

THE CREATIVE CRITIC*

By D. S. SAVAGE

I WANT to begin by making a claim—the claim of the literary critic to stand upon an equal footing with every other writer, and to be held similarly capable of original work in his chosen field. My motive is not so much a jealous regard for the critic's status as a concern for the inner economy of literature—and, more than that, with the integrity of culture.

To many people, I know, "creative criticism" will seem a contradiction in terms, like "fictitious fact" or "sensible nonsense". Criticism and creativeness have come to be regarded as quite distinct activities: so much so, that we even make free use of the phrase, "creative writing", to cover novels, stories and verse—*original* work, as contrasted with mere writing-about-writing. What seems to have happened here is that a distinction of degree within literature itself has unwittingly become changed into one of kind as between one literary form and others. Creativeness and originality, that is to say, are not fixed properties of this or that form of expression, but qualities of mind, manifested through various forms.

There is, of course, a sense in which criticism appears to stand apart from the other literary forms. While they are representations of "life", it is a representation of them, and so is set, to all appearances, at a double remove from "life". But there is really no such thing as "life" in the exclusive sense presumed here. "Life" is not an exclusive but an inclusive concept: everything we do, from trimming the hedge to writing philosophy, takes place within "life", and the critic can be no more remote from it than the novelist or the man in the street. "Life" is not synonymous with "reality".

Nor must we overlook, here, the conventional character of our division of literature into distinct and separate forms—not one of which, on examination, can be detached from its close involvement with all the others. To begin with, there is a critical element in all "creative" writing. There is equally a creative element in all critical work. And then, not only do the more strictly literary forms merge into each other, so that drama enters into poetry and the novel, poetry into novel and drama, and so on, but these in turn are intimately bound up with the less strictly artistic forms of expression—for instance, religious writing of every kind, philosophy and history. You

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cannot, then, break off literary forms from each other without attacking the unity of literature. And you cannot apply the term "creative" inclusively to any department of letters without emptying that term of meaning and making recognition of the real quality more difficult. To withhold creativeness from one field in order to affirm it in another is in effect to deny the creative principle in literature at large. And because our existence is a whole, in which each part communicates with every other, this denial can only result in a general indifference to the creative principle—if, indeed, it does not originate in that very indifference. Since creativeness points to unity and non-creativeness to disunity, it may be that the marked tendency to split off criticism from creative writing is just one more symptom of the cultural fragmentation which afflicts us—and which, remember, is both an outward, social break-up and a fracturing of consciousness.

What, then, *is* creativeness. A common error, which may have helped to put criticism in its present inferior place, is to confuse it with inventiveness or productivity, and to confuse originality with novelty or eccentricity. But these are quite distinct qualities. Whereas inventiveness and novelty suggest variations on something which is already *given*, creativeness and originality point always to the source of things, to the unconditioned. Creativeness, I would say, is the power which springs from imaginative vision—the immediate perception of truth. What is truth. Truth is *that which is*. As I see it, creativeness, working at whatever degree of intensity and in whatever field, can only be the outcome of a primary existence-relation of the self, in freedom, to the truth. Originality is neither more nor less than this, for *that which is, is* the original, the eternally new.

If this sounds theological and abstruse, let me illustrate at least something of my meaning with this passage from a letter of Dostoevsky. "I have my own idea about art," he writes, "and it is this: What most people regard as fantastic and lacking in universality, I hold to be the inmost essence of truth. Arid observation of everyday trivialities I have long ceased to regard as realism—it is quite the reverse. In any newspaper one takes up, one comes upon reports of wholly authentic facts, which nevertheless strike one as extraordinary. Our writers regard them as fantastic, and take no account of them; and yet they are the truth, for they are facts. But who troubles to observe, record, describe them. . . . Is not my

fantastic *Idiot* the very dailiest truth." Yes, indeed: Dostoevsky's *Idiot* is everyday truth, but the everyday truth of a man of imaginative vision.

