A History of Modern Criticism 1750–1950

RENÉ WELLEK

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BY

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PREFACE

THIS IS the first volume of a four-volume history of modern literary criticism, written from a consistent point of view. The history of criticism should not be a purely antiquarian subject but should, I believe, illuminate and interpret our present situation. It will, in turn, become comprehensible only in the light of a modern literary theory. The middle of the 18th century is a meaningful point to start, as then the neoclassical system of doctrines, established since the Renaissance, began to disintegrate. To describe the changes within that system between 1500 and 1750 seems to me largely an antiquarian task, unrelated to the problems of our day; but in the later 18th century there emerge, and struggle with one another, doctrines and points of view which are relevant even today: naturalism, the view that art is expression and communication of emotion, the symbolic and mystical view of poetry, and others. The 1830's, when the European romantic movement was well on the wane, when Goethe and Hegel, Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Leopardi died, and when the new creed of realism began to emerge, seem the natural break in our story. Volume 2 ends here, and the remaining two volumes, now in active preparation, should bring the account down to our day.

The term "criticism" I shall interpret broadly to mean not only judgments of individual books and authors, "judicial" criticism, practical criticism, evidences of literary taste, but mainly what has been thought about the principles and theory of literature, its nature, its creation, its function, its effects, its relations to the other activities of man, its kinds, devices, and techniques, its origins and history. I shall try to steer a middle course between pure aesthetics on the one hand—"aesthetics from above," speculations about the nature of the beautiful and about art in general—and mere pronouncements of impressionistic taste, unsubstantiated, unargued opinions, on the other. It will be impossible to avoid

some excursions into the history of abstract aesthetics and of concrete taste, since obviously the history of literary criticism cannot be totally divorced from them. But we shall discuss purely philosophical aestheticians, such as Kant, only very briefly and shall merely glance at even prominent writers if they have not given some kind of theoretical framework to their literary predilections and tastes.

The first two volumes consider only four countries: England (with Scotland), France, Germany, and Italy, though the Conclusion touches briefly on developments in other countries. In volumes 3 and 4 Spain, Russia, and the United States will be added; meanwhile, in the period under discussion, Spanish criticism seems derivative, Russian barely emerging, and the new United States still echoing England.

The only existing book which covers our topic *in extenso*, George Saintsbury's *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe* (3 vols. 1900–04), while admirable in its sweep and still readable because of the liveliness of the author's exposition and style, is not only outdated by having been written fifty years ago, during the heyday of impressionism and art for art's sake, but seems to me seriously vitiated by its professed lack of interest in questions of theory and aesthetics.

To preserve the uniformity and readability of the text, all quotations are in English, but in the notes all foreign texts are given in the original in order to make a check of vocabulary and context possible. Most translations are my own, but in some cases I have used older translations freely. The spelling is modernized throughout, for it seems unnecessary, in a book devoted to ideas, to preserve the printing habits of the time. In many cases, especially the German classics available in modernized reprints, going back to the original spelling would have been an almost impossible task, irrelevant to the purpose of the book. The many superior numbers need not disturb the reader; only the infrequent notes which contain something more than a mere reference to the sources are placed at the bottom of the page. The bibliographies are selective and descriptive and allow allusions to controversial points of interpretation avoided in the text.

In three chapters (1, 5, and 6) I was able to draw on my discussion in an earlier book, *The Rise of English Literary History*

(1941). I want to thank the University of North Carolina Press for permitting me to use some passages verbatim.

I owe a heavy debt of gratitude to the Guggenheim Foundation for granting a fellowship which allowed me to devote a whole year to writing and to undertake a short trip to Europe; to Edgar S. Furniss, Provost of Yale University, who gave generously from the Fluid Research Fund to facilitate the preparation of this book; and to several friends and colleagues, Cleanth Brooks, Douglas Knight, Austin Warren, and Robert Penn Warren, for their critical reading of several chapters. Two friends between them, Lowry Nelson Jr. and William K. Wimsatt Jr., have read the whole manuscript and have made many valuable suggestions for its improvement. David Horne has helped with the proofs and Mr. and Mrs. Addison W. Ward with the indexes.

