

Taking on Being: Getting Beyond Postmodern Criticism

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“This is the terrible product of a materialistic age: scholars write commentaries on art. But these academic explanations, *Faust* commentaries, *Hamlet* commentaries, learned descriptions of the art of Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, are coffins in which genuine artistic feeling, living art, lie buried. If one picks up a *Faust* or *Hamlet* commentary, it is like touching a corpse.” - Rudolf Steiner, *The Arts and Their Mission* (1923), 85.

“. . . as soon as ‘the method’ turns criticism into a species of decoding, the man whose attachment to art is warm and direct must decline the game. He knows that the grand rule of life, Probability, also underlies art, and that such a rule can be applied only by intelligence, not a system.” - Jacques Barzun, *The Energies of Art: Studies of Authors, Classic and Modern* (1956), 14.

“We are all sick of interpretation.” - trans. of Jean Wahl, qtd. in *The Structuralist Controversy* (1966), 97.

THOUGH I SOMETIMES assume the role of literary critic, I must admit that there is something intrinsically unsettling about the very concept of literary criticism. I am not sure what the problem is. My immediate inclination is to blame criticism’s parasitic nature: that it lives at the expense of another, or, more properly, “*the other*.” But at best this is only a partial truth. My apprehension is probably what inclines me toward an appreciation for George Steiner’s observation that a subsequent literary work is the best type of criticism. *The Aeneid* and *Ulysses*, according to his manner of reckoning, are commentaries on *The Odyssey* as well as creative works in their own right. *Anna Karenina* performs the same service for *Madame Bovary*. “All serious art, music and literature,” he writes, “is a *critical act*” (11). Steiner’s insight reaches

beyond notions of intertextuality or allusion and points to relationships—between separate works and their authors; between authors, works, and audience—that literally divine meaning. He terms these relationships experiences of “real presences.”

The literary criticism George Steiner wrote of in 1989 and that we are accustomed to now, however, is very much different from that Rudolf Steiner (quoted above) encountered in 1923. Early twentieth-century criticism was of a more historical bent, focusing more on dates, sources, influences, and rhetoric than do late twentieth- or early twenty-first-century criticism. While more traditional modes of criticism are still to be found, by far the most prevalent approach to criticism is marked by the wide variety of self-reflective, idiosyncratic, subjective (though often, bewilderingly, professing to be objective) crystallizations of theory that can be categorized under the heading “postmodern.” Criticism is much changed since 1923.

The difficult thing, of course, is finding a definition for postmodernism. We are in no danger of running out of definitions for this word. Indeed, when I asked a colleague—a scholar who teaches courses on postmodernism—how she would define it, she declined, saying, “It is impossible to define.” My own definition is a general one, and one which many might find too wide. They are welcome to come up with their own definitions. Postmodernism is not a system of thought, not a philosophy, not a world view, but an attitude. As Socrates through Plato (or is it Plato through Socrates?) asserted that the rhetoric of the Sophist Gorgias was not the wisdom the latter professed it to be but “a knack;” so postmodernism is not a theory or set of theories but a knack, a habit, a proclivity particular to scholars of our day and age. The postmodernism habit is characteristic of approaches to literary criticism and studies in the humanities that have proliferated since the 1960s. These approaches are marked by fragmentation, uncertainty, irony, as well as by intellectual

and spiritual ambivalence or even, at times, hostility. The postmodern gesture is one of malaise when confronting the world, of insecurity when confronting the self. As a result, the encounter with the world, with the self, and with the other (the meeting place between the two) is fraught with cynicism, relativism, and angst. Postmodernism, finally, is more a symptom than a cause. It is a *sign* (a very postmodern word) of a deeper disorder.

Perhaps the strongest influence of postmodernism in intellectual life, and the one with which I am most familiar, has been in literary criticism. Academic and literary journals in literature and the humanities teem with work that furthers dissemination of the postmodern attitude. As a result, the innovative perspectives of Foucault, of Derrida, Lyotard, and others have rippled out into the culture affecting every level of society, even the lives of people who have never heard of these men, as did those of Darwin and Freud a few generations earlier. But before getting too far into postmodernism, let us first consider what led to its advent.

