

René Wellek

**CONCEPTS
OF
CRITICISM**

EDITED BY STEPHEN G. NICHOLS, JR.

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by René Wellek

*Edited and with an
Introduction by Stephen G. Nichols, Jr.*

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Introduction

As a statement of purpose in one of his earliest theoretical articles, René Wellek said: "We have in mind . . . the clarification of . . . theoretical problems which can be solved only on a philosophical [i.e., conceptual] basis. Clearness on methodological issues should influence the direction of future research." Thus, in 1936, at a time when modern trends in criticism had hardly been recognized or named, Mr. Wellek was already concerned with the dangers imminent for the many methods of literary study which were then emerging in reaction to the critical attitudes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The dangers were many, but the common threat was that the inevitable confusion resulting from the almost simultaneous development of movements widely separated geographically and circumscribed by national, not to mention linguistic, boundaries would lead to a "veritable Tower of Babel." In this confusion there was a real possibility that a failure to define basic concepts would vitiate the work of the new literary scholarship. Accordingly, Mr. Wellek set out to formulate precise conceptual ideals for literary study. In view of the numerous ramifications of literature and literary scholarship, these ideals would have to be defined individually. Once formulated, however, they would continually interact in the practical pursuits of literary scholarship to point the way toward the optimum understanding of the meaning and values of literature.

The initial result of Mr. Wellek's efforts to formulate conceptual ideals for literary study on a large, systematic scale

was the book he wrote with Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*. Here, in a chapter by chapter development, the three central disciplines of literary scholarship—literary theory, criticism, and history—are defined and united in an effort to explain the many aspects of literary works and their study. Practical questions are studied in conjunction with theoretical problems whose antecedents go back at least as far as Aristotle's *Poetics*. Literature is examined in relation to its own world, in relation to other arts and sciences, and in relation to society in general. The component aspects of literary form, e.g. metrics, rhythm, image, symbol, rhetorical devices, are discussed along with the methods of literary study which use these formal aspects as a basis for critical analysis. The mode of existence of a literary work is closely considered. Such are the large questions posed in *Theory of Literature*, questions particularly relevant to the literary work itself.

In the present work Professor Wellek is specifically concerned with the *methods* of studying literary works. If justification be needed for the viewpoint of these essays, it is to be found in their purpose: to secure a firm base for the task of achieving a full understanding of imaginative literature. To this end each essay posits as its goal the development of a concept which will contribute to the better understanding of the literary work. In this sense we see that methods developed in writing *Theory of Literature* have played an important role in the creation of the present essays. That is, each article has a strong theoretical base postulating an ideal goal to be achieved by that aspect of literary study within the province of the particular essay. The justification of the ideal, its pertinence, is always measured in terms of its efficacy in explaining that aspect of literature under discussion. But Mr. Wellek does not appeal solely to the creative works themselves in order to demonstrate the appropriateness of the ideals formulated in the essays. To do so would

be to ignore the results obtained by other critics and would merely add to the confusion of voices already plaguing literary study. True to the guiding principles outlined in the statement quoted initially, Mr. Wellek undertakes analytical reviews of the work done by other scholars as a basic part of his own method of approach to the questions discussed. In this way he succeeds not only in defining the ideal goals to be achieved by the new methods of criticism, but also in showing wherein these new methods have successfully attained their goals and wherein they have failed. As a result Mr. Wellek may be credited with bringing some order to the mass of new trends in criticism: in grouping them according to formative influences and according to similarities and effectiveness of method. In this latter effort we see the transition from the point of view of *Theory of Literature* to that utilized so effectively in *A History of Modern Criticism*.

Inasmuch as the essays were all written with the same unifying principle and goal in mind, they maintain a cohesive unity of purpose. Nevertheless, they were not all written at the same time or even in the order in which they appear here. They represent, rather, the results of intense concentration during the past eighteen years on the specific problems which the disciplines of literary theory, criticism, and history have had to face and must solve if they are to realize their potential. The most consistent problem discerned by Mr. Wellek has been the failure on the part of literary scholarship to attain a general and complete awareness of the basic concepts on which the three disciplines should be founded—concepts from which the basic questions to be asked of the literary works must be formulated. Accordingly, the first two essays, “Literary Theory, Criticism, and History” and “The Term and Concept of Literary Criticism” (consult the bibliography for place and date of original publication for those essays which have appeared previously), consider the terminology and functions of the disciplines

which make up the field of literary scholarship. "Literary Theory, Criticism, and History" specifically combats recent attempts to conflate the basic distinctions among these areas, distinctions on which depends the meaningful structure of the whole field. "The Term and Concept of Literary Criticism" offers a historical consideration and working definition of criticism. Likewise "The Concept of Evolution in Literary History" is concerned with defining problems of methodology within another of the basic areas of literary study. The great problem of literary history today, as seen by Mr. Wellek, is the need for "a modern concept of time, modeled not on the metric chronology of the calendar and physical science, but on an interpenetration of the causal order in experience and memory." The pursuit of literary history divorced from the value judgments achieved by criticism is inconceivable as Wellek shows.

