

The Use and Abuse of Theory

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In March 1937 René Wellek published in *Scrutiny* a challenge to the author of *Revaluation*: would Dr Leavis please expound and defend the principles upon which the book was based? Would he offer a theory of literature to explain how he had arrived at the judgement of the several poems analysed? Wellek intimated that without such a theory, the particular judgements enforced in the book could have only whatever authority a reader was willing to concede to Dr Leavis's personality. Leavis's reply to Wellek mainly consists in his assertion that the author of *Revaluation* is a literary critic, not a philosopher: 'Literary criticism and philosophy seem to me to be quite distinct and different kinds of discipline — at least I think they ought to be', he asserted. The business of the literary critic, according to Leavis, 'is to attain a peculiar completeness of response and to observe a peculiarly strict relevance in developing his response into commentary; he must be on his guard against abstracting improperly from what is in front of him and against any premature or irrelevant generalizing — of it or from it'. 'I think I have gone as far in explicitness', Leavis said, 'as I could profitably attempt to go, and that I do not see what would be gained by the kind of explicitness [Professor Wellek] demands (though I see what is lost by it).' What is lost by it, Leavis maintains, is the cogency of concrete analysis, the organization of 'similarly "placed" things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations'. Leavis speaks of the danger of 'blunting of edge, blurring of focus and muddled misdirection of attention: consequences of queering one discipline with the habits of another'.¹

I have recalled that exchange between Wellek and Leavis, familiar as it is, mainly to remark that Leavis has usually been supposed to have had the better of it. I have never met anyone who argued that Leavis should have worked out a theory of literature in advance of the need of it; or a poetics ready to be applied on every occasion of commentary. It has generally been agreed that the close work of analysis must come first, and that the development from practice to theory may well be endlessly postponed. I concur with this attitude, for the reasons Leavis has given. But I wonder, if the exchange between Wellek and Leavis were to be enacted today, whether the privilege which Leavis claimed for the literary critic would now be willingly granted; or indeed whether the relation between the theory and the practice of literary criticism would be thought to be a matter of any moment. I think many of my students would find the argument between Wellek and Leavis quaint. They would say that theory is one thing and practical criticism a different thing. They would not observe any important relation between the two or understand why Wellek and Leavis troubled themselves with it.

¹ F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 212–13; René Wellek, 'Literature and Philosophy', *Scrutiny*, 5.4 (March 1937), 375–83.

Indeed, if I were to claim that an argument between Wellek and Leavis fifty-five years ago retains an interest not merely historical, I should have to explain to my students that in 1937 there was a notably close relation between the literature represented by Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce, and Lawrence, on the one hand, and, on the other, the particular forms of criticism developed to deal with it; that the New Criticism, as it was called in Britain and the United States, was designed as a response to a literature still thought to be new and difficult; that the attempt to gain for the literature a competent readership, in the universities and beyond them in the reading public, was a matter of urgency. Eliot was the crucial figure, by virtue of *The Waste Land* and the poems surrounding it; by virtue, too, of the essays he selected for *The Sacred Wood*. The scale of Eliot's achievement was acknowledged and clarified in Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry*. This is commonplace, but it marks a situation that no longer obtains. In 1992 the work of literary criticism cannot be said to be impelled by a new literature. No literature written in the past forty years has called for a distinctive critical response; by this, I mean a response such as was required to deal with the formal organization of *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*. So far as I can judge, critics no longer feel impelled to devise new procedures to deal with current poems and novels. Nor do poets and novelists show much interest in the theory and practice of criticism. There are many books which call for sustained attention. I think of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a work at least as difficult as, say, *The Waves*. But *Gravity's Rainbow* proceeds independently of criticism, in respects which do not apply to *The Waves*.