The first major departure from more traditional, humanistic approaches to literary criticism, which were ultimately unsatisfactory themselves, came with the New Critics beginning in the 1920s and 30s. The New Critics' insistence on training the reader's attention to the work of art rather than to the artist was one of their primary and original contributions in the development of close reading. They eschewed biographical information of authors as irrelevant to the text, allowing instead their own relationship to the works to lead them into a deeper understanding of literature. However, fashions of literary criticism, like fashions of literature, are given to change and innovation. Like poets and novelists, critics seek new ways.

Since the advent of New Criticism, perhaps the most foundational event in the history of literary criticism occurred at the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center from October 18-21, 1966. There at a symposium entitled "The Languages

of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” (the proceedings of which are captured in the book, *The Structuralist Controversy*) Structuralism was summarily dealt its death blow and Post-Structuralism and its discontents started marking their territory. Big names, and names about to be big, were present: names like Hyppolite, Jakobson, Lacan, Kott, Poulet, Barthes, de Man, Girard, and Derrida, among others. In terms that would literally become the *lingua franca* in the forthcoming decades, this amazing gathering of critics pronounced on everything from metaphysics to fledgling semiotics, sometimes profoundly, and other times in ways that might sound ridiculous—or at least pompous—to us now. When Georges Poulet confesses

My essential weakness is my near incapability of going to the theater to look at a play. For me that seems to be a spectacle absolutely unbearable, insufferable. I cannot do it; I never do it. The only possibility for me of tackling this play is to read it; that is what I do and then I have no difficulty whatever. (Macksey, 79)

he asserts not only the phenomenologist’s need for control over and intimacy with the text, he also stars in his own microcosmic theatre of the absurd (plays are written to be *seen*, after all). The Post-Structuralist drama Poulet and others performed in Baltimore set the stage for all that followed. The maelstrom of changes that has occurred in literary criticism since is astounding.

The no-longer-so-*nouveau* categories of Deconstruction, Marxist Criticism, Freudian Criticism, New Historicism, Postcolonial Criticism, Feminist Criticism, and Queer Theory share, sometimes obligingly, sometimes begrudgingly, the umbrella of “Postmodernism.” They have come to dominate literature and humanities departments in America over the past thirty years. As Paul Lake laments, postmodern critics are “the new ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’” (355). For a movement, or movements, that staked its claim by vowing to topple “hegemonic discourse,” postmodernism

is now the ruling, if not the only, discourse. *Carpe diem*, indeed.

Common to all the abovementioned manifestations of postmodernism's potent *geist* is the treatment of literature, "texts," with an uncompromising suspicion—that is, unless the texts belong to the so-called "marginalized" segments of society, in which case they are championed. The texts under scrutiny are seen not as manifestations of an author's appeal to "go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race," but as the detritus of a corrupted (Western) culture squeezed by (or is it from?) the critic's intellect like oil and dirt from a pimple.

The sad thing about this is that the people thus heroically scrutinizing and pimple squeezing, especially many of those in college and university literature departments, started out for the most part as kids who indeed wanted to forge the uncreated consciences of their races. They were kids who loved books and writers. Now they're grown-ups who deconstruct texts and believe the "author" is fiction's greatest fiction. (Did they never notice that Foucault, though he claimed the author to be a fiction, still signed his name to his books? No wonder plagiarism is in its heyday.) What happened?

Lots of things. First, we know what we are taught. In literature departments over the last thirty years, these postmodern schools have had the day and have increasingly secured their powerbase by transmitting their doctrines to their students and protégés. Jens Zimmermann observes that postmodern theorists evince a willful amnesia concerning their own motivations when it comes to the political agendas of their "willful violations of texts," adding that their "misreadings have become so formulaic that students learn to produce them on command" (497). In a like manner to which we, as if by osmosis, assume the beliefs and attitudes of our parents as children, so do we in our schooling often

assume those of our teachers and educational institutions. Indeed, we often replace the values of former with those of the latter. As elementary and secondary schools are such bastions of “socialization,” higher education furthers that mandate and attempts to socialize students into accepting the norms of the academy.