"Concepts of Form and Structure in Twentieth-Century Criticism" turns to the examination of two structural methods of analyzing literary works which have been widely used in this century. The terms "form" and "structure" have been so loosely used by such varied groups of critics that confusing and even conflicting usages of the terms have arisen. Mr. Wellek here untangles the various usages, marshaling them in an order roughly related to the various schools using the terms; then he analyzes the success of these usages in recent literary studies. Finally, he offers a positive means of choosing the best working concepts of "structure" for critical purposes. This article serves as a transition to the three essays which make up the central part of the book, essays dealing with specific problems of practical periodization. The essays—"The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship," "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History," "The Concept of Realism in Literary Scholarship"—are at once a review of previous attempts at characterizing works from these periods and, at the same time, an

outline of the conceptual ideals which must be at the basis of future, hopefully more successful, attempts. Reinforcing the interaction of disciplines sketched in the first essay, Mr. Wellek shows in these articles that successful periodization is impossible as long as literary theory, criticism, and history are not utilized in concert to define the essence of the literature of a particular period. The impact of these three articles, and especially that of the baroque and romanticism studies which have been available for a longer time, has been such as to provoke a general re-examination of the problems raised in the studies. The whole question of periodization, released from the purely mechanistic principles characteristic of older attitudes opposed by Mr. Wellek, has now assumed a new vitality based upon its association with such immanent aspects of the individual work as style and ideology. In order to take cognizance of the work done since the baroque and romanticism articles were originally published, Mr. Wellek has written postscripts for them. The baroque postscript does not try to review the many hundreds of articles published since 1946 but does try to suggest wherein the original paper stands corrected and points out the new issues that have been raised. What is particularly striking for us, in retrospect, is the extent to which recent studies have attempted to utilize the concepts laid down in Mr. Wellek's original study. "Romanticism Re-examined" is a welcome reaffirmation of his views on the whole question of periodization in general and of the particular situation facing the romantic period.

"The Revolt Against Positivism in European Literary Scholarship" makes a transition back to broader questions—not of critical *definition* as in the first essays, but of critical *directions*—by tracing the origin of the modern critical methods from the revolt against positivism as practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" and "American Literary

Scholarship" analyze specific failings in the direction of comparative literature as a discipline in the one case and of graduate schools in the other. The poor direction of comparative literature is of particular concern to literary scholarship because it is in comparative literature that freedom from the specific demands and boundaries faced by language departments should be found for pursuing the broader questions of literary theory. Similarly, the lack of freedom and vitality in graduate school curricula is of the gravest concern because it is through the graduate schools that our scholars receive their first professional training. The formative influence on these future scholars is particularly crucial in determining, as Mr. Wellek states, our success in attaining "better, more relevant, and more critical scholarship."

"Philosophy and Postwar American Criticism," one of the three previously unpublished pieces, represents a new approach by Mr. Wellek to the problem of imposing order on the chaos of critical voices. In this essay he examines the recent trends in American criticism from the point of view of their underlying philosophical orientation. He "takes the history of Western philosophy in its main representatives and currents—Plato, Aristotle, Thomism, British empiricism, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, etc.—in their chronological order and asks how far recent American critics profess allegiance to any of them." This article attempts to achieve what Mr. Wellek calls a "perspective by incongruity" and in so doing raises questions at the very core of American criticism.

"The Main Trends of Twentieth-Century Criticism" offers a final summation, along the lines of *A History of Modern Criticism*, of the main currents in contemporary literary criticism, showing the need within the field for a really concerted effort to attain a greater degree of awareness of the conceptual principles set forth in the preceding essays.

Such, then, is the purpose and structure of the book. In

closing it should be noted that the previously published articles are for the most part presented in the form in which they originally appeared. Some bibliographical revisions have been undertaken, and some reflections necessitated by work done since the articles first appeared have been amended. It is particularly fitting that these essays and the bibliography, striking testimonies of the enormous contribution René Wellek has made, not only in the United States, but, through translations, in other countries as well, should appear in time for his sixtieth birthday: August 22, 1963.