Yet certain issues which were for centuries determined by a general reading public have now been removed to the universities. The current argument about the canon, for instance. So far as there is a canon of literature, it has been formed by the fact that certain writers have been important to other writers: Spenser to Milton; Milton to Wordsworth, Keats, and Blake; Shelley to Browning, Hardy, and Keats; Dante to Eliot. These relations were then verified by those readers who paid attention to them. During the years in which Eliot's central significance was accepted, it was not considered eccentric to propose a revision of the canon in his favour. Cleanth Brooks offered a revised history of English literature in this respect in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*. Now that there is no such contemporary writer — no writer upon whose work the future of literature in his or her language appears to depend — the question of the canon is open to much more diverse considerations. It is no longer considered self-evident that there are distinctions to be made between High Literature and Popular Literature, or between the values expounded by literary criticism and those brought to bear upon the sociology of literature. It may be that such distinctions can still be established, but they cannot be taken for granted or imputed to common knowledge. I am not complaining.

Nor am I complaining that the context of these arguments is no longer what it was. The university has become an epitome of the world, so far as the world is discursive. So it is not surprising that the university is now a place in which diverse worldly interests are pursued. Some of our colleagues may be dismayed to find that libraries have to find space not only for the Oxford Standard Authors but for the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, various collections of Black Writing, and the *Faber Book of Gay Short Stories*. But this merely reflects the fact that the university deals with its interests by recognizing their multiplicity, by regarding them as we regard lobbies in the political world, as groups speaking for special interests. Those

in the university who cherish the notion of a canon, a syllabus held in common, may take comfort in the thought that the great authors are still those who satisfy the diverse interests of many writers and of large groups of readers otherwise disparate. These classic authors are still found to be, in Frank Kermode's phrase, 'patient of interpretation'; their works may be read in many different ways and subjected to extremely disparate considerations.

My sense of the university, then, is that it is no longer an institution in which a few official topics of research — paradigms, as we say — are pursued in many different ways by many people, but rather a place in which many groups of people — many constituencies — pursue special interests between which there is little or no communication. It may be that over a longer period these groups will discover relations between one interest and another, and combine to articulate them. But for the moment most of them seem to be keeping to themselves.

The word in current use to describe these interests is 'Theory'; though I am not sure that it is correctly used. A passage from J. Hillis Miller's recent book, *Hawthorne and History*, shows how the word is commonly called upon. He is speaking of literary theory, but a little extension of his account would be enough to accommodate what we call 'critical theory':

I mean by 'literary theory' the shift from the hermeneutical process of identifying the meaning of a work of literature to a focus on the question of how that meaning is generated. When there is a general consensus about literary theory, if there ever was such a time (for example in that mythical time at the beginning of the present epoch of literary studies when the 'new criticism' was more or less universally accepted in the United States), theory tends to be effaced, latent, presupposed. One just goes to work doing or teaching 'close reading'. When a multitude of conflicting critical theories call for attention, and when in addition there is confusion over the canons and the curricula of literature, as at the present time, then literary theory, rather than being something that can more or less be taken for granted, becomes overt, exigent, even, some would say, strident. Theory tends to become a primary means of access to the works read. These works now tend to be redefined as 'examples' demonstrating the productive effectiveness of this or that theory. In such a situation, literary theory even tends to become a primary object for study in itself, as in that ever-increasing number of courses and programs these days in critical theory as such, sometimes treated historically, sometimes as a matter of current concern.²

In that statement by Miller, urbane as it is, a number of distinctions have been elided. The New Criticism was never a matter of such consensus as Miller implies: think of the disagreements which enlivened the proceedings of the Kenyon School of Criticism, and the published disputes between Ransom, Tate, Kenneth Burke, Blackmur, and Empson. But Miller is, broadly speaking, correct; the New Critics thought of themselves as engaged in 'the common pursuit of true judgment' — in Eliot's phrase — and their efforts were turned upon a provocative literature deemed to be held in common. I wish Miller would explain, though, how Theory 'tends to become a primary means of access to the works read'. In his own work it does, but he is exceptional in this respect. Generally, it seems to me that Theory, far from being a primary means of access to the works read, becomes a primary means of endlessly postponing access to them. Or if works of literature are read, they are read merely as illustrations of a theory already fixed: it is the fate of the theory merely to be fulfilled, and of the work of literature merely to gratify the theory. Indeed, Miller is on firmer ground in saying that Theory becomes 'a primary object for study in itself'.

² J. Hillis Miller, *Hawthorne and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 47–48.