The values typically espoused in the form of buzzwords—for example “inclusiveness,” “tolerance,” and “multiculturalism”—are laughable, as they usually are applied only to those with similar political sympathies as the espouser. Try to get a Pro-Choice colleague to be “tolerant” of a Pro-Life “voice,” or *vice versa*. Fat chance. Add an Islamic *jihadi*—or an evangelical Christian, for that matter—to your department of Political Science, if you really want to be “inclusive.” Not bloody likely. The postmodern hegemonic discourse will not allow it. And there is nothing necessarily wrong with this. But all this jangling about tolerance, etc., is worthless. Nobody means it: it just makes us feel good about how noble we like to tell ourselves we are. But we continue to repeat the postmodern catechism of “acceptance, tolerance, equality,” despite evidence to the contrary. All these inane niceties have got to go. As Ernest Gellner said of postmodernism’s relativistic blather,

To pretend that we are somehow or other living in a pre-scientific and even a pre-Axial world, in which all meanings-systems are equal, in order to provide titillation for Middle America, and to indulge in a rite of expiation for a vanishing hegemony, is simply absurd. The sooner this nonsense stops the better. (60)

But Gellner, when he wrote this in 1992, did not believe the postmodern juggernaut would still be on a roll in 2009. He was wrong: this nonsense did not stop.

Another reason the postmodern ethos is still an article of faith in the academy is a very materialistic one: money. It’s what’s selling. Or, rather, who’s hiring. Literature departments, crammed as most of them are with adherents to what Harold

Bloom calls the “Schools of Resentment,” are like everybody else: they like to hire people like themselves. There’s strength in numbers, safety in a crowd. This creates an atmosphere of what I like to call “multiple persona disorder”—a group of otherwise decent people assuming masks in order to take a part in the departmental play. Five characters in search of an English department. Performativity on steroids. C. G. Jung wrote of the persona as a psychological dysfunction that we can all relate to:

Every calling or profession, for example, has its own characteristic persona. . . . A certain kind of behavior is forced on them by the world, and professional people endeavour to come up to these expectations. Only, the danger is that they become identical with their personas—the professor with his text-book, the tenor with his voice. Then the damage is done . . . the temptation to be what one seems to be is great, because the persona is usually rewarded in cash. (122-23)

In a discussion of the Sophists of ancient Greece and their unabashed relativism, Vladimir Solovyov points out that, for them, “nothing is either good or bad, true or false in itself . . . in the absence of real and objective principles, the only guide in every matter is practical expediency, whose sole aim is success” (32). And success breeds imitation.

Departments in the humanities look for *types* (“We need a feminist/postcolonial person who can specialize in underrepresented authors.”) These should really be called *stereotypes*. Unfortunately, the expertise of these academics can be, more often than might be acknowledged, in their politics to the detriment of their disciplines. An example: once, on a visit as a master teacher, I had occasion to observe a new classroom teacher, one who happened to hold a Ph.D. in history, give a lesson to fifth graders contrasting the societies of classical Athens and Sparta. Since the teacher held a doctorate, I looked forward to learning something myself. Throughout her lesson, which was very creatively and cleverly presented, she kept referring to the “island of Sparta.” In

our conference afterwards, I asked where she learned that Sparta was an island. "It's not?" she asked. I broke it to her as gently as I could, adding, "I thought you said you had a Ph.D. in history." "I do," she replied, "in feminist history."

The sad thing is that many of the types deconstructing texts, dismissing authors, and waving the black flag of postmodern nihilism still have that book-loving kid inside. But that is one abused child. As a colleague of mine says, due to their accumulation of degrees in literature, "They've had their love for literature bred out of them." More's the pity.

This postmodern mania for persona is nothing new—as Jung's essay, written in 1940, should make clear. It just has a cooler haircut and a nose ring. This donning of the persona is something intrinsically human, going all the way back to the caves and the sympathetic magic of wearing animal skins and antlers in order to secure a successful hunt—which, I suppose, is analogous to the interview process. Furthermore, we find in postmodernism the perennial desire of any school or age to prove its forebears wrong, our patrimonial agon. We play a glass bead game.