My definition, you will see, presumes what might be called, in a certain sense, a religious view of literature. And I stress this, because here is a bridge by which we can cross from the particular work of art to the general organism, culture. What is culture but the total pattern of our common life as it is shaped by our human need for significant living—living, that is, put into accord with the realm of values. By culture I mean not only all the disciplines of art and thought but the living context from which these are singled out and to which, in their effects, they return—a ceaseless cycle of interchange between *life* and *art*. Now culture has its roots always in religion. That is a fact of history, but it is also a truth beyond history. Religion is the foundation of culture because it is the primary source of the values which spread outwards to permeate culture. And it is a source of values because, however imperfectly, it expresses man's inmost approach to the living truth of being. In its essence, religion is the first area of the creative act, the act of faith, both in the individual and in the race. Outwardly, it expresses man's creative endeavour to raise himself out of a meaningless—because discontinuous—finite and relative condition, to relate himself to the infinite and absolute reality of the divine. It is this central aspiration within culture to truth, or reality, which draws the separate disciplines into a larger unity, giving them meaning both for one another and for the whole.

What we call the fragmentation of culture, then, is the breaking up of this unity which comes about when religion is displaced from its central position, and separated, specialized activities begin to develop themselves in more or less isolated compartments remote from one another and the common life—religion itself becoming narrowed and perverted. The fracturing of consciousness is this condition reflected in the individual. Or, you can put the individual condition first, and say with equal justice that it is the projection of this which results in the social disruption. The two aspects are complementary.

In the field of the arts, cultural disruption throws up two main psychological types, the *aesthete* and the *ideologist*. Men without faith, unable to address themselves to a reality beyond both life and art, they are forced into the contradiction of denying meaning to the whole only in order to affirm it in the part.

The aesthete turns from a life he supposes to be meaningless only to embrace an art he strangely endows with intrinsic meaning. The ideologist denies this intrinsic meaningfulness to art, attributing it instead to life as a *process*: art is for him instrumental to practical affairs.

In criticism, these same two deviations from integrity obtrude themselves. The two types of non-creative critic may be considered in their contrasting attitudes to the comparative importance of *form* and *content*; to the attention they give to *ideas*, and to the relative emphasis they place upon *art* and *life*. The aesthetic critic, then, fixes on the formal properties of a piece of writing. Appraising technique and style, he refuses to commit himself to a viewpoint or to discuss ideas. The ideological critic reverses this. His over-concern with "life" means that his interest in content exceeds his care for form, while he appears to attach importance to ideas. That's to say, adopting a viewpoint fixed by some sectarian obedience, not *beyond* literature but *outside* it, he uses this to measure-up his subject's conformity to specification—the Party Line, if he is a Marxist.

Now it is a firm critical principle that form and content in the achieved work of art are inseparable. Yet here we have two extreme, opposed views which agree in the implicit severance which they effect, not only of form from content but of art from life. My point is that this cleavage is a projection of that primary split in the self between inwardness and externality, or the infinite subject and the finite objective world, which always appears when there is no creative relation to truth.

It isn't hard to see that if this separation were really pushed to a finish, and *form* in the given work quite divorced from its content, then *art*, the totality in which they are resolved, would cease to be. Again, if *art* collectively were to be finally separated from *life*, then *culture* would be no more. Art, then, individually, and culture collectively, are the real wholes without which their component parts fall into nonentity. That which draws these components into unity, you will have noticed, is also that which draws the broken halves of consciousness into the unity of the self: namely the faithful obedience to truth—which is just one way of saying that the structure of a work of art reflects that of the being of man.

