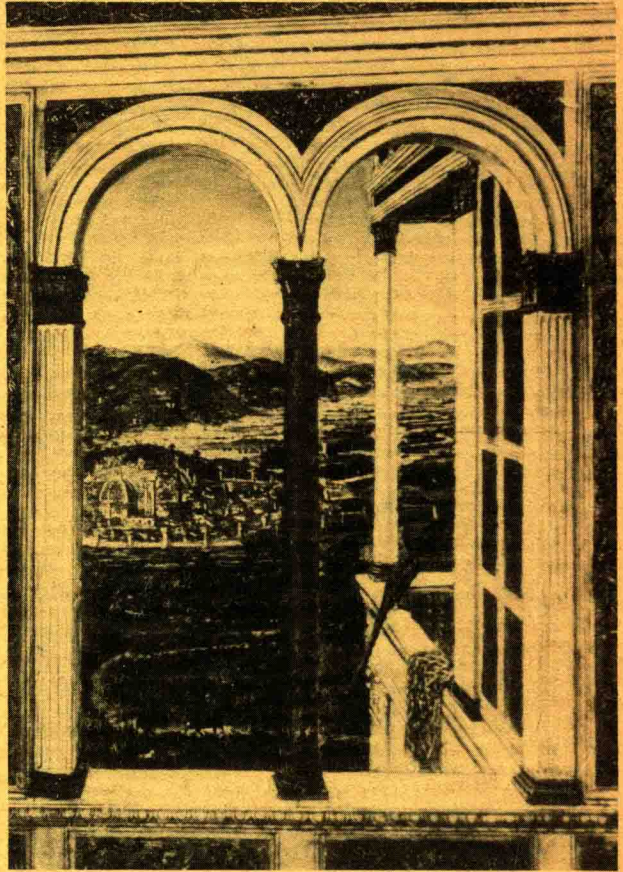


Philip Brockbank



THE
Creativity
OF
PERCEPTION

THE CREATIVITY OF PERCEPTION

Essays in the Genesis of Literature and Art

Philip Brockbank

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THE CREATIVITY OF PERCEPTION

To Jonathan and Gina

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- Georges Seurat *Les Baignades à Asnières*. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.
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- Auguste Renoir *Chemin montant dans les hautes herbes*. Musée Orsay, Paris (photograph: Réunion des musées nationaux).
- Pieter Bruegel *Two Peasants Binding Faggots*. Reproduced by kind permission of The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, The University of Birmingham.
- Paul Cézanne *Les Joueurs de cartes*. Reproduced by kind permission of Courtauld Institute Galleries, London (Courtauld Collection).

PREFACE

The language, as Leavis sometimes found it convenient to observe, is neither 'out there' nor (pointing sometimes to the head and sometimes to the belly) 'in here', but 'in a third realm'. When, in 1975, the University of Leeds awarded honorary degrees to F. R. Leavis and E. H. J. Gombrich, Gombrich said to Leavis, 'We have much in common', and Leavis responded, 'Yes – tradition, and the creativity of perception.'

My account of that 'creativity' begins and ends with William Blake, but it also comes to take in what, for me, are surprising truths about our common, routine perceptions. I treat them as truths that can spare us some of the unnecessary dilemmas of modern theory by foregrounding the role of writers and their works as part of a larger tradition – 'a third realm' – one that is not necessarily of a piece with the complacencies of past orders, or exhaustible by exclusive theses or antitheses.

Both Gombrich and Leavis found ways of disengaging from the Comtean scientism that for the past century has laid importunate claims on all aspects of our thought. Blake too confronted the scientism of his day – not only the 'giant forms' of Newton and Aristotle, but also the imaginative condition of all who unknowingly fell under their spell ('The city-clerk's idle facilities Which sprang from Sir Isaac Newton's great abilities').

