

Past Significance and Present Meaning in Literary History*

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OVER the last 30 years the critique of the historical method has, in the West, achieved considerable dimensions, but perhaps the time has now come to re-assess the nature and the object of this critique, and from there to proceed to some re-appraisal of the possibilities and limitations of literary history. If, in the United States, the historical study of literature is to achieve a new sense of direction and purpose, it must first be prepared to face (with all that this implies) the full extent of the crisis of its discipline. This crisis is in many ways a symptom of the larger crisis of western society, in which the revolutionary idea of change, organic and dialectical concepts of evolution, and the liberal and humanist traditions of progress are all, in various degrees, affected. In recent years the consciousness of this wider background of crisis seems once more to be gaining ground, and perhaps the conjecture may be hazarded that a new interest in historical method can only benefit from an awareness of its present background. Such awareness may indeed facilitate the first steps towards re-opening, in the realm of literary history, the

* This paper uses and develops further the theoretical assumptions that govern the present writer's previous work, especially *New Criticism und die Entwicklung bürgerlicher Literaturwissenschaft* (Halle, 1962), but also *Drama und Wirklichkeit in der Shakespearezeit* (Halle, 1958) and the more recent *Shakespeare und die Tradition des Volkstheaters* (Henschelverlag Berlin, 1967). Some of these assumptions have also gone into several articles, of which two are accessible in English: "The Soul of the Age: Towards a Historical Approach to Shakespeare," *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London, 1964), pp. 17-42; "Shakespeare on the Modern Stage: Past Significance and Present Meaning," *Shakespeare Survey* 20 (1967), 113-20. There is one rather relevant article in German which the present paper alludes to (but does not actually draw on) when it refers to the recent crisis of American literary history: "Tradition und Krise amerikanischer Literaturhistorie. Zu ihrer Methodologie und Geschichte," *Weimarer Beiträge*, XI (1965), 394-435.

question of method and purpose from an angle which defines itself, at the outset, beyond the assumptions of formalist criticism.

Among the recent forces of adversity which the historical study of literature saw itself confronted with, the New Criticism was certainly not the least important. But while the anti-historical direction of its influence can scarcely be doubted, this does not mean that its critique of literary history did not raise a number of very important questions. Now that the New Criticism has itself become part of the history of criticism, the neohumanist and formalist revolt against positivism, as well as its consequences, can more nearly be seen in perspective. At this date we certainly cannot go back to the nineteenth century tradition of historical philology. But for all those who have felt that the theory and practice of formalism do not offer any valid alternative, the demise of positivism can never mean the end of literary history. A new method of literary history will reject the uncritical study of sources, influences and biographical data as an end in itself; but it will also refuse to accept the new critical indictment of the "extrinsic" approach, precisely because the much recommended "intrinsic" study of literature has shown itself equally incapable of coping with the challenge of literature as a process in time.

Any serious re-appraisal of the aims and methods of literary history, then, would have to dispense with antiquarian as well as formalist assumptions. It would have to pursue a more dialectical method, for which the work of art, even when it imitates reality, is seen to be more than merely the reflection or expression of a past age or society. There would still be room for an approach to literature as past mimesis, but not at the cost of present morality. Thus, the customary distinction between the "extrinsic" and the "intrinsic" approaches would appear to be almost as irrelevant as the similar one between the pastness of the work and its present "autonomy." From this angle, history would then be seen as a comprehensive process which includes the present as well as the past; a process which is a continuum and as such as indivisible as the aesthetic experience, which appeals to the whole nature of man as a historical being. In this *process* and in this *nature* both the extrinsic and the intrinsic interact: change and value constitute a relationship which corresponds to a similar tension, in the work of art, between what is past and what is present. Literary history has to embrace this necessary tension, and conceive of its object in terms of both the unity and the contradiction of mimesis and morality, of past significance and present meaning.