The desire to destroy the Freudian father, so well exemplified in the procession of the schools of literary criticism—from New Critical disdain for Humanism, Post-Structuralism's invective for Structuralist paradigms, or Deconstruction's dismissal of Phenomenology—some might describe as an Oedipal conflict. But I would conjecture that another conflict is present in postmodern academic and critical milieus. This is what I like to call the "Laius Conflict": the father's desire to prevent his demise and assure the dominance of his reign. I think Freud dropped the ball on this one. It takes two for this psychological tango.

Jean-François Lyotard acknowledges this fact. "Countless scientists," he writes, "have seen their 'move' ignored or repressed, sometimes for decades, because it too abruptly destabilized the accepted positions, not only in the university and scientific hierarchy, but also in the problematic"

(63). It is hard to believe, and indeed ingenuous of him, that Lyotard believed the postmodern hierarchy would behave any differently. The human capacity for pettiness and envy may be a product of the “Original Sin” metanarrative, but it is apparently impossible to eradicate.

Schools of criticism as well as academic associations (in addition to other groups) might well be said to form *egregores*, the personae of the collective. And the *egregore*, the shadow of the group, rewards individual personae for adhering to the cultural norms of the microclimate of the philosophy, the company, the office, the party, the department. The *egregore* of a particular collective is its *Laius*.

As Lyotard recognized, in the kingdom of the *egregore*, innovators rarely win friends and influence people. Usually they have just the opposite affect. The Russian philosopher Nicolai Berdyaev remarked on this phenomenon:

The highly cultured man of a certain style usually expresses imitative opinions upon every subject: they are average opinions, they belong to a group, though it may well be that this imitativeness belongs to a cultured élite and to a highly select group. . . . Genius has never been completely able to find a place for itself in culture, and culture has always striven to turn genius from a wild animal into a domestic animal. (123)

As the different schools of criticism have risen to prominence in academia, that which is unique and intriguing in a given perspective becomes systematized, dogmatized, canonized, legitimized—that is, it becomes *boring*. Innovators want to topple the philosophy *du jour* from its summit out of sheer boredom. And *Laius* still wants that baby dead.

Furthermore, postmodern theories have undermined their own unique contributions as a consequence of their canonization. Blake put it best: “They became what they beheld.” I find points (I said *points*) of every variety of postmodern discourse interesting, but I am not ready to bleed for any of them. Even more, though, I am offended and disappointed by their many arrogant claims to the truth

of their truthlessness and, most especially, by the self-loathing of frustrated critics and academics projected onto books and authors. I am not talking about Derrida and de Man here: at least their pronouncements when first made were intriguing. Here I speak of the minions still mouthing the dicta of their masters as they add their own two or three *centimes* to the spoils. The obvious careerism exemplified by this is an affront to intellectual life. As Gellner observes,

their repudiation of formal discipline, their expression of deep inner turbulence, is performed in academese prose, intended for publication in learned journals, a means of securing promotion by impressing the appropriate committees. *Sturm und Drang und Tenure* might well be their slogan. (27)

This careerism is not what teaching and thinking are about. At least it shouldn't be. I wish these people had gone into sales. Maybe they have.

What we see, or have seen, in literature studies, and by extension in literary criticism, over the past fifteen or twenty years is, I think, a period of stagnation. Nothing interesting or new has come to challenge the hegemony of postmodern discourse, save for the odd souls longing for the bygone days of humanism. We get theme and variation on the existing schools, but nothing jarring, nothing new. I have not seen anyone who espouses a heroically passionate sensibility like that of Blake's "I must Create a system or be enlav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (*Jerusalem* 10: 20-21). Instead, we see the umpteenth essay on how *The Tempest* is evidence of Shakespeare's nascent colonialism. We can't possibly need any more.

