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John Fraser

Excerpt

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Introduction

... this eternal looking beyond appearances for the 'real', on the part of people who have never even been conscious of appearances.

F. Scott Fitzgerald¹

To speak of a philosophical dimension to these essays may seem presumptuous, given their almost embarrassing innocence of metacritical display. Apart from the remarks about Mr Frye, little or no formal theorizing goes on in them, and I have avoided professional jargons. Moreover, to suggest that I was in possession of any 'system' when I wrote them would be very misleading. I proceeded, as I still do, in an *ad hoc* fashion. I was trying to get things clearer for myself, and each of the works and topics discussed, with its nimbus of critical discourse and ideologies, presented its own kind of challenge, its own zones of puzzlement, of sensed but at times elusive significance. However, by the end of the series something had evidently been worked out, for I was able to stop doing literary criticism, at least of this kind, and go on to other things. So I will risk a few generalizations about what I was up to in the essays, with the recognition that I would not necessarily have put things at the time as I put them now.

Most of the essays were written while I was trying to find my bearings as a teacher after obtaining my doctorate at the University of Minnesota in 1961; and as readers of Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* will know, those were problematic years for literary criticism, particularly in North America. Actually, I am not sure that I altogether understand what is intended by the term New Criticism in some of the recent accounts of that period. After all, critics like Yvor Winters and F. R. Leavis were as productive during the forties and fifties as were ones like Cleanth Brooks, and to speak as Lentricchia and others do as if, dialectically, criticism *tout court* had arrived at certain impasses, or entangled itself in various nets of its own devising, seems to me simply untrue. But of course, as

Gerald Graff's *Poetic Discourse and Critical Dogma* reminds us, certain opinions, amounting to an orthodoxy, were a good deal reiterated; and there were certain pressures and presences in those years that I myself can recall finding particularly bothersome.

In one of Sergio Aragones's cartoons in *Mad Magazine*, a convict in the obligatory striped uniform is enthusiastically burrowing his way to freedom. What he doesn't know, and what the reader of course does, is that the end of his impressive tunnel is now below sea level and that only a few more inches of protective rock remain between him and the water.² It is a nice paradigm (in more exalted circles we see the same kind of thing in *Paradise Lost* when God and the Son have a good smile together over Satan's unawareness of the real game rules of the universe), and during the later fifties and early sixties irony was an insistent presence in American criticism and teaching. The neophyte looked at a seemingly obvious text and ventured one or two obvious comments ('Well, I guess she's just trying to be polite to him'). The initiate ('But what does the cup of tea *symbolize*, Janey?') then demolished the obvious account and replaced it with a very different one, thereby getting one-up on the student. And the ironical revelation of error and misperception became part of the substance of literature itself. Characters in fiction were mistaken about their own motives and radically misperceived the situations in which they found themselves. Readers continually fell into pits dug for them by authors. The ostensibly earnest comment was intended humorously; the seeming awkwardness was actually very skilful; and behind every authorial mask there was a very different face that only the critic had discerned. The tradition of irony is of course still with us. Indeed, only last year I came upon a writer in the *Village Voice* speaking of a current *de haut en bas* disposition to view 'the entire history of Western thought as a complex evasion',³ which sounds like intellectual one-upmanship with a vengeance.

The disdain for appearances during my apprentice years was obviously partly a continuation of the New England allegorical tradition: human feelings and doings – falling in or out of love, fighting a war, and so on – did not become truly charged with meaning and value until they had been translated into terms of hidden but momentous patterns. And it also had analogies with the seizing of the high ground by Marxists and Freudians which I had experienced in my argumentative adolescence, and which involved