I

As indicated, a new approach to the historical study of literature cannot pass by, and indeed must not underrate, the theoretical positions from which the New Criticism has challenged the methods of traditional literary history. This is not the place for a full survey of new critical opinion on the subject, but perhaps a few illustrations will suffice to bring out its main direction and emphasis. Even when, with some effort, the new critics would retain a grudging modicum of respect for the "intense and precise labors of the Victorian philologists in the service of authenticity and other forms of factuality,"¹ their rejection of historical antiquarianism was as consistent as it was complete. If this had entailed a formulated alternative in historical method, there might have been more to be said for their polemics, especially for their attacks on the academic accumulation of unrelated historical facts, and even their scarcely concealed scorn for those mechanistic "exercises relating literature to various kinds of influence — social, political, economic, climatic, national, regional, traditional, psychological, and genealogical."² Such polemics, of course, were almost as vigorous in Britain and Europe, as in F. R. Leavis' protests against "the usual compilation . . . — names, titles, dates, 'facts about', irrelevancies, superficial comments, and labour-saving descriptions."³

These attacks (which were also aimed at "the verbose inanities of tendencies," historical *Zeitgeist*, etc., and which were echoed by a good many liberal critics) are too well-known to call for further documentation. They were all more or less explicitly based on certain theoretical assumptions which, reduced to their common denominator, can perhaps best be phrased negatively: They saw "the great mistake of the scientific-historical scholarship" in the fact that it "had allied itself with the physical sciences of the nineteenth century."⁴ The most disreputable symptoms of such *mésalliance* were diagnosed in "the whole underlying assumption that literature should be explained by the methods of the natural sciences, by causality, by such external determining forces as . . . *race, milieu, moment*."⁵ Such "scienticism,"

1 William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), p. 537.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 543.

3 F. R. Leavis, "Criticism and Literary History," *The Importance of Scrutiny*, ed. Eric Bentley (New York, 1964), p. 12.

4 Lionel Trilling, "The Sense of the Past," *The Liberal Imagination*, Mercury Books edn. (London, 1961), p. 182.

5 René Wellek, "The Revolt Against Positivism in Recent European Literary Scholarship," *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols (New Haven and London, 1963), p. 256.

it was argued, was behind both the "study of causal antecedents and origins" and the use of "quantitative methods of science: statistics, charts, and graphs."⁶

Again, this is not the place to open the vast question of the relation of historical scholarship and natural science, and in any case an answer to this question would have to show, as many scholars and critics have done, that literary criticism is not an exact science. But even though the early battle in "the revolt against positivism" was in many ways justified, later new critical polemics tended both to complacency and to ingenuousness. Even while the enemy was routed, the attacks continued to be directed at a straw man who supposedly still believed in the methodological identity of history and mechanical physics. Although positivism was dead, its spectre was not allowed to find rest. These polemics, which served as a comfortable *alibi* to the anti-historical bias of the newer criticism, were questionable in several respects.

In the first place, the attack against the mechanistic aspects of nineteenth century literary scholarship never paused to consider that the tradition of historical inquiry was much older than, and never solely identical with, the pseudo-scientific pose of some latter-day philologists. The rise of historical criticism can (roughly) be traced in the decline of the social and theoretical presuppositions of natural law, and dates from, say, Vico's *La Scienza Nuova* (1725), the work of Leibniz, Shaftesbury, the French enlightenment and, in its fully developed form, from Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784/91). It finds its mature expression in Goethe's own "sense of the past and the present as one," for him a "powerful and overwhelming feeling," which could hardly "be expressed wonderfully enough." ("Ein Gefühl aber, das bei mir gewaltig überhand nahm und sich nicht wundersam genug äußern konnte, war die Empfindung der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart in Eins . . ." ⁷) This is a poet's statement which corresponds to Schiller's attempt, in his theory of *Universalgeschichte*, "to connect the past with the present": "das Vergangene mit dem Gegenwärtigen zu verknüpfen."⁸ From here, through Hegel, this tradition of historical thought branched off in two directions. On the one hand there was the *geisteswissenschaftliche* idealism of Dilthey and the later historians of *Historismus*, Ernst Troeltsch and Friedrich Meinecke, whose philosophy of history cer-

6 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

7 J. W. Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (14. Buch); cf. *Werke* ("Jubiläums-Ausgabe"), xxiv, 213.

8 Friedrich Schiller, *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?* 2. Aufl. Jena 1790 (repr. 1953, ed. F. Schneider), p. 36.