Miller's slide, in the passages quoted, from literary theory to critical theory gives me occasion to ask what he means by Theory. The shift from the hermeneutical process to a focus on the question of how the meaning of a work of literature is generated is not entirely clear. I take it that 'the hermeneutical process' is one in which it is agreed that the aim is a valid — or at least a productive — interpretation of the work of literature. When we move from that consideration to the question of how the meaning of the work is generated, we are concerned with the process by which one meaning rather than another is arrived at and in some sense enforced, given whatever authority is ascribed to it. We would be concerned to discover, as a case in point, not what Leavis thought of 'Ash-Wednesday' but the process by which his sense of that poem acquired a certain authority. If I am right in that assumption, I do not see that the word 'Theory' is enough to accommodate that interest.

To make sense of the matter, we need to distinguish between two words which offer themselves in this context: theory and principle. They are not synonymous, but the difference between them is hard to maintain. I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* could not reasonably have been called *Theories of Literary Criticism*. If it were, it would have had to be a survey of the many theories in the vicinity of criticism, rather than an attempt, as it clearly is, to establish one privileged set of values in preference to another. The dictionaries do not help us very much here. They tell us that principles are those first or founding considerations from which later elaborations and applications are derived. The word is often used to refer to moral or ethical principles, such as principles of natural justice, on which specific judgements may be made in other fields of interest. When we say that Dr Johnson was a moralist, we hope not only to say that his criticism is directed by the moral claims he acknowledged but to explain why he censured the mythological allusions in *Paradise Lost* 'as not being always used with notice of their vanity'.³ It would be trivial to think of that judgement as having issued from a theory.

The difference between a principle and a theory seems to depend upon a difference in the scale of the matter under consideration: where the matter is grand, we think of a principle; where it is relatively minor or local, we think of a theory in its behalf. Jean Starobinski's distinction between a theory and a method is valuable here. He takes a theory to issue from an act of intellectual contemplation, on the analogy of certain procedures in the natural sciences. Theory, in one sense, according to Starobinski, is a predictive hypothesis — 'une hypothèse anticipatrice' — concerning the nature and internal relations of the object under examination; in another sense the word means the general contemplation of an ensemble, or the comprehensive system governed by an intelligible order: 'la vision générale d'un système régi par un ordre sensé'.⁴ A method is, then, the scrupulous coding of certain technical procedures: it develops into a reflection on the aims to be proposed.

These definitions are useful, especially as they make us wonder whether those who proffer a literary theory or even a critical theory are not hoping to gain a certain advantage they do not deserve. Theory, as I use the word and as Starobinski encourages me to use it, has an air of speculation about it: it is not to be treated casually, but it is notional, hypothetical, or, as we say, heuristic. We use a theory for what it is worth, and we drop it when it has served its day. We do not hold to it for

³ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1906; repr. 1968), 1, 123.

⁴ Jean Starobinski, *La Relation critique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 9.

dear life, as if it were a belief. But when I read Terry Eagleton's book called *Literary Theory*, I find it not at all speculative or heuristic. He is bent upon an ideological programme, and uses literature only as a means to a political end. He is in literary theory in the sense in which we say of someone that he is in politics or in economics or in real estate. I find the same spirit, though not the same ideological programme, at work in Leo Bersani's *The Culture of Redemption*. In that book Bersani attacks the literature of High Modernism, as we call it, for not being as radical as it claimed to be. The charge against Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, is that it ministers to 'a conservative ideology of the self'; that, while claiming to redeem modern experience, it merely repeats the procedures of the late-nineteenth-century psychological novel. Joyce, according to Bersani, 'is faithful to our humanist tradition [...] in his reenactment of its assumptions and promise that the possession of culture will transcend anxiety and perhaps even redeem history'.⁵ It does not require a close reading of Bersani's sentences to disclose the invidious implication carried by the words 'humanist', 'culture', and 'redeem'. Indeed it is clear that Bersani's books, notably *A Future for Astyanax*, *Baudelaire and Freud*, and *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, constitute a politics rather than a poetics, a politics of desire and a rhetoric in its favour.