R. W.

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INTRODUCTION

I

THE HISTORY of literary criticism between the middle of the 18th century and the 1830's is the period which most clearly raises all the fundamental issues of criticism that are still with us today. It is the period in which the great system of neoclassical criticism, as it was inherited from antiquity and built up and codified in Italy and France during the 16th and 17th centuries, disintegrated, and when divers new trends emerge which early in the 19th century crystallized into romantic movements.

Today, it seems, we have escaped the dominance of romantic ideas and have come to understand the neoclassical point of view far better and far more sympathetically. There is now a large academic literature which interprets the principles, applications, and fortunes of neoclassical criticism not only with the historian's sense of detached justice but with enthusiastic endorsement of the main neoclassical doctrines and polemical fervor directed against the romantic creed. Also, in contemporary nonacademic English and American criticism we find many tendencies and ideas which could be interpreted as a revival of neoclassical principles. T. S. Eliot has described his general point of view as classicist in the famous preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928), and he is the critic who has influenced contemporary criticism most profoundly, if not on all theoretical issues then at least with his individual judgments and the general bent of his taste. Eliot's emphasis on the impersonality and objectivity of the poet, his view of the poet as "the shred of platinum" (to quote the famous simile from "Tradition and the Individual Talent"), could be interpreted as a revival of neoclassical principles, and it is surely a reaction against romantic subjectivism, lyricism, and exaltation of the ego. Eliot's constant stress on the share of the intellect in the creative process, his plea for reasonableness and toughness, and his view that poetry

must be at least as well written as prose could also be interpreted as neoclassical. His advocacy of the colloquial, the conversational style in poetry, could be compared with its use in Dryden and Pope. The great feeling which Eliot has for the continuity of the Western tradition, conceived of not only as a literary but as a moral and religious force, could also be interpreted as a conscious return to a similar view held less consciously and less vocally during the age of neoclassical dominance. In defining his ideal of what criticism should be, Eliot voices his preference for analysis against the impressionism and "appreciation" which we have come to associate with romantic attitudes.

If we look at other prominent contemporary critics we can find the same elements, or at least some of them. F. R. Leavis displays the banner of tradition and criticizes all poetry from the point of view of "living speech." Yvor Winters talks about prose sense, the moral idea governing a poem, of poetry as a more intense kind of prose. The recent almost universal increase of interest in economy of expression, in craftsmanship, and in rhetoric and its devices might be thought of as neoclassical. The revulsion against the lyrical cry, the purely subjective, and the merely biographical is common today. Most of the so-called New Critics in the United States criticize the English romantic poets, especially Shelley, very severely. Many favor wit, paradox, and irony as central devices of poetry.

But it would be an absurd simplification of the present critical situation if we described it merely in terms of a revival of neoclassicism. It is certainly not a total revival, and one could argue that the neoclassical doctrines are used today in a different context and with an altered meaning. One could even argue the opposite: many modern critics actually use romantic ideas more prominently in some of their most central theories. An examination of the historical antecedents of some of the key terms of recent criticism will show this. "Organic" has its origin in a passage of Aristotle's *Poetics* (chapter VIII). The neoclassical "unity in variety" and the neo-Platonic "inner form" are other anticipations. But only Herder, Goethe, Schelling, and the Schlegels have drawn the ultimate consequences from the organic metaphor and used it consistently in their criticism. It reaches England with Coleridge. A further development of the organic view is the idea that a work

of art represents a system of tensions and balances. T. S. Eliot and after him I. A. Richards [1] constantly quote the key passage in Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria,* describing imagination as the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.[2] This formula is neither neoclassical nor original with Coleridge. It is merely a reproduction of what some of the most romantic of the German aestheticians had said: the closest parallel can be found in Schelling, whom Coleridge had studied and for whom, at the time of writing the *Biographia* (1817), he professed such admiration that he thought of himself, momentarily at least, as merely an expounder of his philosophy.*