One error of the postmodern persona is its presumption of itself, or at least of some of its schools, as "scientific"—while at the same time disdaining science. This is most tellingly exhibited by postmodernism's hubris, borrowed from the sciences, that the contemporary "we" is privileged to exalted perspectives superior to those of the

poor saps who went before us. This attitude is rampant. Indeed, Lyotard accused those he perceived as “technocrats” of arrogance, writing, “What their ‘arrogance’ means is that they identify themselves with the social system conceived as a totality in quest of its most performative unity possible” (63). These words rang with palpable authenticity when they were written in 1979. Now they turn upon their master like the hounds of Actaeon.

As for postmodernism aping pure science, Terry Eagleton, for one, has been upbraided for calling his approach “scientific” (Felperin, 63); and Robert Koch identifies a “scientism” in the thought of Lyotard. The canonized Michel Foucault’s discourse is rife with technical, quasi-scientific jargon such as “author-function,” and “the science or the discursivity which refers back to their work as primary coordinates” (143, 156). The prose in *JAMA* is far more lucid.

But literary criticism, whether postmodern, classical, or prehistoric, is NOT a science, as much as it pretends or has pretended to be with its hypotheses, “theories,” and so-called “research.” As Bloom writes, “Criticism is not a science, not even a ‘human science,’ and it is not a branch of philosophy. . . . The theory of poetry, like all criticism, is an art, a teachable and useful art, and its true criteria are poetic” (25). Only the more historical/philological aspects of literary criticism were ever remotely scientific.

Allow me to draw a parallel. The Human Genome Project comprises research; it is a scientific endeavor, based on hypotheses and theories, with the goal of finding the *truth* about DNA. Compare this to a postmodern critic representing the suicide of Ophelia as emblematic of patriarchy’s oppression of the female “other.” This is not a product of research; though it may certainly be a product of much *reading*. What it may more legitimately be called is political propaganda, or bad psychoanalysis, or a statement of belief. It may very well make for interesting reading, but

it is in no way a product of scientific objectivity or research. Quite the contrary.

This pretension to scientific eminence stems from postmodernism's New Critical and Structuralist precursors; though New Critical and Structuralist critics approved of science, while postmodernism, for the most part, disavows it. Following the Darwinian time bomb of the nineteenth century and Freud's subsequent revelation of the psyche, science came into its own. Even the charlatan Madame Blavatsky appropriated the scientific paradigm of evolution to "create a system" of religious, metaphysical, and occult syncretism in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Literary critics of the mid-twentieth century did much the same.

Literary criticism of the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s, for instance, is jam packed with scientific/psychological jargon and diagrams, lots and lots of diagrams. This was the age of the great schematicizers: Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, and Kenneth Burke. Frye and Abrams were big on diagrams and outlines. They adorned their books with tidy little schematics, figures easily translatable to the blackboard. Burke, a little more idiosyncratic and much more materialistic, took his scientism even further, avoiding any remotely metaphysical categories such as "symbol" or "symbolic action" and replacing them with more materialistic terminology, such as "statistic" or "equation" (22-33). The Structuralists were not so much attempting to reveal the "truth" about literature, as much as trying to arrive at a scientific approach to the reading of literature, however erring their efforts may appear now.

Postmodernism has maintained the Structuralist enthusiasm for pseudo-scientific smugness while avoiding anything approximating scientific *method*. Though holding science in disrepute, postmodernism nevertheless assumes the sciences' mantel of certainty—even if that certainty is a certainty of uncertainty (and if that's not a chunk of PoMo verbiage, I don't know what is). This scientific anti-science is

organically schizophrenic. It's everything and nothing at the same time.

Literary criticism is not science; literary criticism, as Bloom tries to remind us, is art. Unfortunately, many of its practitioners have forgotten or tried to ignore this fact. I, like many others, find it extremely grueling, indeed a form of penance, to make it through a book of Derrida's, though I often find his ideas interesting. Nevertheless, his discourse is needlessly abstruse, complicated, and graceless. On the other hand, I once read a photocopy of a hand-written letter of Derrida's, and I was surprised at its levity and charm. And while Derrida's writing is not very beautiful, it is still an artistic expression: rhetoric. And art—especially rhetoric—is not about “truth” or “facts” but about interpretation, persuasion, and subjectivity—that of the subject/critic's relationship to the work being considered. This is the very sin of which Socrates accused Gorgias over two-thousand years ago. This innate Sophism of postmodern theory is one of its most supreme ironies: it proves itself to be in essence *premodern*.