I should make it clear that I am not objecting to the politics or the ideology, but to their furtherance in the guise of Theory. I should also try to explain why the politicization of Theory so often takes the form of an attack on the literature of High Modernism. I have remarked the disjunction between theory and contemporary literature, and now I find myself saying that much of the energy of Theory is provoked by disappointment, the apparent failure of High Modernism to achieve its aims — or rather, one particular aim: its attack on bourgeois liberalism.

The antithetical, subversive character of modern literature is a commonplace. Lionel Trilling remarked that the social purpose of modern literature was to enable its readers not only to criticize the achievements of middle-class culture but, if they so wished, to live some part of their spiritual lives beyond that culture. The possibility of adopting an adversary stance, or a stance of dissociation, was first disclosed in the art and literature of Modernism. From Pater and Mallarmé to Yeats and Eliot we find this possibility held out as a vision, its emblem the self-animating poem, the passage of murmuring, self-beguiling prose. In poetry: difficult forms, language brooding upon itself. In prose: passages in which the mind is indeed engrossed in a dialogue with itself. One might expect modern critics, then, to approve such efforts and to thank the modern writers for maintaining, in poems and fictions, the possibility of a 'world elsewhere'. Surely they would endorse the efforts of James, Conrad, and Proust rather than those of H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw? Instead, we find literary critics complaining that Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, and Pound not only failed to make middle-class society feel ashamed of itself but, all the while, were in secret league with the society they claimed to oppose.

What form would such a charge take? Let me give one example of it. Some years ago the critic John Guillory published an essay called 'The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks'. I must distort the argument by presenting it in an extremely simple version, but the gist of it is that Eliot's cultivation of relatively minor poets — Donne, Herbert, and certain lesser poets

⁵ Leo Bersani, 'Against *Ulysses*', *Raritan*, 8.2 (Fall 1988), 1–32 (p. 32).

combining somehow to culminate in Dryden rather than in Milton — was in the service of religious and political ‘orthodoxy’, a term Eliot came to use instead of the ‘tradition’ of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ and other early essays. Cleanth Brooks’s *The Well-Wrought Urn* then becomes a reinterpretation of several major poems from Donne to Yeats in the light of Eliot’s canonization of Donne. By presenting poetry as paradox, as the reconciliation of opposites, Brooks raises poetry above science and associates its saints with the miracle of a neo-Christian resurrection. I shall quote a substantial paragraph of Guillory’s essay to give a sense of its tone. He is commenting on the chapter in *The Well-Wrought Urn* in which Brooks brings together Donne’s urn, Shakespeare’s phoenix, and the prophetic figure of the resurrected Christ. Brooks’s implication is, according to Guillory, that one day soon the suppressed truth of poetry will be recovered, removed from the control of scientists and positivists, and handed into the keeping of true priests, the well-ordained teachers of poetry in the academies. Guillory writes:

The elaboration of the ideology into such allusive structures yields up the New Criticism to the service of the liberal pluralism which is the regnant ideology of the academy and which the pedagogy in no way contradicts. The technique of formalist interpretation subtends the larger ideology, satisfying within a narrower domain of practice the longing for consensus, for a metaphysics of the same — a longing expressed by the posited ‘unity’ of the literary work. [...] It would appear that we mean by consensus what Eliot meant by orthodoxy.

The canon participates centrally in the establishment of consensus as the embodiment of a collective valuation. [...] The phoenix image emerges from the exemplary text as an emblem of the canonical principle. [...] The assimilation of ‘The Phoenix and Turtle’ foreshadows a systematically ideological reading of the canon, a reading capable of absorbing what Eliot’s more primitive rule had excluded: the major English poets.⁶

So far as I understand the phrase, ‘a metaphysics of the same’ refers to the act of knowledge by which the mind, encountering an object, engages with it on the understanding that no threat to its own autonomy is entailed: the mind returns to itself at the end, justified and strengthened in its self-understanding. A consensus is the civic equivalent of this experience.