allegorizing the utterances of one's adversaries and explaining to them what their statements 'really' meant, which was generally the opposite of what they thought they were saying. But that did not make it any the less bothersome, and it was understandable when Susan Sontag called her first book of essays *Against Interpretation*, in protest against the kind of critical thinking in which everything was always really something else. In fictions like *The Pilgrim's Progress*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark', the tangible world stayed tangible, whatever else might be going on: castles were castles, birthmarks birthmarks, cups of tea cups of tea. In allegorical criticism, in contrast, there was a curious destabilizing and devaluing of that world, an opening-up into a simultaneously less substantial and more 'real' reality behind the kinaesthetic realities of albino whales sounding, chilly mid-Victorian London chambers, and the various other things that keep us reading in order to find out what happens next and which contribute to our sense of the continuing presentness of the works in which we encounter them. 'Moby Dick is the mind of God', 'The spectral twin coat buttons of Marley's ghost are Scrooge's suppressed libido' – in such statements there was something almost black-magical about the use of the copula and the primacy assigned by it to the intangible. And so there was too about some of the related conferring of physicality on the non-physical that went on and that Theodore Spencer captured so nicely in the forties in his pseudo-exegesis of 'Thirty Days Hath September'. February, as he explained with just the right earnestness,

is 'alone', is cut off from communion with his fellows. The tragic note is struck the moment 'February' is mentioned. For the initial sound of the word 'excepting' is 'X', and as that sound strikes the sensibility of the reader's ear a number of associations subconsciously accumulate. We think of the spot, the murderous and lonely spot, which 'X' has so frequently marked; we remember the examinations of our childhood where the wrong answers were implacably signaled with 'X'; we think of ex-kings and exile, of lonely crossroads and executions, of the incurable anonymity of those who cannot sign their names.⁴

Alas, poor X! Alas, poor eccentric criticism!

These essays too, then, were in some ways essays against interpretation. For me the behaviour of the characters in most of the works that I discussed did not stand in need of allegorizing in order to acquire meaning. It had it already; the problem was to describe it

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accurately, in the same way that we try to be accurate about the behaviour of people whom we have dealings with or hear about. But the idea of accuracy here did not entail any aspiration to comprehensiveness or any mysterious intuiting of essences. It seemed plain to me that by and large we piece fictional characters together, as we do real ones, from the variegated bits and pieces of information about them that become available to us, and with the recognition that there are huge gaps in our knowledge and that errors and perplexities may always be possible. And the fact of that possibility need not throw us into a state of chronic doubt and scepticism, any more than it does in daily life. The fact that in a particular situation we may be unable to decide whether someone is being insulting when she asks a guest if he would prefer wine or tea – which is to say, to ‘interpret’ her words, her tone of voice, her facial expression in a more commonsensical but not necessarily simpler sense of the term – does not mean that no one else could have done so or that we couldn’t have done so ourselves if we had possessed more knowledge. In everyday life, by and large, we are engaged in trying to make more substantial, rather than transform, what we see and learn about – to refine upon an initial impression rather than reverse it, or clarify a puzzlement rather than dismiss it as a pseudo-problem – and our conclusions about what other people feel and think make it clear that there is a middle ground between the kind of reifying in which each bit of behaviour is treated as an index to a homogenous inner state, and the disintegrative free-associating parodied in the passage by Spencer. To say that we cannot know everything about someone is not to say that we can know nothing. What we ‘know’, whether about a friend, or a fictional character, or the creator of that character, is in a sense what we ‘see’ – this social gesture, that letter, those poems – and the things thus seen go on connecting up with each other in a complicated, loose, and sometimes perplexing fashion, and can be discussed with other people. I am aware that there are other and valid ways of reading a work. I am talking about the spirit in which I myself was reading when I wrote these essays.

All this bore for me on the question of the kinds of knowledge that could be acquired from a work. I myself had never, at least since childhood, been afflicted with what Jacques Leenhardt calls ‘the sacred awe we feel in France toward *the* text – an awe cultivated by our educational system’,⁵ and I could not perceive the wisdom of the various demands for surrender to a text that are epitomized