In England laborious, sceptical, critical inquiry, putting questions of value to an empirical test, may be thought the dominant tradition, making its way from Donne's arduous approach to an exalted truth – 'He that would reach her about must, and about must go' – to Eliot's phrase, embraced by Leavis – 'the common pursuit of true judgement' – and incorporating a scientific tradition to which Newton

belonged. The punning collusion of the words 'empirical' and 'empire' may well remind us that the period from Blake to Leavis saw the rise and fall of the institution crystallized as 'The British Empire' and introduce us to the mysteries of the 'third realm'. Is such a resemblance coincidence, freeplay or destiny? Does such an observation reveal more about the observed or the observer? The essays which follow explore such areas without pretending to be definitive except in so far as they discern that within the ambiguity of the word certain people are able to construct more persuasive and enabling language than others. Some may be scientists, and some politicians, but traditionally it is to works of imagination that successive ages return to know again their forebears, even if only by reconstructing ancestors in the image of descendants.

Blake, that most energetic reconstructor of forerunners had an uncompromising answer to the question of the interrelationship between creativity and establishment: Art was against Empire, but he knew from Thompson and Reynolds, and might have known from the Pope of 'Windsor Forest', that art can offer solace to our governors and that government has its own way of taming the artist through its academic institutions – the Royal Academy and universities. D. H. Lawrence knew that the academic had his way of keeping the poet under control:

Man fixes some wonderful erection of his own between himself and the wild chaos, and gradually goes bleached and stifled under his parasol. Then comes a poet, enemy of convention, and makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! the glimpse of chaos is a vision, a window to the sun. But after a while, getting used to the vision, and not liking the genuine draught from chaos, commonplace man daubs a simulacrum of the window that opens onto chaos, and patches the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum. That is, he has got used to the vision; it is part of his house-decoration. So that the umbrella at last looks like a glowing open firmament, of many aspects. But alas! it is all simulacrum, in innumerable patches. Homer and Keats, annotated and with glossary.¹

'Chaos in Poetry', in *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Anthony Beal, London, 1955, p. 90.

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Just as monks in earlier times had prayed for their patrons in return for certain creature comforts, so academics have processed the anarchic energies of the poet until the reader is thoroughly protected from them.

Consequently it is becoming that we should examine what we are doing when we offer a reading of a poem, measuring our accounts (to use a richly capitalist turn of phrase!) against not only the vested voice of criticism but also the urgent voice of creation. Leavis often put the paradigm, 'This is so, is it not?', expecting the retort, 'Yes, but . . .' The metaphor I have called into service asks for a less importunate interrogation: 'This is how I see it, from over here, in this light; how do you see it, over there, in that light?', hoping for the response 'Yes, and . . .': these metaphors of 'light' and 'crystal' are examined in more detail in chapter 1. When our insights into the mystery and accomplishment of art turn out to be shared we may call them 'recognitions'; if they are new we may think of them, provisionally at least, as 'discoveries'. The discovery may call for the fine-tuning of our most sensitive responses, but in itself that may not be enough; creative critical scholarship works by charting an appropriate perceptual field, and so activating word and image in the work on which attention is closely focused; and responses so stirred must be articulated with vigilant precision of phrase.

In pursuit of precision of phrase, I have often looked for those words in which a poem seems most precisely and evocatively to describe itself, for, however manifold alternative meanings are, they are not infinite and art has its own mode of imposing on the arbitrary. Where the masterpiece under consideration is non-verbal, I have tried to find words that serve a similar defining purpose. Hence the way in which some essays have become stepping stones into poems, or into turbulent verses. It can be seen as a pastime afforded by 'Le Plaisir du texte' or a privilege of private cultivation, but in all events it belongs to a mode of interpretation that regards appreciation as being as important as criticism (in the popular sense) – an aspect of criticism forgotten by those who like to trace the word 'crisis' as being an inevitable component of the concept.

There are two parts to the present study; of the nine pieces composing the first part, two are fresh and two others have had very limited airing. The pieces on *Paradise Lost* and Marvell were contributed to volumes of *Approaches* edited by C. A. Patrides, and each had a modestly festive audience, in the universities of York and Chicago.

The Joyce talk too was part of a celebration (at the University of Leeds), but the essays on *Comus* and *The Dunciad* were prepared simply for published volumes, whilst *Urban Mysteries of the Renaissance* was the 1988 occasional lecture of the International Shakespeare Association. In preparing responses to festive invitations I look for ways of keeping the poetry alive and not for opportunity to give it a more solemn funeral. But I fear that the very choice of masterpieces has often recalled (as perhaps festivals should) our communal mortality.