Guillory’s attack not only on Eliot and Brooks but on the ideology of liberal pluralism which they allegedly endorse is bound to appear odd. It must come as a surprise to hear that Eliot gave support to liberal pluralism. But it has been argued, notably by Habermas in *The Philosophical Basis of Modernity* and by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, that the whole of western philosophy from Plato to Derrida has been a metaphysics of the same; that, however disparate its appearances, it has had an interest in finding the individual mind verified and recovered in its own powers. Cognitive experience has been valued for that reason. So Guillory’s terms are not eccentric. What appears eccentric is his assumption that the replacement of ‘the same’ by ‘difference’ as ‘our central critical category’ will solve our problems. In our colleges and universities, at least in the United States, the rhetoric of difference, and its corresponding pedagogy, merely takes the form of establishing groups to express different viewpoints and, as we used to say, different lifestyles. The establishment of courses in women’s studies, Afro-American studies, feminist studies, Marxist studies, and so forth seems to recognize difference; and so it does till the members of each group sink their difference in yet another rhetoric of the same. Each is the same

⁶ John Guillory, ‘The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks’, in *Canons*, ed. by Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 337–62 (p. 358).

as the next member of the group. Consensus is sought within the group, on the sole ground of its difference from the group in the next seminar room. Within the group, membership implies the experience of fusion: the terms sought are those which have been found sinister in the world at large — unity, 'the same', fusion, the autonomy of the object attended to.

There is no merit, no justice, in being tendentious. I am not sure, however, what form a conversation with John Guillory would take. It seems to me that the critical problem has to do with the status of fictions: how to teach our students to deal with fictions and not to degrade them into concepts. The most acute difficulty in the classroom is to gain attention, preferably a just kind of attention, for aesthetic objects; or rather to gain aesthetic attention for objects that call for such a response. There was a time when it was convincing to quote Eliot's admonition that if you read literature it is as literature you must read it and not as another thing. But our students do not understand what Eliot was talking about or what it means to read literature 'as literature'. They read literature as they read everything else, as matter for conversation on themes that happen to interest them apart from literature.

It seems clear to me that unless we can establish the fictive and the aesthetic as calling for a distinctive form of attention, we cannot teach literature. We can of course present poems and novels as illustrations of human experiences which can then be discussed independently of their provenance in literature; but that is indeed another thing. So how may we proceed?

We may start, as so often, with Kant's third *Critique*, especially with the famous passage in which he describes an aesthetic idea as 'that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it'.⁷ The imagination, to Kant, is the mind's power of invention, of producing what nature has not given, a distinctive *copia* free and freely enjoyed, independently of concepts. It follows that a work of art is exempt from determinant or cognitive judgement, the judgement by virtue of which thinking is turned upon being and deemed to be veridical by being so turned. Schiller extended Kant's sense of art by appealing to the experience of play as an act of the mind superior to both the impulse to sense and the impulse to form, removing the deficiencies of each. Man is only and completely man while at play. The source of play is excess of energy, beyond need. We have the basis of a theory of aesthetics if to Kant's third *Critique* and Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* we add Goethe's letter to Louise Seidler (February 1818) in which he describes that excess as the emotions of hope, anticipation, and astonishment. The condition of art, Goethe said, is probability, 'but within the realm of probability the highest ideal must be supplied which does not otherwise appear'.⁸

What I have said of Kant, Schiller, and Goethe is not intended to be adequate to the theory of aesthetics they imply: it is designed merely to say that there is such a theory. It has not been ignored: indeed, much recent theory has been an effort to disqualify it or, if that is not possible, to compromise it by associating it with the allegedly fascist politics of 'aesthetic ideology'. I cannot go far into these arguments, but I shall try to represent them in a few sentences. It is alleged that Kantian

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, trans. by James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 175–76.

⁸ Quoted in John Gage, *Goethe on Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 97.

aesthetics is tainted by his idealism and by its ministering to bourgeois hegemony. It is also alleged that Kantian aesthetics claims to transcend political difference and to embody 'the universal formal identity of the human'.⁹ What corresponds to the autonomy claimed for the aesthetic object is the autonomy felt by the subject, the mind that contemplates the object. This mind is enabled to escape from history, politics, economics, and all such forces; or at least to have the sentiment of escape. So the human subject is recuperated on the ground of universality as freedom enjoyed at once individually and in common. The mind can exert this claim to freedom and unity by observing it also in natural or organic processes. The place of this freedom is *l'imaginaire*, a place all the better for its not yet existing; it is the site of an 'as if' which is not embarrassed by its fictiveness. Kantian aesthetics is then declared guilty, because it allows its adepts to feel that they embody the essential truth of human life, free of political and other constraints; that they are at once individual and universal; that their felicity in the contemplation of aesthetic objects is authenticated by natural processes.