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in Georges Poulet's statement in 1970, 'When I read as I ought – that is without mental reservations, without any desire to preserve my independence of judgment, and with the total commitment required of any reader – my comprehending becomes intuitive and any feeling proposed to me is immediately assumed by me.'⁶ They struck me, in fact, as being so flagrantly at odds with our dealings with all the other bits of discourse that we encounter daily as to be a recipe for disintegration. And I had no desire to dwell in that curious zone of magic and mystification, with its compulsive dichotomizing ('prose/poetry', etc.)⁷ and its talk about non-referentiality and organic unity, wherein literature supposedly exists in sharp separation from all other modes of discourse. It seemed plain enough, furthermore, that once magical boundaries and taboos were disposed of, and along with them the aspiration to locate the meaning of a work in the innermost recesses of its author's mind, works of literature were as capable as ones of history, or political science, or philosophy of furnishing knowledge about the world that we all inhabit and have to make our way in. If it was natural for critics to invoke philosophers at various points, this was because the parallels were mutually reinforcing and not because the literary works stood in need of metaphysical validation. However, while distinguished plays and distinguished works of history or philosophy could illuminate, say, the will to domination or the hunger for order in ways that complemented each other because they were not radically different from each other, the procedures of literature with respect to ideas, especially philosophical and political ones, had their own distinctive features.

In one of his essays from the sixties, Roland Barthes divides criticism into 'academic' criticism – principally investigations of the genesis of works – and 'interpretative' criticism, which is to say criticism engaged in operating on works in terms of one or other of the then dominant ideologies – psychoanalysis, Marxism, Existentialism, phenomenology.⁸ It appeared to me, however, that in distinguished literature the abstractions of ideologies were tested out in terms of the concretions of individual experience, rather than vice versa. Literature showed us individuals in action, doing things with consequences for themselves and others. And as Shakespeare above all had demonstrated, it was possible to trace complex connections between philosophical or political convictions and the flesh-and-blood conduct towards others of representative

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individuals in representative situations. In these respects literature, some of it anyway, paralleled the continuum of 'abstract' intellection and 'concrete' behaviour in the writings of philosophers like Plato, Kierkegaard, Spinoza, and Nietzsche. A regrettable aspect of the hunger of some American academics for metaphysics without ethics – a hunger related, no doubt, to the persisting sense of the creative writer as someone who ventures into the depths and returns with a unique kind of knowledge – is that it separates intellection from the demands of action in which some of the testing-out of ideas occurs.

In contrast to that dis severing, the world dealt with in these essays, and in the works discussed in them, is one in which actions matter a lot. In it people have or seek power over others or resist the claims of others to power over them, the problems they face are given rather than chosen, and the decisions that they make about them can have irreversible consequences, sometimes literally life-or-death ones. But it is not on that account a merely Hobbesian or Sadean battleground of power relationships, and it cannot be collapsed into naturalism. In a theoretical article elsewhere I compared the difference between two conceptions of art to

that between modern scientific investigation and scientific investigation as it was conceived of in the mid-nineteenth century. In the latter, the explorer pushes out into a homogenous and essentially unmysterious universe in which the dignity possible to individual men is oddly diminished. In the former, it is many different kinds of explorations that are made, and the explorations themselves, in so far as they are done intelligently and accurately, help to construct, in a task without foreseeable limits, the human universe that we inhabit.⁹

In that world or universe of individual consciousnesses, a multiplicity of value-systems overlap and furnish people with justifications for their conduct, and the relationships between thought and action are in fact more complex than the model of 'concrete' action and 'abstract' thought suggests. Values exist not only as propositions and prescriptions but as embodiments and enactments, and individuals are drawn forward by images of future bliss or woe derived from their past experiences, including their experiences of fiction, written or spoken. It seems to me a Shakespearian world, it feels like our own, and part of what bothered me about the derealizing and devaluing that I spoke of above was its weakening of what in *East Coker* T. S. Eliot refers to as 'the motive of action'.