Sometimes there is no news but the old news, and there is a need not only to say new things but also to say old things in new ways. The old imperatives include that which requires us to be our age, to be as old as our imaginative inheritance. Musing on the frantic enterprise of a young Fortinbras, Hamlet remembers we are made 'with such large discourse, Looking before and after' – a godlike (and Shakespearean) capability. With no more Latin than Shakespeare and even less Greek, I am unable to come to rest in the classical past, and have made my way back to the first day of creation, finding satisfaction in the thought that the first creative command called for light and that in the beginning was the word. The story and its metaphors, those devices for ordering the over-meaningful into a plot, have a rich after-life which is still continuing, not wholly displaced by current worries about creation.

These papers I call 're-creations' are all, with one exception, in touch at some point with the Book of Genesis, and where they are not about the word they are likely to be about light. Each is an occasional piece and a response to an invitation. The diversity is owed to the occasion, and the continuity of topics is a matter of choice. The odd one out, on Keats's 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', answered an invitation from the University of Essex to 'proclaim a masterpiece' and give a critical account of it. The 're-creations' therefore are about specific writers and masterpieces from distinctive phases of European and English civilization. The conjunction of time-and-place (Grub Street, Flanders) with timelessness (Genesis) is the most searching challenge that art can offer to the scholar, seeking to recover the experience of the past, and the critic, trying to relate it to the present. Yet this conjunction is a normal, not an exceptional, condition of the art in which we find pleasure and significance.

Shakespeare makes his own start on the puzzle in *Love's Labour's Lost*, setting up his 'little academe, Still and contemplative in living

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art', while at the play's end the sickness of France waits in a London whose theatres are about to shut down for the plague. Berowne asks the king about the motives and ends of scholarship:

What is the end of study? let me know

Why, that to know which else we should not know.

Things hid and barred, you mean, from common sense?

Ay, that is study's godlike recompense.

'Common sense' is a richer and more complex faculty than we commonly suppose it to be, and we live, like Berowne and his fellow courtiers, almost constantly under the need to recover it. It is against common sense, for example, to suppose, as we commonly do, that scholarship slowly advances from generation to generation towards a complete and definitive understanding of the art and life of the past. In fact we have to work hard to recover what slips and slides away from us, including much in the language and ethos of *Love's Labour's Lost* itself, when it tells us that 'Light seeking light doth light of light beguile', that 'Small have continual plodders ever won / Save base authority from other's books', and that 'honest plain words best pierce the ears of grief'.

Our delusions of constant incremental progress flourish partly because in some areas we are successful in clearing up old misapprehensions – about Pope's reading, for example, and about the treatment of Shakespeare's work in the theatre and the printing shop. But the prevailing delusion has to do with 'progress' itself – as if today's knowledge, conviction and response were invincibly in advance of yesterday's. It is not so. Our interpretations of art and evidence change as we change, but not necessarily as we advance. What we try to do in the routine procedures of criticism and scholarship, as in talking to each other, is to consolidate and give coherence to our own shared perceptions.

It remains paradoxically true, however, that the significance of the art of the past is not wholly circumscribed by the time and conditions of its production. Hence the importance of the masterpiece. The imagination reaches forward and often attains insights into potentials of meaning and effect that are dormant in the language it attempts to bring under more expressive control. The ability to respond to the poetic current from the past may show itself in the work of a living artist (working perhaps in a different medium) or in that of a critic;

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often, like Pope, Johnson, Coleridge, Keats or Eliot, the artist is the critic. These are the sources of the 'uncommon' sense on which the life of our common sense depends.

While I was never ambitious to give a theoretical account of my 'approach' among so many, I was nevertheless aware over the decades that a good deal of what Santayana would call 'metaphysical pathos' continued to be invested in theories by and about literature, deriving largely from French sources. Determinations to think objectively and to bring to bear evidence that was capable of contributing to shared responses was often represented as naivety. I was strongly disposed to believe otherwise, but had no wish to lose touch with the art and the energy in order to rectify abstractions.

The introduction that follows, therefore, is taken up with what, from my point of view, is a fresh account of perception. 'Perception' is now among the so-called buzzwords of the day. Like 'image' it is used by politicians, businessmen and journalists who traffic in appearances, at the hustings or in the market-place. Blake's engagement with what he calls 'the first principles of human perception' spanned the five thousand eight hundred years of his life from the Book of Genesis to Wordsworth's despised *Excursion*. He was, we shall find reason to remember, a contemporary of Rousseau, Tom Paine and Adam Smith, and he himself, by setting up a comprehensive eternity, claims a kind of contemporaneity with (for example) Isaiah, King David, Newton, Milton and Berkeley – men whose vision we have still to contend with in the late twentieth century.