tainly contained elements of irrationalism, but not of mechanism. On the other hand it was, in the context of revolutionary materialism, carried on by Engels and especially Marx, who in his well-known comment on classical Greek art argued that certain great works of art can only arise at an early or undeveloped stage of social development, and that "the charm of their art for us" is not opposed to their historical origins; so that the true "difficulty" of the historian's task lies not in the fact that "the Greek epic and Greek art are connected with certain social forms of development," but rather that these works of art "still offer aesthetic pleasure to us and in some respect serve as norm and unattainable standard." ("Aber die Schwierigkeit liegt nicht darin, zu verstehn, daß griechische Kunst und Epos an gewisse gesellschaftliche Entwicklungsformen geknüpft sind. Die Schwierigkeit ist, daß sie für uns noch Kunstgenuß gewähren und in gewisser Beziehung als Norm und unerreichbare Muster gelten."⁹)

It was an illusion, therefore, to assume that the indictment of philological positivism could refute the tradition of historical inquiry at large. At the time when Hippolyte Taine was developing his determinism in terms of the *moment*, the *race* and the *milieu* (1863), the more dialectical concepts of historical criticism were perhaps overshadowed by what Nietzsche contemptuously called the reign of "that blind force of facts" ("jene blinde Macht der Fakta"¹⁰) but they certainly had not ceased to be available. There was, from the point of view of method, a tradition in which "the past and the present" could be considered "as one" and in which the present "charm" (and meaning) of great art, its norm and standard, might well be reconciled with a thorough understanding of its past genesis.

If it was indiscriminating to charge the historical approach with the abuse of "the methods of the natural sciences," then it was no less questionable, in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, to conceive of these methods solely or mainly in terms of nineteenth century ideas of causality and such mechanistic assumptions as "that the world was reflected with perfect literalness in the will-less mind of the observer."¹¹ Again and again the literary historian was warned to keep away from the methods of science — but of a science which was hopelessly out of date. Nor was there, on the side of the critics, any curiosity as to whether the method of historiography itself had not (like that of modern science) developed considerably. By now to

9 Karl Marx, "Einleitung zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie," in Marx and Engels, *Werke* (Dietz edition), XIII, 641.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, Kröners Taschenausgabe, XXXVII (Leipzig, [1933]), p. 70.

11 Cf. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 182.

condemn the writing of history on the charge that it adopts the methods of the natural sciences (*which* "natural sciences"?), has become meaningless, if not downright complacent. At any rate (and this is not the place to say more) it ignores a great deal in modern physics; for instance the tendency among physicists in recent years to speak of their science in terms which (as a distinguished historian notes) suggest an "identity of aim between scientists and historians" and even "more striking analogies between the physical universe and the world of the historian."¹² It may be that in the light of such statements and recent insights into the nature of "the two cultures" (and how "dangerous" it is "to have two cultures which can't or don't communicate"¹³) the responsible literary critic will have to be more and more wary of stressing the irreconcilability of the two disciplines.

To say this is not to minimize the basic differences in method, and is emphatically no apology for positivism, but it may help us to recover a more sober perspective, from which the nineteenth century's "serene unification of scientific conscience" can be viewed with less ambiguity (than Cleanth Brooks betrays in the context of this phrase). Whatever its shortcomings, historical philology was intellectually the most coherent movement in nineteenth century scholarship, and it is with some feeling of respect that one would wish to see *the necessary criticism* to be based on more facts and less arrogance. It would take more detailed investigation into the method and practice of nineteenth century literary history to assess the degree to which the attempts at historical syntheses were actually thwarted by the pseudo-scientific pose. Not that the "blind power of facts" (Nietzsche) can ever be admired again, but on the basis of a recent study of traditional literary history in America¹⁴ one is inclined to think that the really important works are less seriously affected by the mechanism of uncritical research than is commonly assumed by the critics of positivism. A sober re-assessment of these works (some of which, by

12 E. H. Carr, *What Is History* (London, 1962), pp. 80, 66. Contrasting modern and nineteenth-century assumptions of method, Carr writes (pp. 77-78): "Nowadays both scientists and historians entertain the more modest hope of advancing progressively from one fragmentary hypothesis to another, isolating their facts through the medium of their interpretations, and testing their interpretations by the facts; and ways in which they go about it do not seem to me essentially different."

13 C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And A Second Look*, Mentor edn. (New York, 1964), p. 90. Snow raises a vast question which has been asked, independently, in the distinguished work of Jacob Bronowski (see, e.g., *Science and Human Values* [London, 1961], pp. 50, et passim), in the writings of A. N. Whitehead, G. H. Hardy, et al.