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New Haven, Connecticut
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Literary Theory, Criticism, and History

In *Theory of Literature*¹ I tried to maintain the distinctions between certain main branches of literary study. "There is, first," I said, "the distinction between a view of literature as a simultaneous order and a view of literature which sees it primarily as a series of works arranged in a chronological order and as integral parts of the historical process. There is, then, the further distinction between the study of the principles and criteria of literature and the study of the concrete literary works of art, whether we study them in isolation or in chronological series."

"Literary theory" is the study of the principles of literature, its categories, criteria, and the like, while the studies of concrete works of art are either "literary criticism" (primarily static in approach) or "literary history." Of course, "literary criticism" is frequently used in such a way as to include literary theory.² I pleaded for the necessity of a collaboration among the three disciplines: "They implicate each other so thoroughly as to make inconceivable literary theory without criticism or history, or criticism without theory or history, or history without theory and criticism," and I concluded somewhat naively that "these distinctions are fairly obvious and rather widely accepted" (pp. 30-31).

1. René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949).

2. I have used the term thus widely in my *History of Modern Criticism* (New Haven, 1955).

Since these pages were written many attempts have been made either to obliterate these distinctions or to make more or less totalitarian claims for some one of these disciplines: either to say, e.g. that there is only history or only criticism or only theory or, at least, to reduce the triad to a duo, to say that there is only theory and history or only criticism and history. Much of this debate is purely verbal: a further example of the incredible confusion of tongues, the veritable Tower of Babel which seems to me one of the most ominous features of our civilization. It is not worth trying to disentangle these confusions if they do not point to actual issues. Terminological disagreements are inevitable, especially if we take into consideration the different associations and scope of such terms in the main European languages. For instance, the term *Literaturwissenschaft* has preserved in German its ancient meaning of systematic knowledge. But I would try to defend the English term "literary theory" as preferable to "science of literature," because "science" in English has become limited to natural science and suggests an emulation of the methods and claims of the natural sciences which seems, for literary studies, both unwise and misleading. "Literary scholarship" as a possible translation or alternative to "*Literaturwissenschaft*" seems also inadvisable, as it seems to exclude criticism, evaluation, speculation. A "scholar" has ceased to be so broad and wise a man as Emerson wanted the American scholar to be. Again, "literary theory" is preferable to "poetics," as, in English, the term "poetry" is still usually restricted to verse and has not assumed the wide meaning of German *Dichtung*. "Poetics" seems to exclude the theory of such forms as the novel or the essay and it has also the handicap of suggesting prescriptive poetics: a set of principles obligatory for practising poets.

I do not want to trace at length the history of the term "criticism" here, as it is properly the topic of the second

essay. In English, the term criticism is often used to include literary theory and poetics. This usage is rare in German where the term *Literaturkritik* is usually understood in the very narrow sense of day-by-day reviewing. It might be interesting to show how this restriction has come about. In Germany, Lessing, certainly, and the Schlegels thought of themselves as literary critics, but apparently the overwhelming prestige of German philosophy, particularly the Hegelian system, combined with the establishment of a specialized literary historiography led to a sharp distinction between philosophical aesthetics and poetics on the one hand and scholarship on the other, while "criticism" taken over by politically oriented journalism during the thirties of the nineteenth century became degraded to something purely practical, serving temporal ends. The critic becomes a middleman, a secretary, even a servant, of the public. In Germany, the late Werner Milch, in an essay "*Literaturkritik und Literaturgeschichte*"³ has tried to rescue the term by an argument in favor of "literary criticism" as a specific art-form, a literary genre. Its distinguishing characteristic is that in criticism everything must be related to *us*, while in literary history, literature is conceived as involved in a period, judged only relatively to the period. The only criterion of criticism is personal feeling, experience, the magic German word: *Erlebnis*. But Milch hardly touches on the distinction between literary criticism and theory. He rejects a general "science of literature," as all knowledge about literature has its place in history, and poetics cannot be divorced from historical relations.