In one of his more playful excursions into 'the dark and dismal infinite where thought roams up and down', Blake tells Thomas Butts of his own visionary capacity:

For double the vision my Eyes do see
And a double vision is always with me.
With my inward Eye 'tis an old Man grey;
With my outward, a Thistle across my way.²

The outer eye, it seems from this glance, doesn't play any tricks, but in the next rhyme the thistle talks and diverts him from his track. Even objective perceptions are readily distorted by subjective appre-

Geoffrey Keynes, *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, London, 1957, p. 860.

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hensions; 'in the night, imagining some fear,' says Shakespeare's Theseus, 'How easily is a bush supposed a bear.' Blake's inward eye opens the vistas of the 'third realm', in which, through careful choice of words, the natural world becomes a complex of symbols of the perceiver's condition of mind, and the traditions of language which connect us with those perceptions that have gone before. There is a need to be aware of the illusions such perspectives can induce but, unless we try to attend to what Blake called the 'minute particulars' of the text and the 'perceptual field' in which we most respond to it, the cultural endeavour of history will be lost and we will not be able to act our age – six thousand years.

NOTE

In the months before his death my father, Professor John Philip Brockbank, was assembling a collection of previously published pieces to form a companion to his Blackwell volume *On Shakespeare*. The collection was to be supplemented by unpublished work; a selection of his poems on art that had circulated amongst his friends and lecture audiences, a Preface and Introduction, dealing with the theoretical approaches underlying his academic work and an essay on 'War, Apocalypse and Squalor'. The latter was to have traced the Western concern with the Revelation and Armageddon of warfare from Albrecht Altdorfer's 1529 *Alexander's Battle*, fought under a sky where sun and moon appear to stand still as they did for Joshua's victory at Gibeon, to Otto Dix's 1935 *Flanders* where similar heavens hang over the rotting dead and living of the 'War to end wars'. Untimely death left this as no more than a concept. Though editorial intervention was necessary to separate Preface from Introduction, and remove any references to the missing essay, the remaining pieces appear unaltered from previous publication and grateful acknowledgements are made to all who have allowed and approved their republication:

- 2 The Politics of Paradise: 'Bermudas'
'The politics of Paradise: "Bermudas"', in *Approaches to Marvell*, The York Tercentenary Lectures, ed. C. A. Patrides, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Henley and Boston, 1978.
- 3 The Measure of *Comus*
'The Measure of *Comus*', in *Essays and Studies* 1968, ed. Miriam Allott, The English Association, 1 Priory Gardens, London.
- 4 'Within the Visible Diurnal Spheare': the Moving World of

- Paradise Lost*, in *Approaches to Paradise Lost*, The York Tercentenary lectures, ed. C. A. Patrides, Edward Arnold, London, 1968.
- 5 The Book of Genesis and the Genesis of Books: The creation of Pope's *Dunciad*
 'The Book of Genesis and the Genesis of Books: the creation of Pope's *Dunciad*', in *The Art of Alexander Pope*, ed. Howard Erskine-Hill and Anne Smith, Vision Press, Plymouth and London, 1979.
- 6 Keats: The Grecian Urn
 'Keats: The Grecian Urn: "this generation waste"', *Delta: A Literary Review*, no. 51, ed. J. S. Cunningham, I. D. Mackillop, Simon Gray, Roger Gard, 9 Sharrow View, Sheffield, Spring 1973.
- 7 From Genesis to Guinesses: Joyce and Literary Tradition
 'Joyce and literary tradition: Language living, dead, and resurrected, from Genesis to Guinesses', in *James Joyce and Modern Literature*, ed. W. J. McCormack and Alistair Stead, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Henley and Boston, 1982.
- 8 Urban Mysteries of the Renaissance: Shakespeare and Carpaccio
 'Urban Mysteries of the Renaissance: Shakespeare and Carpaccio', in *International Shakespeare Association Occasional Paper no. 4*, Stephen Austin and Sons Ltd, Hertford, 1989.

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