The subject/critic's relationship to the work under consideration, when taken honestly, can be an occasion for discovery and insight. For example, Michelangelo's *Piéta* is not the “truth” about the Deposition of Christ. The Virgin Mary was by no means a fourteen-year-old, seven-foot-tall girl at the time of her son's crucifixion. Nor would Christ have looked like the sleeping hero he appears in the sculpture when taken down from the cross. The *Piéta* is Michelangelo's artistic/philosophic interpretation of and commentary on the Deposition. In that way, it works as a type of literary criticism—augmented by artistic insight and incredible skill—on the stories of the Deposition found in the New Testament. It may not be the *truth*, yet there is plenty of truth in it.

Literary criticism works in the same way: it is the critic's take on the work in question; and any forays into proclamations of new truths about the nature of the

work—or of literature itself—tell us, as many have noted, as much—or more—about the critic as about the work under consideration. It is only in the power of the rhetoric being used that the critics have any influence. And their power is often impressive. The same might be said of the *Piéta*. Only, I doubt whether Michelangelo tried to convince anyone that the Virgin *really* stood seven-feet tall. Postmodern critics for the most part, as did critics before them, have forgotten the virtue of humility. So much of what is published is but an installment in the party line of one or another School of Resentment. Original thought and engaging ideas have almost entirely given way to pat formulae and catechetical dogmas of “*différance*, (re)presentation, semiotic analysis.” It’s like the Middle Ages.

The best a critic can hope to do in a work of literary criticism is to provide insight into the work—this we might call the pedagogic capacity of criticism—or to pronounce sentence (*sententia*) on the work, which may address philosophical, cultural, or aesthetic concerns of the work. But this is *sententia*, an opinion that one either defends or explains, not *scientia*. All too often the two are confused.

“To analyze” for many postmodern critics, especially those following Derrida and Foucault, often means “to destroy.” They are, as Rene Girard wryly suggests, romantic souls who like to think of themselves as the boldest iconoclasts in history (130). Typically, their foci are the texts traditionally listed among that much maligned edifice, the Western Canon. In shattering this literary iconostas, they believe they are liberating us from the oppression of systems, biases, and metanarratives. This type of catabolic, or apophatic criticism certainly has its place in literary studies, but it is not the *only* way. It is a *via negativa*. A *via positiva*, on the other hand, would do something for us more akin to what Coleridge had in mind when he wrote in *Biographia Literaria*:

He who tells me that there are defects in a new work, tells me nothing which I should not have taken for granted without

this information. But he, who points out and elucidates the *beauties* of an original work, does indeed give me interesting information, such as experience would not have authorized me in anticipating. (1: 44)

Coleridge's attitude is echoed by an unexpected thinker: Richard Rorty. Rorty divides criticism into two categories: "methodical" and "inspired." Methodical approaches are those of critics who hold an angle or agenda, be it Marxist, feminist or what have you. These critics treat texts systematically, scientifically, with the intention of furthering their ideology or philosophy through the course of their discourse. This approach, believes Rorty, belongs to those who "lack . . . 'an appetite for poetry'" (145). Inspired criticism, on the other hand, he says, "is the result of an encounter with an author, character, plot, stanza, line or archaic torso which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself: an encounter which has rearranged her priorities and purposes" (145). This is a function of criticism sadly missing from most academic journals.

But such criticism exists. Rorty, though not "officially" a literary critic, can be described as inspired. So can Jacques Barzun, George Steiner, and Camille Paglia. Certainly, the second half of Harold Bloom's career has been distinguished by taking inspired criticism to the masses. Unfortunately, all of those mentioned have been consistently upbraided for their very "inspired-ness" by the postmodern personae. Not toeing the party line. Their prose is engaging, entertaining, and thoughtful: what more could one ask of a piece of writing?