I recognize that Milch's discussion raises interesting historical questions about the forms in which the insights of criticism have been conveyed, and that there is a real issue

3. *Germanisch-romanische Monatsschrift*, 18 (1930), 1-15, reprinted in *Kleine Schriften zur Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte* (Heidelberg, 1957), pp. 9-24.

in the debate whether criticism is an art or a science (in the old, wide sense). I shall be content to say here that criticism has been conveyed in the most different art-forms, even in poems, such as those of Horace, Vida, and Pope, or in brief aphorisms, such as those by Friedrich Schlegel, or in abstractly, prosaically, even badly written treatises. The history of the "literary review" (*Rezension*) as a genre raises historical and social questions, but it seems to me a mistake to identify "criticism" with this one limited form. There still remains the problem of the relation between criticism and art. A feeling for art will enter into criticism: many critical forms require artistic skills of composition and style; imagination has its share in all knowledge and science. Still, I do not believe that the critic is an artist or that criticism is an art (in the strict modern sense). Its aim is intellectual cognition. It does not create a fictional imaginative world such as the world of music or poetry. Criticism is conceptual knowledge, or aims at such knowledge. It must ultimately aim at systematic knowledge about literature, at literary theory.

This point of view has recently been eloquently argued by Northrop Frye in the "Polemical Introduction" to his *Anatomy of Criticism*,⁴ a work of literary theory which has been praised as the greatest book of criticism since Matthew Arnold. Frye, convincingly, rejects the view that literary theory and criticism are a kind of parasite on literature, that the critic is an artist *manqué* and postulates that "criticism is a structure of thought and knowledge existing in its own right" (p. 5). I agree with his general enterprise, his belief in the necessity of a theory of literature. I want to argue here only against his attempt to erect literary theory into the uniquely worthwhile discipline and to expel criticism (in our sense of criticism of concrete works) from literary study. Frye makes a sharp distinction between, on the one

4. Princeton, 1957.

hand, both "literary theory" and "genuine criticism," which progresses toward making the whole of literature intelligible, and, on the other hand, a kind of criticism which belongs only to the history of taste. Obviously Frye has little use for the "public critic"—Sainte-Beuve, Hazlitt, Arnold, etc.—who represents the reading public and merely registers its prejudices. Frye laughs at "the literary chit-chat which makes the reputations of poets boom and crash in an imaginary stock exchange. That wealthy investor, Mr. Eliot, after dumping Milton on the market, is now buying him again; Donne has probably reached his peak and will begin to taper off; Tennyson may be in for a slight flutter but the Shelley stocks are still bearish" (p. 18). Frye is obviously right in ridiculing the "whirligig of taste"; but he must be wrong in drawing the conclusion that "as the history of taste has no organic connection with criticism, it can be easily separated."

In my own *History of Modern Criticism* I have discovered that it cannot be done.⁵ Frye's view that "the study of literature can never be founded on value judgments," that the theory of literature is not directly concerned with value judgments, seems to me quite mistaken. He himself concedes that the "critic will find soon, and constantly, that Milton is a more rewarding and suggestive poet to work with than Blackmore" (p. 25). Whatever his impatience with arbitrary literary opinions may be or with the game of rankings, I cannot see how such a divorce as he seems to advocate is feasible in practice. Literary theories, principles, criteria cannot be arrived at *in vacuo*: every critic in history has developed his theory in contact (as has Frye himself) with concrete works of art which he has had to select, interpret, analyze and, after all, to judge. The literary opinions, rankings, and judgments of a critic are buttressed,

5. In his very generous review Mr. Frye apparently wished I had done so. Cf. *Virginia Quarterly*, 32 (1956), 310-15.

confirmed, developed by his theories, and the theories are drawn from, supported, illustrated, made concrete and plausible by works of art. The relegation, in Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, of concrete criticisms, judgments, evaluations to an arbitrary, irrational, and meaningless "history of taste" seems to me as indefensible as the recent attempts to doubt the whole enterprise of literary theory and to absorb all literary study into history.

In the forties, during the heyday of the New Criticism, historical scholarship was on the defensive. Much was done to reassert the rights of criticism and literary theory and to minimize the former overwhelming emphasis on biography and historical background. In the colleges a textbook, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry*⁶ (1938), was the signal for the change. I believe my own *Theory of Literature* (1949) was widely understood as an attack on "extrinsic" methods, as a repudiation of "literary history," though the book actually contains a final chapter on "Literary History" which emphatically argues against the neglect of this discipline and provides a theory of a new, less external literary history. But in recent years the situation has become reversed, and criticism, literary theory, the whole task of interpreting and evaluating literature as a simultaneous order has been doubted and rejected. The New Criticism, and actually any criticism, is today on the defensive. One type of discussion moves on an empirical level as a wrangle about the interpretation of specific passages or poems. The theoretical issue is there put often in very sweeping and vague terms. A straw man is set up: the New Critic, who supposedly denies that a work of art can be illuminated by historical knowledge at all. It is then easy to show that poems have been misunderstood because the meaning of an obsolete word was missed or a historical or

6. Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and R. P. Warren, *Understanding Poetry; an Anthology for College Students* (New York, 1938).