The arguments against Kantian aesthetics are far more elaborate than I have implied, but I may refer to one occasion of them in Derrida's *La Vérité en peinture*. There are two main emphases. In the first, Derrida takes the work of art as requiring a frame to hold it separate from everything else; and he shows the problems entailed by trying to hold the frame in place. He then removes the frame and declares 'the political' or 'the sublime' to be everything that is the case. The frame is contradictory because it cannot be held. My answer to Derrida is that it is theoretically no more difficult to have an aesthetics than to have a politics: unless you queer the issue by deeming one or the other to be axiomatic or self-evident. Yeats's poem 'Politics' is his demonstration of an erotics just as omnivorous as a politics; his occasion was Thomas Mann's claim that in our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms. Derrida's argument against Kant's aesthetics depends upon his taking politics as self-evidently unbounded. There is no reason to think it is. In the second part of the argument Derrida maintains that Kant's third *Critique* 'depends in an essential way [. . .] on a pragmatic anthropology and on what could be called in more than one sense of the terms a reflective humanism'. This anthropological resource, Derrida argues, 'weighs massively by its content on this supposedly pure deduction of aesthetic judgment'.¹⁰ My answer here is that the reference to 'pure' deduction is invidious. Kant does not claim that such a judgement is pure, but that it is not covered by a concept: this is a different claim. Kant's claim seems to be admitted by the fact that Derrida does not produce a concept capable of dealing with aesthetic experience in any of its recognized Kantian forms: the beautiful, the picturesque, the sublime.

But a large question persists. How can we teach our students to read a poem or a novel (assuming that they have not even begun to read it so long as they are merely extracting themes and discussing them in isolation from their formal destiny in the poem)? There are two issues before us. The first is to decide whether to cede to the ideologues the definition of reality in political terms, or whether to hold out against this concession as reductive. It is entirely possible to argue that the definition of

⁹ David Lloyd, 'Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics', *Cultural Critique*, 2 (1985-86), 137-69 (p. 139).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 123.

reality in political terms is false. Herbert Marcuse has maintained, in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, that Marxist orthodoxy has committed a serious mistake in interpreting the quality and truth of a work of art in terms of the prevailing relations of production. He maintains, on the contrary, that art, by virtue of its aesthetic form, is largely autonomous in relation to the given social relations. Literature is indeed revolutionary, he argues, 'only with reference to itself, as content having become form'. Indeed, he goes further and argues that Marxism has erred in placing a low value upon subjectivity, not only upon the rational subject but upon inwardness, the individual imagination, the private emotions. It was a mistake to dissolve the subjectivity of individuals into class consciousness; because the need for radical change 'must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and passions, their drives and their goals'. Marxists should have understood that the world imagined in art, far from being inauthentic, is the very reality that is suppressed in every official definition of reality. It follows that 'the critical function of art [. . .] resides in the aesthetic form'. The truth of art consists in its power to break the monopoly which those in power exercise by defining what is real. The supreme merit of art is that it contradicts the version of reality that obtains in social and economic life.

The whole purpose of Marcuse's book is to defend the integrity and freedom of art by assigning high value to the freedom — the forms of a free life — which it imagines. Like Ernst Bloch in *Geist der Utopie* and *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Marcuse turns that freedom toward a future, utopian if we want to call it that but not a whit the worse for that designation. So we have a 'defence of poesy' in various vocabularies from Bacon and Sidney through Kant, Schiller, and Goethe, to Bloch and Marcuse: the list, I am happy to note, is incomplete. Common to these otherwise disparate figures is acknowledgement of fiction, by which I mean the forms of imagination in which 'the real' is not granted the force of law.