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In a review-essay on *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Gerald Graff quotes a reference by H. G. Schenk to 'the paradoxical double attitude of a near nihilism coupled with the most fervent yearning for the conquest of nihilism that lies at the very heart of the [Romantic] movement'.¹⁰ If the present essays are in some ways essays against interpretation, they also seem to me in retrospect to have been essays against nihilism. I don't mean that they are innocently affirmative or positive with respect to ideals. On the contrary, a number of them are concerned with the harmful consequences of idealism and with the dangers attendant on our hunger for grace and energy and order; and I was very conscious of how such dangers, when viewed through ironical eyes, may seem to furnish grounds for dismissing all aspirations to a greater fullness of being. I was especially conscious of the characteristically American pattern, on display in writers like Hawthorne and Melville and Hemingway, in which a heroic intensity of aspiration leads to overstrain and collapse and to the invasion of the mind by a vision of blankness and meaninglessness, the vision articulated in Wallace Stevens' 'The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad', the vision described by that American-influenced author E. M. Forster during the performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in *Howards End*, when all the splendour of life and art seemed to 'boil over and waste to steam and froth ... and a goblin, with increased malignity, walked quietly over the universe from end to end. Panic and emptiness! Panic and emptiness!' But though chaos may always be near for some of us, its triumph did not seem to me inevitable, any more than it did to Forster, who did not endorse the goblin vision.

As I have suggested, a consequence of the craving for a realer-than-real reality behind or beyond the human realities that I have talked about, or of an obsessive questioning of the status of such a reality, is that it leaves so large a middle ground unoccupied and undefended. The recent Franco-American preoccupation with freedom and 'bliss', for example, with its yearning to escape from the everyday claims of consciousness into a region of pain-free sporting, seems fundamentally unsociable in its rejection of bonds, including the bonds of scrupulous dialogue; and its devaluing of social structures and implicit licensing of infantilistic egotism make things easier for the dominators and predators who prosper in a Hobbesian or Sadean world. But a desire for grace and energy and order, and a fondness for images of them, including obviously

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fictional ones, does not have to draw us away from the world of action or result in what I call at one point a 'stultifying contrasting of Edenic ideals and barren actualities'. If a good deal of watchfulness about power relationships and about the possibility of self-deception is obviously called for, the images of happiness that have traditionally moved people forward into action do not have to be at odds with the realities of the will to power and can be at once social *and* liberative. The mundane can have its heroic aspects, self-affirmation can be more than merely personal, and there can be an agonistic order that is not characterized either by overt domination and submission or by the masked dominativeness of neopastoral niceness and blandness. Likewise, there can be intellectual and artistic relationships in which individuals become more free and more themselves by willingly assimilating some of the ideas and procedures of others.

It is not for me to say how persuasively such possibilities emerge in these essays. I am not sure that I could, anyway, and writing an introduction is a risky enough business as it is. But they are implicit in them and in the sequence in which they are arranged; and they are at the centre of *America and the Patterns of Chivalry*.¹¹

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Prospero's Book: *The Tempest* Revisited

In an essay some years ago, Mr Leo Marx very composedly did what a number of other people had probably considered doing but turned away from for fear of seeming gimmicky; he discussed *The Tempest* as, in effect, an American play.¹ There was of course nothing gimmicky about his discussion. He wrote as a student of American culture who was at home among the relevant Elizabethan and Jacobean documents, and he showed convincingly that in *The Tempest* Shakespeare was at work on problems that had been receiving a sharper definition in contemporary writings about the American continent, and that his handling of them looked forward in various ways to their handling by American writers a couple of centuries later. Such a transcending of categories was long overdue. If nineteenth-century American literature is the most challenging body of literature in English since the Renaissance, this is obviously partly because some of the same major questions are explored in both – questions such as the respective demands of selfhood and community, the authority of tradition, the anatomy of evil, the workings and worth of conscience, the claims of action and contemplation, the function of violence, the nature of the ‘natural’, and the metaphysical basis of moral choices. Anything that can illuminate the resemblances and differences between the two groups of explorations is therefore greatly to be welcomed. Indeed, we have probably reached a point where neither can be studied with full profit without a strong consciousness of the other.

That said, however, I am inclined to wonder whether the importance of Mr Marx's essay may not lie rather in the general kind of pointing that goes on in it than in the detailed analysis that he engages in. Given the almost hypnotically cool charm of *The Tempest*, and the gratifications it so insidiously offers our pastoral yearnings, we must of course be grateful that Mr Marx has reminded us so freshly of the tough intelligence deployed in it on major problems of social organization. The besetting weakness of criticism of the play, where it has not been to succumb to the