The psychological truth I have been trying to state is well known in our religion, which speaks of man in his relation to God. There is a close affinity between literature—and indeed

art and thought in general—and religion. In its social outcome, religion establishes a permanent type or form within the shifting process of collective life. It does this both from without, in the founding of an inheritable tradition, and from within, in the ever-renewed penetration, by the individual, into the source of the tradition, which is thus both *given* as outward fact, and *created* or *re-created* in inward experience. This creative participation in the source of being is more than a narrowly religious truth, it is a truth of existence, of creative living. It is what the philosopher means when he speaks of man as a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, and the theologian when he uses the term, *incarnation*. My present limited point is that it extends into literature too. No writer can be said in the obvious sense to begin from the beginning, for he works within a given literary form which has been evolved in history. Yet there is an entirely valid sense in which his creative activity, if authentic, is a veritable new beginning, a beginning beyond history, in which he may actually be said to create afresh the very form he works in.

Can we doubt that the work of our great writers is a cryptic utterance of their momentous engagement with existence, a search for meaning in man and the world, in which the very self is felt to be at stake. It is the intensity of the mastering passion for the true and the real which lifts the artist's vision above its immersion in experience and enables him to draw out from life the content which is to be *trans-formed*. I am saying nothing novel if I compare the entity which is born of the creative act to a minor universe, for the genuine work of art is an organism having meaning and beauty inherent in its being. It is, I would say, a world-form embodying a world-view, a microcosm capable of indefinite expansion into the macrocosm—susceptible, that is, of rational elucidation and interpretation. That is why originators like Dostoevsky and Shakespeare are such mines of material for more abstract and technical thinkers. Fully to understand *Hamlet* or *King Lear* would, I am convinced, be virtually to comprehend the universe itself.

In the writer's originality is his freedom. Not, of course, freedom in the void, but freedom within the bounds of the formal discipline he accepts and makes his own. In penetrating to its source and to that extent creating the form itself, he naturally sets its limits also. That is to look at it from within. Taking an outside view, the writer's freedom would appear to be communicated to the form he works in. Hence arises that *indeterminacy* which is at the heart of every literary form, which makes it impervious to final definition. In literature, only provisional,

or working definitions are possible. Were it otherwise, development would cease; construction would take the place of creation. It would be a rupturing of continuity, a quenching of the spirit.

Well then, because criticism is one field within the world of letters, sharing in this very indeterminacy, it too is impatient of outward limits. Like every writer, the critic is just as free as he wills and is able to be: free within the bounds of a discipline which is shaped simultaneously upon recognition of the integrity of the work of art and upon the critic's own first-hand relation to reality.

As I see him, the critic is in certain respects intermediate between the poet and the abstract thinker, and ideally he should have something of both in his make-up. His commerce with ideas is two-sided, facing as he does on the one side the realm of abstract thought and on the other that of art in its concrete particularity. As an interpreter—and he must be that—he can neither take up a narrow extra-literary viewpoint, like the ideologist, nor run away from thought like the aesthete. His is the far more exacting and rewarding task of penetrating deeply, as it were, *into* the content of a work *through* the form, bringing both the wider universe of discourse and the smaller world of the novel, poem or play into luminous relation through the medium of his own understanding.

The routine work of criticism is to interpret, elucidate and evaluate our literature, and in so doing to define, defend and expound the tradition. Not the literary tradition solely, but the whole cultural complex from which literature is one specific outgrowth, and which includes the tradition of thought and of belief. Tradition, as the reality which lives in us, and in and by which we live, is our *community in the truth*. If we think of culture, in this larger sense, in its dual aspect as both a continual *process* and an abiding *entity* or *form* manifesting within the process, then the wider function of criticism is to help in the perpetual assimilation of the process to the entity—the continual transformation of life.

Only the constant work of creation, conservation and destruction in relation to the abiding, ideal yet incarnate form ensures the continuity of human history. The critic is very far from bearing the burden alone: I don't want to exaggerate his importance. But at a time when the unity of culture is becoming lost to sight, and life and the arts perishing for want of each other and for their common centre, it may be that the creative critic has a special responsibility to overcome the disintegration, both within himself and within the world, and to play a part in the preparation of a new beginning.