can the claim be justified that I or any other historian is not another of the blind men—seizing the trunk, the tusk, the tail, or the foot of the elephant alone? The only answer is precisely that which grows out of history itself: a body of doctrines and insights, judgments and theories which are the accumulated wisdom of mankind. Thus, I hope, the book does not simply leave its reader floundering among a welter of opinions, nor does it look down at history as a series of failures, as doomed attempts to scramble to the heights of our present-day glories. On the contrary, this book is written with the conviction that history and theory explain each other, that there is a profound unity of fact and idea, past and present.

Such a book could not have been written without the encouragement and help of institutions and friends. I owe a heavy debt of gratitude to the Guggenheim Foundation, which made possible an instructive trip to Europe in 1957, and to the American Council of Learned Societies and the Fulbright Commission, which allowed me to spend a year (1959–60) mainly in Italy and England. The Rockefeller and the Bollingen Foundations have allowed me to take another leave of absence from academic duties in 1963–64. Friends have read parts of the manuscript and made valuable suggestions. I in particular recall gratefully Edith Kern, Lowry Nelson, Jr., Stephen G. Nichols, Jr., Blanche A. Price, Mr. and Mrs. R. W. Riddle, Nonna D. Shaw, Alexander Welsh, and William K. Wimsatt. Nils Sahlin helped with the proofs. David Horne has been a careful editor. It seems not the habit nowadays to acknowledge the simple fact that such a book would be impossible without liberal access to great libraries. The Yale University Li-

brary comes first on my list, but in Europe I used the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, the Alessandrina in Rome, the British Museum in London, the Bodleian and the Library of the Taylorian Institute at Oxford. They all deserve thanks for their hospitality.

R. W.

New Haven, Connecticut
June 1964

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUMES 3 AND 4

THIRTY OR FORTY years ago the later 19th century would have inevitably appeared as the golden age of criticism. This was true especially in France; the reputation of Sainte-Beuve and Taine stood high, higher than that of any other critics in the whole history of literature whose reputations were established almost entirely by criticism. But in other countries also, criticism became a central preoccupation, a favored genre, and the critic a great public and national figure: Belinsky in Russia, De Sanctis in Italy, Brandes in Denmark, Menéndez y Pelayo in Spain, Matthew Arnold in England. Significantly, only Germany and the United States appeared to have lacked comparable figures, though in retrospect Henry James seems a great critic indeed, and Heine, Nietzsche, and Dilthey can hardly be overlooked as critics, though their reputations were established on different grounds.

The enormous public role of criticism in the century was supported and paralleled by an unprecedented development of the study and discussion of literature in general. The number of critics reflects the number of literary magazines and manifestos, and the growth of academic concern for literature. The role of the *Edinburgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review*, and *Blackwood's Magazine* in the early decades of the 19th century is matched by that of the *Fortnightly Review* or the *Saturday Review* in later years. In France hardly anything can compare with the role of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, in Italy with that of the *Nuova antologia*, in the United States with that of the *North American Review*, in Germany with that of the *Grenzboten* and *Preussische Jahrbücher*, and in Russia with that of *Sovremennik* and *Otechestvennyye Zapiski*. Monographs have been written and many more could be written about the role of the large 19th-century reviews in molding public opinion and particularly in determining literary taste and discussing literary ideas.

The role of the universities was hardly less important. The French speak of a "*critique universitaire*" which had its beginnings in the eloquent courses given to large audiences at the Sorbonne soon after the Restoration by Abel François Villemain. Brunetière was a professor at the École Normale for many years. Even Sainte-Beuve and Taine appeared on academic rostrums. Matthew Arnold was Professor of Poetry at Oxford for ten years. De Sanctis became Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Naples in 1870, and Carducci was a professor at Bologna for more than four decades. In Germany much serious literary study passed into the hands of university teachers: Nietzsche was in his youth Professor of Classics at Basel; Dilthey was Professor of Philosophy all through his long adult life (from 1866 to 1911). In the United States only Lowell was a critic with academic associations, while in Russia criticism remained largely in the hands of journalists and free-lance writers.

Academic literary study was not, of course, necessarily critical. In general it rather encouraged the development of literary history. The expansion of literary history into practically all ages and nations is largely the work of the 19th century. Literary historiography was founded in the 18th century as a subject, but it floundered then between the brilliant speculations of a Herder and the laborious, antiquarian compilations of a Tiraboschi or a Thomas Warton. Narrative literary history did not exist before the romantic movement. The Schlegels were the first modern literary historians, and in their wake Sismondi, Fauriel, Ampère, and Villemain created French literary historiography. At first Italy and England, which had no successor to Warton, lagged strangely behind. Still, the seeds sown in the early decades sprouted much later in the great works of Gervinus and Hettner, Taine and Brunetière, De Sanctis and Brandes, and their innumerable followers. Literary history supplied criticism with a new, unlimited mass of materials and problems—a challenge that proved by its very enormity paralyzing.