14 See my article "Tradition und Krise amerikanischer Literaturgeschichte" (cf. above, footnote to title), where the traditions of Moses Coit Tyler and Vernon Louis Parrington are discussed.

the way, are eminently readable) would, among other things, reveal a startling contrast to the much more analytical and experimental prose of the New Criticism.¹⁵

If the new critical attitude towards historical scholarship was somewhat ambiguous, it was also, of course, not uniform. The various critics reacted rather differently, and there were quite a number of protests (some of them undoubtedly sincere) "that the literary historian and the critic need to work together" and that both functions should, ideally, be united "in one and the same man."¹⁶ But, as the main works in the tradition of historical inquiry were generally treated with more condescension than knowledge and as their results were, in the practical business of criticism, usually ignored, such protests often rang hollow. So whereas the critics did not offer any theoretical alternative, there developed and spread a climate of critical opinion in which historical scholarship seemed *per se* hostile to critical evaluation; likewise, the genetic approach seemed *per se* to be an expression of relativism; the study of the writer's background and biography seemed *per se* to be a symptom of the "intentional fallacy"; etc. As in the forties and early fifties the New Criticism reaped its academic triumphs and one scholarly journal after the other thinned the volume of its historical contributions, it must have appeared to many that the study of literary genesis could only detract from and never add to the critical approach to literature as a serious art form. Small wonder, when even the most thoughtful observers approached the relations of "History and Criticism" as "something unavoidably problematic, part of a troublesome opposition which runs through all our experience."¹⁷ Such an opposition was in many quarters not merely taken for granted; it was justified by, and elaborated into, the theory of "absolute" criteria of evaluation. It was an "absolutism" by which the (undoubted) "relativism" of the traditional literary historian was, unfortunately, not overcome but relegated to a series of opposites, among which change and value, development and order,

15 Ironically it "was precisely this scientific pose, conscious or unconscious, that constituted one of the main strengths of the New Criticism" (J. H. Raleigh, "The New Criticism as an Historical Phenomenon," *Comparative Literature*, XI [1959/60], 23). The irony of it was noticed by at least one critic who — finding in Allen Tate's work "a rage, so deep a hatred of Science and positivism, not to say democracy" — saw "a certain irony in his position, since the very textual analysis he defended was an aping of scientific method and rigor" (Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds*, Overseas ed. [New York, 1942], p. 361).

16 Cleanth Brooks, "A Note on the Limits of 'History' and the Limits of 'Criticism,'" *The Sewanee Review*, LXI (1953), 132.

17 W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "History and Criticism: A Problematic Relationship," *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), p. 253.

history and aesthetics, past significance and present meaning, appeared more irreconcilable than ever before.

II

However, it would be a gross over-simplification to imply that the new-critical critique of traditional literary history was entirely based on a series of formalist fallacies. Nor would one wish to minimize the extent to which the virtue of close textual analysis can survive the decline of the dogma of the autonomy of literature, thereby making a very considerable contribution to the more recent *rapprochement* of literary criticism and historical scholarship. And in the work of critics such as F. R. Leavis, Yvor Winters and Kenneth Burke, these possibilities reach as far back as the thirties and forties. For whatever the degree of the failure of the New Criticism in the field of literary history, even in its heyday a number of serious issues were raised and several very penetrating questions were asked, which a new approach would not wish easily to dismiss.

Among them, the question of relevance was foremost. Inspiring the attack on historical antiquarianism, it asserted the need for a new consciousness of "the relation between antique fact and poetic value."¹⁸ The simplest and the most straightforward form in which the problem was posed was one in which the purpose of literary history was defined from the angle of the present. A history of English literature, F. R. Leavis wrote, "will be undertaken because the works of certain poets are judged to be of lasting value — of value in the present."¹⁹ From this position, which may be said to stress one aspect of one basic truth, the need for evaluation was articulated with a new sense of urgency: If the criteria for a history of literature somehow correspond to a living system of values, then an awareness of these values would indeed seem to be *one* prerequisite for historical studies. F. R. Leavis (without bothering much about the emphasis carried by our cautious italics) put this quite bluntly: "Such a history, then, could be accomplished only by a writer interested in, and intelligent about, the present. It would, for one thing, be an attempt to establish a perspective, to determine what of English poetry of the past is, or ought to be, alive for us now."²⁰

The strength of this position consisted in the fact *that* (not in the method *how*) the literature of the past was related to what was felt to

18 Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism*, p. 537.