What readers can ask of critics is that they make their criticism what it should be, a work of art. If we are going to be touching corpses, let's make it as enjoyable a process as possible. I regret to say that I find very little postmodern criticism pleasing as literature. Good literature, on the other hand, is the type of thing we can return to again and

again. As Italo Calvino puts it, “A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say” (128). So often I return to the poetry of Yeats, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, or Ortega y Gasset’s *Meditations on Hunting* (not to mention Shakespeare) and find marvels I had never encountered in them before. Rarely does that happen when I return to a work of literary criticism. On the other hand, it is rare that I want to return to a work of literary criticism.

The critic should be interested in the *character* of the writing before him. For a postmodern critic, this character is a “constructed self”—considered the byproduct of a culture or metanarrative, but rarely the product of a fellow human being. We must never forget that the impulse to write and the reciprocal impulse to read are underwritten by a desire for communion with the other. This is the real privilege in literature. Authors and books may, indeed, be compromised by their times and conditions, their prejudices and aversions, their influences and agons; but we cannot escape the fact that—at times—the touch of their utterance upon us is profound to the point of ineffability. Is this statement an example of the religiosity the New Critics and humanists have been so chastised for? Perhaps. But for many of them literature had become a variety of ersatz religion. What I speak of is not quite the same. I am speaking not of a divine communion, but of a more humble one: that between human souls. This is why I keep returning to literature, though this *communio* does not only—or always—happen in literature. What I have in mind is a literary experience approximate to what Heidegger calls the authentic Self. When we encounter a piece of writing that rings of this authenticity, even when we may know it is a fictive (and thereby categorically false) construction, we are moved by the utterance. The resonance allowed by our own sense of openness to the Being of the work becomes apparent, it may be, in a flash of insight or recognition, in a smile. In tears. It most certainly does not need happen only when reading literary works. It could

happen, for instance, in reading a letter, or even, if we're lucky, in reading literary criticism. The point is that reading is an incredibly intimate act, when the ideas and words of another inhabit our own souls. No other act can do this. Not even sex.

The problem, for me, with most postmodern criticism is that I do not experience the *communio*. Perhaps, infected by postmodernism's absolute and radical skepticism, I am on the defensive? More likely, and what I suspect, is that there is no room for the authentic Self of the critic in postmodern criticism. Instead there is persona. And persona, being a fictive representation of self, has no Self available to the *communio*. What's Hecuba to him? Or he to Hecuba?

I hope to never have my love for literature bred out of me. I still believe with Apollinaire that "*que seuls le renouvellent ceux qui sont fondés en poésie*"—only those will remake the world who are grounded in poetry ("Poème lu au mariage d'Andre Salmon," line 10). The glossolalia of postmodern polemics and political manifestoes offer nothing to me and mean less. When they are not entirely incomprehensible, at best they are like tautological debates over issues of faith: cause for strife and bellyaches, but not for insight. But critics need not invest themselves too heavily in the anxieties of polemics. There is another way.

In 1917 the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev asked the poet Jean Cocteau to create a ballet for him. When Cocteau asked what Diaghilev would like, the entrepreneur simply said, "Astonish us." That's what I want from criticism. I want to be astonished. Sadly, much postmodern literary criticism follows the imperative, "Shock us," which by trickle-down dialectics has come to mean "Bore us." It's succeeding. I long to hear more audacious, rather than simply contrary, voices in criticism. I long to encounter an independent mind. I have grown weary of the marketplace.