Nobody can deny the incredible bulk of the criticism of the time, or the expansion of its claims, the proliferation of its methods and materials, the increase of its prestige. But from a present-day point of view we might arrive at a more sober and less favorable judgment of the achievements of criticism proper during the

seventy years under consideration. One could even argue that the second half of the 19th century constitutes in some respects a decline or even an aberration in the history of criticism.

If we consider the central task of criticism to be the definition and description of the nature of poetry and literature—poetics, literary theory—we might come to the disconcerting conclusion that the later 19th century did not advance and often rather retreated from the systematic achievements of the great romantic critics. If we ignore the extravagant and erratic E. S. Dallas, no poetic theory was produced in England that could claim novelty and systematic coherence. Even in Germany, the home of romantic theories, little was written after Vischer's eclectic *Ästhetik* that is more than a restatement of the doctrines of Goethe and Schiller, Humboldt and Hegel, if we except the highly original though hardly noticed young Nietzsche. The main new enterprise of the time—pursued particularly in France by Taine, Hennequin, Brunetière, and Zola, but also in Germany by Dilthey and Wilhelm Scherer and in Russia by Alexander Veselovsky—was the attempt to set up a science of poetics on the analogy of the natural sciences. I believe we would agree today that this enterprise failed dismally. The related aesthetics of realism and naturalism—whatever their historical justification as an antiromantic weapon of polemics may have been—must appear today extremely inadequate as aesthetics, at least on this side of the Iron Curtain. They led to a confusion of life and art, to a denial of the imagination, to a misunderstanding of the nature of art as making, as creating, a world of symbols. Historicism, the other great achievement of the 19th century, which immensely widened the horizons in time and space and increased the sense of the variety of art and its forms, also had its adverse effects on criticism: it led to a crippling relativism and an anarchy of values that became more and more conspicuous as the century advanced.

Sheer subjectivism, "impressionism" in criticism, was only the reverse side of the same coin. "The adventures of the soul among masterpieces" is only another formula for the loss of a sense of values, for relativism and anarchy. The well-defined position of the art-for-art's-sake movement, which was valuable as a reaction against Philistinism and crude didacticism, also led to dehumanizing results as it surrendered every claim to a social and philosophi-

cal significance of art. Nor can we deny the dessicating narrowness of the new French classicism of Désiré Nisard and Brunetière, or the Victorian limits of the "culture" propounded by Arnold, or the obtuse fierceness of the moralism of Tolstoy.

It seems not too rash a generalization about 19th-century criticism to say that it lost its grasp on the unity of content and form: that it went either to the extremes of didacticism or to the extremes of art-for-art's-sake formalism—or, to vary this dichotomy, to the extremes of claiming mystical insight into the supernatural on behalf of art or to reducing it to a mere technicality, a game or craft. Poe, who combines both views, illustrates the dilemma early in the century. Mallarmé, who dreamed of a "negative aesthetics of silence," of a single book that would supersede all other books, faced it at the threshold of the 20th century. We could even argue that so deft and competent a writer as Sainte-Beuve—wide-ranging, subtle, learned, and sensitive—led criticism astray into biography and even, on occasion, into anecdotage and gossip-mongering.

But if we look at this indictment we must ultimately be struck by its injustice or, at least, its inadequacy. The 19th century precisely by its divergent efforts in all directions presents us rather with a laboratory of criticism, with an enormous, ceaseless debate in which every possible position was pushed to its extreme. We can observe the working out (and sometimes the reduction to absurdity) of almost all the theories that are still with us: scientism, historicism, realism, naturalism, didacticism, aestheticism, symbolism, etc. But most important, from the discussions of these issues critical personalities emerge, not just persons but personalities with their individual mental physiognomies, their contradictions, their patterns of tensions, their triumphs and defeats. That is why a history of criticism cannot be merely a history of ideas *in vacuo*, a mere tracing of concepts and arguments. Happily, concepts, arguments, and doctrines come alive in the work of a great critic in a configuration that is not repeated anywhere else, that is unique and therefore valuable if we value personality and man.

Among these critics were a few who built, as it were, a bridge between the early 19th century and our time and who preserved the essence of the great tradition and transmitted it to us. They are, as I hope to show, the greatest critics of the time: Taine and Baudelaire in France; De Sanctis in Italy; Nietzsche and Dilthey

in Germany; Henry James in the United States. These critics can best be understood in terms of a continuity that is still obvious in such early figures as Belinsky, Heine, Carlyle, or Emerson. Taine is basically a Hegelian; Baudelaire summarized motifs of the German romantics that filtered through to him by devious ways, via Carlyle, Poe, and even Coleridge (second-hand); De Sanctis is, as is Dilthey, in the direct line of succession from the Schlegels and Hegel. Nietzsche is nourished by Schopenhauer and the romantic classical philologists. Henry James is saturated with an almost Goethean sense of the organicity of art. These critics prepared the way for the regeneration that came in the 20th century with Croce, Valéry, T. S. Eliot, and many others. Croce goes back to De Sanctis and further, to the Germans. Valéry knows Mallarmé and Poe. Eliot draws on the immediate French sources and on Coleridge. But whatever the exact contacts and channels to the past may be, something has been reconstituted in the 20th century that had fallen apart in the 19th: a sense of the unity of content and form, a grasp of the nature of art.