This brings me to the second and last consideration. If as teachers we are not obliged to accept a political or otherwise ideological definition of 'the real', it follows that we make a claim for art as proposing new images, new thresholds, new antinomies. The next question is: how can we teach our students to understand these inventions and to stop suppressing them in the interests of the common discourse of politics? There are several possibilities. Cleanth Brooks's theory of literature concentrated upon the language of paradox, mainly to claim that the sense of experience which a poem embodies is more complex, more subtle, than the judgements we make or accept in our economic or appetitive lives. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* works in the same spirit: the words of literature are in his sense 'complex words'. It is also possible to find the poetry in the precise form of a particular poem; though it remains a matter for tact, in each case, to decide what constitutes the form and how much to claim for it. Strictly accounted, form is every consideration that gets the poem from its first word to its last. The form of *The Waste Land* is not the form of 'The Red Wheelbarrow', but each requires to be shown in action.

As teachers we should start with a simple proposition, and then work it for all it is worth. From time to time I refer to a passage in John Crowe Ransom's *The World's Body*:

Poetry is a kind of language, and therefore a kind of experience. It distinguishes itself by an act of will from prose, which is also a language and an experience. Probably that is its whole

intention. If there were no prose, there would not have to be poetry; and the more ubiquitous the tyranny of the prose, the more necessary it is to undertake the poetry, and the harder.¹¹

It is a simple proposition, that poetry is a kind of language. But it is sufficient, if we use it to invite our students to ask the next question: what kind of language is it, in the particular poem we have chosen to read? Or what kind of language is that of the particular novel we have chosen to read? These questions are far better than those more commonly asked: was T. S. Eliot anti-Semitic, on the evidence of 'Gerontion' and *After Strange Gods*? Was W. B. Yeats a fascist, on the evidence of *On the Boiler* and the last stanza of 'The Statues'? Discuss.

I hope I have made it clear that I am not, in the common phrase, 'against theory'. Not to have a theory is to have someone else's. But I wish theorists would challenge themselves more severely than they mostly do. The kind of challenge I have in mind is suggested to me by two literary occasions, one an old one, the other very recent. In his essay 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', Valéry defended his theoretical meditations by claiming that 'there is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography'.¹² Most of the theories I read could not be fragments of any autobiography: that is why one thinks of them as fragments of a political programme, a campaign speech, or a manifesto. It would mark a far healthier intellectual and pedagogical situation if we asked our theorists to speak from their own personal experience, rather than pretend to what Valéry called 'a knowledge that is entirely impersonal, an observation with no observer'.

For the second challenging occasion, I quote a passage from a recent *Times Literary Supplement*, in which Geoffrey Hill reviewed Isabel Rivers's *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660–1780*, Volume 1: *Whichcote to Wesley*. The passage reads, in part:

Whichcote wrote that 'by wickedness [a man] passes into a *Nature* contrary to his one'. I am willing to claim as an empirical fact that when you write at any serious pitch of obligation you enter into the nature of grammar and etymology which is a nature contrary to your own. You cannot extricate yourself from this 'contrary nature' by some kind of philosophical fiat or gesture of spiritual withdrawal. Hobbes categorized 'Compleasance' as a 'Law of Nature': 'That every man strive to accommodate himselfe to the rest'. In the palpable contrariness of *strive/accommodate* one recognizes the working of intelligence at a more than conceptual level [...]. [Dr Rivers] simply assumes the concurrence of language with one's expectations.¹³

This passage from Geoffrey Hill's review is not an essay in theory, but it implies a theory of language and a theory of literature. The phrases he quotes from Whichcote, the Wesleys, George Herbert, and other writers are not merely illustrations of a posture already taken up: they are acts of mind at one with acts of language, acts of the English language in a certain phase of its contrariness. I have quoted Hill not to confound the issues entailed by theories, principles, and methods but to point to some of the criteria which must be met if our meditations on language and literature are to merit the claims we make for them.

¹¹ John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), pp. 235–36.

¹² Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. by Denise Folliot (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 58.

¹³ Geoffrey Hill, 'Style and Faith', *TLS*, 27 December 1991, pp. 3–4.