Criticism, like any good poem, can delight and inform. As George Steiner observed, it does not even have

to be written as criticism *per se*. One of the finest works of literary criticism is also one of the oldest, and it has delighted and informed audiences for well over two thousand years. Aristophanes's *Frogs* is also one of history's cheekiest pieces of literary criticism. It is hard to beat lines like these:

To hang around killing time
in pretentious conversation
and hairsplitting twaddle
is the mark of a man who's lost his mind. (231)

But Aristophanes's humor is a tactic he uses for disarming his audience in order to prepare them for his real intention: a discussion and evaluation on the place of literature in culture. Literary criticism for Aristophanes—and his audience—was important enough and immediate enough to be as entertaining as slapstick or as violent as a prizefight. And while the acerbic quote above shows Aristophanes at his most catabolic, he could wax anabolic as well: “First, you gods below the earth, grant to the departing poet a fine journey as he ascends to the sunlight, and to the city grant fine ideas that will bring fine blessings” (233). Aristophanes knew that the dissembling critic and the inspired one can exist side by side, even within the folds of the same tunic.

In a similar vein to Rudolf Steiner, William Butler Yeats, in an 1895 essay entitled “The Body of Father Christian Rosencrucx,” compared criticism to a tomb. But he was nevertheless hopeful. “I cannot get it out of my mind,” he wrote, “that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation, about to come in its place . . . for art is a revelation, and not a criticism” (197). Certainly, an odor of decay still hangs about the tomb of criticism. And that odor belongs foremost to the *corpus poetarum*. The art of poetry, for one, is dying if not dead, having fallen into transcriptions of therapy sessions, dystopic and dyspeptic family albums, evident loathing (or ignorance) of literature, and contempt for the world. Even more unsettling is the fact that far more people write

poetry than read it. Poetry's demise is a product of the age of criticism in which we live. What appetite the postmodern age had for poetry has been purged through its criticism's suspicious attitude toward language and its demand for the repudiation of authorship. Criticism is indeed a tomb.

But implicit in this idea of the tomb is the attendant commonplace of calling the physical accretion of a writer's output the *body* of his or her work, an admission of something much more than a convenient metaphor. This body is the vessel in which the writer's or critic's ideas *take on Being*. And I mean this in the sense of *incarnation* as well as in the sense of *confronting* Being. This body is a thing, a construction, at times an obstruction. It possesses a reality, but that reality is only manifest when the *ideas* present in a work descend (or is it ascend?) through language and connect with the consciousness of another. The "text," then, becomes not so much the shameful evidence of decrepit cultural biases and oppression, but a frequency by which we can discern and attend to the ideas of another. As Poulet said, "To understand a literary work ... is to let the individual who wrote it reveal himself *in us*" (Macksey, 61). Reading is the most Platonic thing in the world.

I must confess that, as Yeats did over a hundred years ago, I feel that *this* age of criticism is about to pass. Postmodernism has run out of fresh ideas. It's become as predictable as a sitcom. Indeed, its present stagnation presages its impending atrophy and subsequent demise. Its downfall has already begun. But I do not dare prophesy what will arise in its place. Even though I will not be unhappy to see it go, I anticipate the arrival of its successor with trepidation. Experience has taught me to be suspicious of movements; even, or especially, those with which I feel a natural affinity. But something will take its place. Of this we can be certain.

In considering Socrates's encounters with the Sophists, Vladimir Solovyov wrote, "by the very fact of his absolutely critical and at the same time perfectly positive

attitude towards actual life, he exposed the moral insolvency of the pseudo-criticism of the Sophists" (37). The criticism of postmodernism, like that of the Sophists, lacks the vivifying élan of Socrates's positive attitude. Its ultimately negative and tragically cynical attitude, like cancer cells in latency, will be the cause of its collapse.

So what do I recommend as an alternative? A return to Romanticism? The resurrection of meaning? These are the two ideas most under attack by postmodernism, and for good reason: they won't go away. If we fear our lives are meaningless and project that fear onto the world (or a book) what we have at best is a case of sympathetic vibration, not discovery. Meaning (or meaninglessness) is not something one finds; it is, rather, something one already possesses, a property of being. Here I do not uphold an avowal of relativity, but an apotheosis of the subjective, a modality that would not be apropos of the sciences, but is of art. I am not advocating a return to humanism, as Graham Good suggests. Nor am I staking a claim for a "neo-humanism," as does Zimmermann. We don't need any more manifestoes. What we need is to allow inspiration back into criticism. The last word of criticism, as with the last word of *Ulysses*, should be "Yes."

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