

Review Article

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A KEY TO ALL MYTHOLOGIES

There are many mythologies in literary criticism, inevitably, since the acts of interpretation and judgment necessarily involve the substitution of one myth for another. These acts are most frequently made within the larger mythological framework of a particular critical strategy, like the concern with the rhetorical structure of the novel which links the collection of essays, *The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by George Goodin.¹ Rather surprisingly this interest is not acknowledged in the Preface to the volume and the opportunity thus afforded for an introductory debate about the novelist's role as teacher or moralist is ignored. Instead the Preface promulgates myths of a different kind about the nature of criticism, the function of teaching and, more importantly, about the relation between them. It is these myths which need to be challenged.

Mr. Goodin suggests that at present criticism of the novel is excessively subjective and that what is required is a search for greater rigour. He urges that "the ideal . . . [is] to argue from questions of literary technique to conclusions about human values" (x). However, quasi-scientific objectivity is still the more potent danger, and while this emphasis on human values is central to good criticism the stress on technique is misplaced. George Saintsbury once wrote in his *History of Criticism*:

Literary criticism has not much more to do with aesthetics than architecture has to do with physics and geology—than the art of wine-taster or the tea-taster has to do with the study of the papillae of the tongue and the theory of the nervous system generally.

This is the extreme position of the non-theoretical critic, but couched in more moderate terms it is a defensible point of view. It stresses that if literary criticism strays too far from the experience of the 'common reader', however complex that may be, then the critic is heading for trouble; he is liable to be lost in a labyrinth of laboured refinements, pointless subtleties and ingeniously

original insights which have done so much to bring the discipline into disrepute with students and public alike.

The weighty structuralist emphasis of many of these essays and their apparent concern with interpretation rather than critical judgment reflect a bias revealed in the Preface, which reminds us rightly that "The idea of a distinctly literary approach to literature is, of course, widespread today, largely because of Coleridge" (ix), but omits to acknowledge that only *Scrutiny* maintained this stance throughout a period when the last word on the Victorians seemed to have been spoken by Lytton Strachey. *Scrutiny* discarded Saintsbury's Victorian notion of 'taste', which is too easily associated with the trivial concept of 'pure' criticism; but it also rejected the opposite view, which this collection of essays in the main supports, that critical judgment is made by standards that can be in some way abstractly formulated—a key to all mythologies.

F. R. Leavis's position, that the principles of his criticism can only be defined in the actual process of the criticism, is a moral and aesthetic pragmatism that makes the kind of theoretical definition which René Wellek favours, or the narrower concentration on technique which this volume espouses, ineffectually clumsy.² But it is not necessary to be a whole-hearted Scrutineer to believe that the theoretical conviction of these essays—that "... the growth of a person and of his knowledge about human values depends on reading life *out of*, not *into*, a literary work" (ix), does not do justice to the complex experience of critical reading, for pristine naïveté and aesthetic sophistication rarely coincide in the same reader. This mythology, indeed, like Mr. Casaubon's, will render only the "merely literary knowledge" (ix) which the editor depletes.

Mr. Goodin uses the Preface to this *Festschrift*, published in honour of a university teacher, to outline a further myth of doubtful assistance:

... values in literature ... are indeed evanescent, and for this reason are more satisfactorily studied in the give and take of teaching. There the framework of assumptions that constitutes a discipline can be continually challenged, the questions that we ask can be refined, more proof can be demanded, the tangential can receive its due, and the irrelevant can be exposed. These essays cannot possess that advantage, but the ideal they hold up is the same (x).

As the last sentence suggests, this laudable statement of the importance of collaborative effort in the best teaching is simply inappropriate when applied to published essays, which by their nature cannot fully reflect this process, although they may give rise to such fruitful dialogue as that between Dr.

Leavis and Dr. Wellek. More significantly, this kind of proposition is unrealistic because Walter Bagehot's remarks in 1864 are still true:

We live in the realm of the *half* educated. The number of readers grows daily, but the quality of readers does not improve rapidly . . . many of them would much like to improve their culture, to chasten their taste, if they knew how.

Since Bagehot's age the teaching situation in the universities has worsened. The leisurely give and take of discussion about literary and human values, which characterized the teaching of the first English schools, has largely vanished and its gradual disappearance has coincided with the spread of university education from the small *élite* to a mass audience. The high cost of this process and the numbers involved has meant that the tutorial or small seminar has been largely replaced by big classes of mixed ability and with a poorer cultural background, unused to and often rightly impatient of the formal lecture and genuinely perplexed about the 'relevance' of the discipline.