There is one feature of 19th-century criticism which we must not minimize: nationalism. Clearly criticism is not an affair of a single nation: ideas wander, migrate, blow about, are carried by winds of doctrine. It is impossible to think of the history of French or English or German criticism in isolation. Still, linguistic traditions and local nationalisms importantly contributed to the growth of criticism. The enormous diversification of the national traditions, the rise of criticism in nations which before had hardly taken part in the critical debate—in the United States, Russia, the other Slavic countries, Spain, and Scandinavia—is the bright side of the matter. But there is also a dark side to literary nationalism: not only in the obvious exaggerations of national claims and the long and repetitious debates about the same questions of nationality in literature but also in the fragmentation of criticism. We must take into account the astonishingly decreased sense of community (even compared with the Romantic Age) among the European nations in the later 19th century and the increased differences among their developments. France and England had the liveliest interchange, and the United States naturally emancipated itself slowly from British dominance, partly with the help of the French. But Germany, which led aesthetic speculation in the

early 19th century, drifted into a curious isolation, which only such a lonely spirit as Nietzsche could overcome by singlehanded effort. Problems of its national *Risorgimento* absorbed Italy even in criticism, and Russia was faced with quite specific local issues, which permeated all literary debates. Though the central problems of criticism are perennial and the greatest critics rise above their local horizon, criticism is written in a historical context, often with a specific audience in mind, in a temporal social situation. We must not reduce it to a mirror of that situation: we must see how it transcends it everywhere, to rise to the issues debated since Aristotle and still discussed today in totally different social and political conditions. Yet we cannot ignore the setting, the persons, and the nations if our history is to assume flesh and blood and is not to remain a shadowy play of ideas. A procedure by nationality is unavoidable. France must be discussed first, as it is the most important country for the development of Western criticism in our age.

CONTENTS

Preface to Volumes 3 and 4	v
Introduction to Volumes 3 and 4	xi
1. French Criticism before 1850	1
2. <u>Sainte-Beuve</u>	34
3. Italian Criticism from Scalvini to Tenca	73
4. English Criticism	86
Introductory	86
Thomas Carlyle	92
Thomas De Quincey	110
Leigh Hunt	120
Thomas Babington Macaulay	125
John Stuart Mill	132
John Ruskin	136
5. American Criticism	150
Introductory	150
Edgar Allan Poe	152
Ralph Waldo Emerson	163
The Other Transcendentalists	176
6. German Critics from Grillparzer to Marx and Engels	182
From Grillparzer to Börne	182
Heinrich Heine	192
Young Germany	201
Georg Gottfried Gervinus	204
The Hegelians	213
Friedrich Hebbel	224
Arnold Ruge	229
Marx and Engels	232

7. Russian Criticism	240
Introductory (Pushkin)	240
Vissarion Belinsky	243
Bibliographies and Notes	267
Chronological Table of Works	369
Index of Names	377
Index of Topics and Terms	386

1: FRENCH CRITICISM BEFORE 1850

OSSIFIED NEOCLASSICISM died slowly in France, and the emotional romanticism which took its place had little to offer for criticism except a standard of feeling and freedom from the rules. But even before the Restoration (1815) new ideas were stirring everywhere. There was a sudden proliferation of the varieties of criticism: not a leaping ahead in one direction but almost a flying apart to all corners of the intellectual universe. The man who eventually arises from the chaos, Sainte-Beuve, wears the traces of the conflicts of his youth. We shall understand him better if we know his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. But they deserve attention also for their own sake: they laid the foundations of French literary history, formulated a symbolist theory of poetry, demanded a literature in the service of humanity, and started the art-for-art's-sake movement.

France inherited a great tradition of cultural historiography from the 18th century. Transferred to literature, the tradition was summed up in De Bonald's famous formula: "literature is the expression of society."¹ As early as 1800 in *De la Littérature* Madame de Staël had drawn up a rather vague scheme of a history of literature determined by society. The influence of letters on society was then examined much more concretely by Prosper de Barante (1782–1866) in his *De la Littérature française au XVIII^e siècle* (1809). Barante, who knew Madame de Staël but was a Napoleonic official at the time of writing his book, tries to put the controversy about the causes of the Revolution in a new perspective. He deplores the destructive radicalism of the *philosophes* and argues from a vaguely Kantian point of view against the premises of sensualist philosophy; but he sees that the Revolution was not caused by Voltaire or Rousseau. French writings of the 18th century were rather "symptoms of the general illness." Men of letters became spokesmen of the discontent and unrest caused by the