19 Leavis, "Criticism and Literary History," p. 13.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

be "alive" in the present. When the interests of contemporary literature can find an echo in the literature of the past, then there needs must exist some community of poetic values (and, we should add, of historical moments). Even when this community was defined solely in terms of "modern" values, it comprised, and had to be defined in terms of, a sense of tradition. But then, again, "tradition" was taken as a mode of relating (rather than *correlating*) past poetry to present practice. F. R. Leavis and most of the new critics still behaved as if their literary history virtually had the choice between past significance and present meaning — *their* choice being, of course, in favour of the latter.

The result, even though it satisfied current aesthetic assumptions, was not very helpful in establishing criteria by which a new approach to literary history might have prospered. F. R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition* (1948) just as Cleanth Brooks' *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1947) yielded the proof that by and large the historical community of values had been defined solely in terms of "modern" meaning. Here were two accomplished critics, both of them certainly "interested in, and intelligent about, the present," and both venturing into literary history, but with a result that somehow defeated the very aims and functions of this discipline. To be sure, neither critic had intended to write anything like a history of the English novel or a history of English poetry — as they are "or ought to be, alive for us now." But the historical elements of tradition which they recommended, were so much at odds with the history of English literature as an actual process of possibilities (a process, that is, of both developments *and* values), that not even the rudiments for a future synthesis of history and aesthetics were laid. (In this, Leavis and Brooks followed the critical theory and practice of T. S. Eliot, who however — interestingly enough — had defined the idea of tradition much less exclusively and more "historically," when he said that tradition involves "the historical sense" with its "perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."²¹

To take up only one example, the criteria by which Leavis defined the great tradition of the English novel were not merely narrow and exclusive, but also confusing. To dismiss, usually in form of a footnote, Defoe (without mentioning *Robinson Crusoe*) as well as Thackeray, Scott and Hardy may perhaps be legitimate for one who wishes to bring out the undoubted greatness of George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. But in this context to introduce such concepts as "historical importance" or "the important lines of English literary

²¹ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays: 1917-1932* (London, 1932), p. 14.

history" is entirely to beg the question not merely of literary history, but of a workable synthesis of criticism and history. If Leavis states his "reason for not including Dickens in the line of great novelists" and then proceeds to assure us that he is "a great genius and is permanently among the classics";²² if he gives a mere "note" to Emily Brontë "because [her] astonishing work seems to me a kind of sport," and then continues to say that "out of her a minor tradition comes . . ." ²³; if Fielding is rejected as "simple" and then is said to have "made Jane Austen possible by opening the central tradition of English fiction"²⁴; — then there must be something wrong with a criticism which conceives of "tradition" not historically, not as a process of both developments *and* values, but in terms of three or four major modern novelists. Again, the complex relationship between past significance and present meaning is overlooked. It is ignored or replaced by a concept of tradition which can conceive of no unity and of no living interplay between the past world of the English novel and its present reception, but which judges everything in terms of "the significant few" major novelists. (Leavis touches on the real problem, which he prefers not to go into, when he says: "To be important historically is not, of course, to be necessarily one of the significant few."²⁵)

But to raise these objections is not to dispute the relevance of a concept of value, which (for Leavis) is seen "in terms of that human awareness . . . of the possibilities of life."²⁶ Nor can such a concept of value be anything but critical. That is to say that it will evaluate the literature of the past not "as a record of past customs, past habits, past manners, past fashions in taste,"²⁷ or anything which is in the nature of a museum. If, as the New Criticism was perfectly justified to insist, literature is properly understood as literature and not as a medium of sociological reference and exemplification, then indeed

²² F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Penguin edn. (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.* There seems to be a similar contradiction, of which Cleanth Brooks is probably unaware, when he says "that we need to revise drastically our conventional estimate of the course of English poetry." ("Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," *The Well Wrought Urn*, Harvest edn. [New York, 1947], p. 224; my italics.) At any rate, this is too facile a way of correlating value ("estimate") and development ("course").