In this context the university teacher's function has altered and his focus in the classroom on elements of literary technique is frequently a necessary 'shorthand' method of teaching people to read literature. But too often the process is exaggerated by a desire to make literary criticism appear 'difficult' and, if not actually relevant, at least intellectually acceptable. The target of popular and student dislike is no longer the scholar, who in an age of research has become respectable, but the New Critic, the clinician of the discipline. This, at any rate, is the effective myth, and it is partly rooted in the classroom.

The disquiet of this generation's students arises partly from a sense of distaste that something so personal as the enjoyment of literature should be linked with the idea of a job or professional routine, and frequently their uneasiness expresses a frank nostalgia for a mythical belletrist golden age of intimate literary dialogue. Moreover, with a historical shift in the teacher's function his dual roles as teacher and critic have inevitably moved apart while, paradoxically, classroom techniques have spilled over into much of today's literary criticism, reinforcing the tendency to abstraction, the shorthand style and the half-facetious, semi-jocular attempt to be up-to-date with current jargon.

While most of the essays in the volume under discussion reflect the trend to theoretical formulation, the best of them strikingly reject it and display instead a pragmatism founded on sure intuition—a concern with the particularity of the novel under scrutiny which produces a truer and more

significant account of the culture it embodies than the strategy of applying to it abstruse models.

The trust in abstract formulation is most clearly seen in Charles Patterson's essay, "Empathy and the Daemonic in *Wuthering Heights*";

During empathic union one does not simply confuse his identity with another person's but feels a pronounced lessening of awareness of his separate identity and a simultaneous filling up of his selfhood by the other person's selfhood *in idea*, all the while remaining to some degree conscious of his own being (84).

This is the reading life into the novel which contradicted the aims of the Preface and it is especially suspect when the author's knowledge of empathy seems confined to his observation of an old, widowed lady who faded away when her husband died (95). For this critic understanding depends on having the right 'equipment':

In actuality [the novel] will reveal considerable metaphysical concreteness if the particular metaphysics involved is defined and clarified. Not having this very necessary equipment in hand, Professor Hagan slips into the mistake of applying conventional moralistic standards to Heathcliff's and Cathy's actions, with critical results that are not acceptable (84).

When Mr. Patterson's quasi-scientific quest gives way to what has traditionally passed for scholarship it is less than rigorous. He argues that Emily Brontë could have learned about daemons by overhearing Goethe's autobiography discussed, but in spite of an impressive quotation of the German text of *Dichtung und Wahrheit* the connection has no factual basis. Moreover, the "warp and woof" of experience to which Goethe refers is that of the daemonic and the moral orders, not the series of other dichotomies which the author finds in the characters of *Wuthering Heights*. This kind of strategy and equipment is of little help either in the classroom or on paper.

"*Vanity Fair: The Double Standard*" also leans heavily on a simple structural model. Roger M. Swanson elaborates afresh the familiar distinction, first made by Edward Dowden in 1872, between the author and the narrator:

It is the ambiguity of the narrator toward Becky that most clearly defines Thackeray's critical method: the narrator questions her innocence, but the author confirms her guilt, thereby condemning the narrator for judging by a false standard (140).

This does not do justice to the subtle moral relativism of the novel because, as Juliet McMaster has pointed out, the moral experience of *Vanity Fair* is

largely a matter of the reader's decision where to place himself among the various attitudes dramatized for him by the author's commentary, for Thackeray's inconsistency is part of his complex artistry.³

The programme set out in William E. Buckler's "Memory, Morality and the Tragic Vision in the Early Novels of George Eliot" focuses on memory as her way of "... making the moralist relevant to the psychologist and for mediating between the classical concept of tragedy of character and the incipient naturalistic idea of tragedy of circumstance" (145). One would not quarrel with this interesting and ambitious endeavour, but its argument does not carry conviction. Instead of rather fancifully suggesting that George Eliot employed in a codified form Samuel Butler's "psychological evolutionary hypothesis called 'unconscious memory'" (150) in *The Mill on the Floss*, it would have been more pertinent to quote from her review of Riehl's *Natural History of German Life*:

What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestations of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it.⁴

Mr. Buckler also sets up irrelevant literary signposts, like the suggestion that Mr. Tulliver's bullish obstinacy looks forward to Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or Old Goulay in *The House with the Green Shutters*, when it looks back more importantly and emphatically to George Eliot's father. More disturbing, however, is the haphazard accumulation of traditional myths to dignify the critical procedure, especially in *Silas Marner*, where Cinderella and Midas compete for prominence with Christ and the Lady of Shalott, (Cinderella having already appeared in *The Mill on the Floss* in company with Marie Antoinette).