Opposites and tensions are easily associated with ironies and paradoxes. The aesthetic (not merely rhetorical) use of irony comes

* One could argue that "reconciliation of opposites" is foreshadowed in all rhetorical theories about the recognition of "similitude in dissimilitude." It dates back to Aristotle's view that in a riddle it is possible to join together absurdities by metaphor (*Poetics,* XXII), or to Longinus' analysis of a poem by Sappho, which speaks of "uniting contradictions in the feelings" (x, 24), as Allen Tate has pointed out in *Lectures in Criticism,* ed. H. Cairns (New York, 1949), p. 61. Anticipations could be seen in concettist theories, in Gracián's theories of *agudeza* (1642). Gracián arrives at a definition of agudeza as a "splendid concordance, a harmonious correlation between two or three extremes, expressed in a single act of the understanding." Quoted by Croce, "I trattatisti italiani del Concettismo e Baltasar Gracián," in *Problemi di estetica* (Bari, 1949), p. 317. Dr. Johnson's famous description of metaphysical wit in his "Life of Cowley" (*Lives of the English Poets,* ed. Hill, *I,* 11) as "a kind of *discordia concors;* a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" seems derived from such widespread theories. But they are all purely rhetorical, little more than recognitions of the distance between tenor and vehicle in a metaphor, of the opposite in antithesis, paradox, and oxymoron. They are not the reconciliation of such opposites as nature and art with its implied metaphysics, as in Coleridge.

Croce, *Storia dell' età barocca in Italia* (Bari, 1946), p. 222, refers to Tomaso Ceva (1648–1737) as speaking of the union of contraries which is poetry, of the probable and the marvelous, of unity and multiplicity, of naturalness and art, of delight and reason. But I cannot discover more than faint hints of such ideas in the actual text of Ceva's *Memorie d'alcune virtù del Signor Conte Francesco de Lemene con alcune riflessioni su le sue poesie,* Milan, 1706.

from Friedrich Schlegel. In another German critic few people read today, Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, we find at the very center of his system the view that all art is irony and paradox—and, again, Coleridge had read and annotated Solger's *Erwin* (1815). The distinction between the denotative and the connotative meaning of linguistic signs was worked out earlier, but a theory of metaphor and symbol as the prime requisite of poetry was first enunciated by Vico, Blackwell, Diderot, and Hamann; it finds its fullest elaboration in the Schlegels, who propounded a system of correspondences, of an all-pervasive symbolism in the universe which poetry reflects and expresses. To Goethe we apparently owe the distinction between allegory and symbol, which was then elaborated by Schelling and August Wilhelm Schlegel and from there taken over by Coleridge. Myth, of course, has always been a device of poetry: classical and Christian mythology were the requisites of neoclassical epic and tragedy. But the view that all poetry is myth, that there is a necessity and possibility of creating new myth, is again propounded for the first time by Herder, Schelling, and Friedrich Schlegel. The only possible anticipations, unknown or barely known in their time, were the visions and mythological fantasies of William Blake.

Most modern critics want poetry to be concrete, visual, precise, and not abstract or universal. Again some preromantic critics can be shown to be the first to have decidedly rejected the older view of poetry as abstract, universal, and wary of the "streaks of the tulip, the shades of the verdure." The shift happened late in the 18th century, and we have not returned to the neoclassical ideal. Thus if we trace the pedigree of the key concepts of many modern critics we inevitably arrive at the romantic period, though the modern critics themselves may not always be aware of the exact derivation of their particular terms. Clearly, much is not drawn directly from the original sources but rather comes through many intermediaries, through Coleridge, Poe, the French symbolists, and Croce. Paradoxically, modern professedly antiromantic criticism, while it has rejected much romantic poetry and some of the metaphysical claims advanced for poetry by romantic criticism, has nevertheless revived its basic tenets. Probably it is better to say it has achieved a curious blend of classical and romantic concepts. Of course modern criticism cannot be described as merely such a

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