What really mars this essay is the occasionally facetious reference. We read of Tom Tulliver's "anal-erotic aunts and uncles" (151), Maggie's few hours of "narcotic 'high'" (158) with Stephen Guest, and the necessity of "norming out Maggie's character" (156); while F. R. Leavis—"zero[s] in on the flood" (152-3) and there is the simply bad English of "very eclipsing kind" (154). One no longer expects a brilliant style in an article, but new facts or fresh insights. These phrases, however, betray the labours of the classroom. Again they imply a 'reading in' of life but of a more insidious kind, for they clutter up the analysis of one culture with the verbal garbage of another. More importantly, this ambiguity of tone suggests that the novels are not being taken seriously.

Several of these essays occupy the undistinguished middle ground of modern criticism of the novel. Leon Gottfried's study of genre in *Daniel Deronda* produces only the basis for a discussion, Leonard Zellar's ten pages on Conrad and Dostoyevsky are too brief to deal adequately with such a large subject, and George Worth's study of "The Control of Emotional Response in *David Copperfield*" is rather mechanical and unexciting. More interesting are those on Jane Austen's proposal scenes by Mary A. Burgan, and Donald Rackin's lengthy "Jane Austen's Anatomy of Persuasion". Unusually, there is also a guided tour through the novels of George Meredith, conducted by Margaret Conrow. However, one annoying feature which they share is a critical uncertainty which expresses itself in the copious and almost compulsive listing of recent articles, mostly unhelpful, which would be better accommodated in a short critical bibliography.

As the Preface suggests, the most valuable articles and essays are those which, like the best classroom discussions although in a more articulate way, probe the frontiers of the discipline, and for this reviewer the three most worthwhile essays in the volume combine this function with sensitivity and severe pragmatism. The problems of genre are examined in George Goodin's "Walter Scott and the Tradition of the Political Novel"; the rhetorical value of time in Mike Hollington's "Time in *Little Dorrit*", and the influence of Matthew Arnold on Thomas Hardy in "Hardy's Scholar-Gypsy", by Ward Hellstrom.

The essay on Scott illumines the heterogeneous matrix of motifs and plot configurations which the political novel of necessity subsumes and which even the tough-minded Malraux has been unable to avoid—the weak hero of divided cultural allegiance, the paradoxical eliciting of the reader's sympathy for the oppressors and the failure of revolt because of the inadequacy of the revolutionaries. This tradition, Mr. Goodin argues, originated and is best exemplified in *Old Mortality*, in which the dramatic convention with its New Comedy love plot, the comic structure which favours Tories, the romance plot which supports the *status quo* and the moral fatigue of the *Bildungsroman* combine in trenchant antipathy to the *roman à thèse*.

It is a suggestive study which, although Mr. Goodin does not pursue the matter, goes a long way to clarify the ambiguities of the political novel in the hands of the heirs to this tradition, Disraeli and Trollope. Scott is not really concerned with political issues but with the limits of politics:

. . . this idea serves to make *Old Mortality* a very perceptive novel. Briefly stated, it is that political activity can be justified, not by its direct accomplishments but by its indirect ones . . . disinterested devotion to a public cause will

at the very least, exercise a continuous criticism on behalf of commonly held, even if vague, ideals (24).

In this essay structuralism is informed by sound intuition and it makes a fine complement to the chapter on *Old Mortality* in A. O. J. Cockshut's study of Scott.⁵

Mike Hollington's *Little Dorrit* essay gets away from Lionel Trilling's "spatial" account of the novel, which finds it lacking imaginative vitality and instead selects as its starting point the Leavises' recent affirmation of its close concern with detail.⁶ It frankly attempts to "suggest the importance of temporal process in *Little Dorrit*, both as a theme and as an aspect of Dickens's narrative technique" (109).

Deliberately rejecting the emphasis of the New Critics who looked for an "expanded metaphor" as the principle of its organization, Mr. Hollington argues with refreshingly close attention to the text that the precision of the characters' sense of time charts their moral value, for to take time and care is the corollary of a finely-tuned moral sensibility which manifests itself in a meticulous concern with life. It also forges detailed links with the larger world of the novel for "Throughout *Little Dorrit* the conception of historical movement forms an impressive unity with the conception of individual growth" (116). Mr. Hollington demonstrates that time is not felt abstractly in the novel but is rooted in the particularity of place, and its articulation in the novel bestows on character a moral and cultural dimension. His subject and method agree, and this study is a valuable corrective to those critics who find in *Little Dorrit* evidence of Dickens's faltering imaginative grasp of detail.

What marks Ward Hellstrom's consideration of Hardy as the most stimulating essay in this collection is that it runs counter to the aims of the volume. His sure empiricism and keen sense of moral relativism are combined with sound scholarship. The influence of "The Scholar-Gypsy" on *Jude the Obscure* is traced from jottings made in Hardy's notebook. But although there are obvious points of similarity, Arnold's critical judgment of romantic escapism is different from Hardy's, for instead of locating the modern *angst* in a romantic legendary figure who focuses contradictory views of the world, Hardy faces the problem of the restless intellect more realistically as Jude's idealism is challenged and transformed.

Mr. Hellstrom further explores the relation between the 1865 edition of *Essays in Criticism First Series* (part of the Preface of which a spectre quotes to Jude in his dream), *Culture and Anarchy*, in which the notions of the ideal

and perfection find ampler definition, and the function of Christminster as the intellectual magnet which draws Jude on to the discovery that an "endless growth in wisdom and beauty", as Arnold puts it, has little to do with externals but is in truth an inward condition. Moreover, Christminster is revealed to be a powerful preserver of Philistinism and the means of thwarting his dreams. These tactfully and surely developed insights indicate how the highly romanticized vision of the Oxford of "The Scholar-Gipsy", of the 1865 Preface and of the younger Jude is ruthlessly and ironically undermined in the course of the novel.

The author disarmingly admits that "Whether 'The Scholar-Gipsy' was the actual source for *Jude the Obscure* is not of great importance" (201). For him what matters is the large scope of Arnold's influence on Hardy, which he also charts from the major poems. But the main debt is the Hellenic-Hebraic dialectic which informs *Culture and Anarchy*. A discriminating respect for evidence and close attention to the text of the novel lays the basis for a subtle interpretation of these clashing imperatives as they appear in *Jude the Obscure*. But while Jude overcomes his consuming moral impulse to realize that the force driving him is really intellectual, Sue Bridehead's overt Hellenism serves to mark her ironic, gradual regression into the enslaving forms of middle-class morality. This is also the point of the close parallel of situation yet strong contrast of character which Jude makes with Phillotson, who is finally trapped by his "ordinary self" while Jude's quest for his "best self" can only be affirmed in death. While the ostensible focus of Mr. Hellstrom's cogently argued essay is not aesthetic but moral, like all sound pragmatic criticism it also demonstrates in this novel Hardy's striking power of form.

More surprising than the inclusion of Jane Austen and Joseph Conrad in this collection, simply for the sake of chronology, and the equally strange omission of Trollope and Mrs. Gaskell, is the glaring exclusion of *Middlemarch*. But perhaps it has a point, for in *Middlemarch* Mr. Casaubon's myopic and self-defeating concern with theorizing and cataloging implicitly condemns faith in merely abstract formulation. This is reflected in his teaching of Dorothea in Rome. The arid emptiness of his answer to her question whether he cares about Raphael's frescoes—"They are, I believe, highly esteemed"—disturbs her profoundly; "This kind of answer . . . did not help to justify the glories of the Eternal City, or to give her the hope that if she knew more about them the world would be joyously illuminated for her".⁷ This is certainly not the

common pursuit which F. R. Leavis speaks of. Mr. Casaubon here lacks a concern with the particularity and the quality of a culture and his attempt to teach it reveals an inability to communicate. Too many of the essays in this volume share his failing and elicit a response similar to that of Dorothea Brooke.

As the Preface suggests, the ideal teaching embodies an intimate dialogue, a collaborative grappling with the significance of literary works. At present this is rarely reflected in criticism, and to take what is published as evidence of what goes on in a university Department of English is to misunderstand the nature of teaching and the nature of criticism, for the relation between them is too subtle and intangible to admit of theoretical formulation. Moreover, in the present educational climate the mutual enrichment of teaching and criticism is largely a myth; yet it is still perhaps the only key to all the mythologies.

NOTES

1. George Goodin, ed., *The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1972.
2. René Wellek, "Literary Criticism and Philosophy", *Scrutiny*, V (1936), pp. 375-83.
F. R. Leavis, "Literary Criticism and Philosophy: A Reply", *Scrutiny*, VI (1937), pp. 59-70.
3. Juliet McMaster, *Thackeray: The Major Novels*, Toronto, 1971.
4. George Eliot, "Riehl's *Natural History of German Life*", *Westminster Review*, LXVI (1856), pp. 69-70.
5. A. O. J. Cockshut, *The Achievement of Walter Scott*, 1969.
6. F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist*, 1970.
7. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, "World's Classics" edn., 1947, p. 210.