²⁶ Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 10.

²⁷ Cleanth Brooks, "The Quick and the Dead. A Comment on Humanistic Studies," *The Humanities: An Appraisal*, ed. Julian Harris (Madison, Wisconsin, 1950), p. 5.

the poetic value of a work of literature is not easily to be abstracted from its ideological or biographical significance. To elucidate the latter is not in itself identical with an awareness of the former. And to achieve this awareness, it is certainly not enough to assume "that the specific problem of reading and judging literature is completely met in the process of learning the meaning of words, the political and philosophical allusions, the mental climate in which the poem originated, etc. etc."²⁸

The most valuable contribution of the New Criticism, then, was to raise (if not to answer) the question as to the function and the criteria of literary history. To stress the need for evaluation involved an awareness of both, the necessity of selection and the importance of achieving a point of view from which to select and hence to evaluate. In the words of W. K. Wimsatt: "We are bound to have a point of view in literary criticism, and that point of view, though it may have been shaped by tradition, is bound to be our own. . . . Our judgments of the past cannot be discontinuous with our experience or insulated from it."²⁹ The realization of one's own point of view as both distinct from, and shaped by, the past finally called for a recognition that the object of evaluation was (just as its "subject," its ego) part of a more comprehensive process of tradition and experience. Such an approach could conceive of history not only "in its several antecedent or causal relations to the writing of literature" but it could also raise the question "whether antecedents themselves, if viewed in a certain light, do not become meanings."³⁰

But to answer this question already involved a break with the formalist dogma of the autonomy of the work of art. This paved the way towards the more recent synthesis between literary criticism and historical scholarship which reveals the extent to which the virtues of close textual analysis can survive the decline of formalism. The inevitable compromises so characteristic of the late fifties and the sixties, need not detain us here. Obviously there are plenty of ways and means through which historical concepts such as, say, the author as "The Necessary Stylist" (Mark Spilka) can be re-introduced, and the whole question of rhetoric can be smuggled into the discussion of the purists. Once the "implied author" is conceived as a "core of norms and choices," a "choosing, evaluating person" who attempts "consciously or unconsciously to impose his fictional world upon the reader," the "strategy of point of view" (Percy Lubbock) can no longer be

²⁸ Cleanth Brooks, "Literary History vs. Criticism," *The Kenyon Review*, II 30 *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²⁹ Wimsatt, "History and Criticism," p. 258.
(1940), 407.

divorced from the world of history and sociology. This is a far cry from the formalist ghost of "the affective fallacy"; and even though *The Rhetoric of Fiction* still neglects the "social and psychological forces that affect authors and readers,"³¹ it again points to what is potentially the historical meaning in the narrative structure of point of view. Similar tendencies have for some time been noticed in the interpretation of imagery, another domain of formalist interpretation, where there is a tendency to widen the scope of the term image and to stress its subject-matter or "tenor" as opposed to its "vehicle," the real subject of the discourse as opposed to the adventitious and imported image.³² It surely is a sign of the times, when a critic of the stature of W. K. Wimsatt produces a historical monograph on the portraits of Alexander Pope, or when Cleanth Brooks, former explicator of "paradox" and "irony," now at great length writes on the geographical theme and background of Yoknapatawpha County. To recognize "that a writer's choice of a subject is an aesthetic decision"³³ prepares the way for a deeper understanding of history as part of the literary theme. The renewed interest in thematics, like that in poetic personality and rhetoric, is an indication of far-reaching transitions and changes in critical doctrine. Themselves part of history, they re-open the neglected dimensions of change and society by which literary history can now be discussed more profitably in terms of what it can and what it cannot accomplish.

III

A dialectical approach, which is conscious of its own social function, will wish to consider the problem of literary history from an angle where literature *is* history, and history is an element of literary structure and aesthetic experience. What is needed is not simply an act of combination between the literary historian's approach ("A is derived from X") and that of the critic ("A is better than Y"). It is not good enough to have — in F. W. Bateson's sense — a "more intimate co-operation" of their efforts, or anything less than an integration in

31 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), p. 74 and p. ix. See also Mark Spilka, "The Necessary Stylist: A New Critical Revision," *Modern Fiction Studies*, VI (1960/61), 285.

32 See the discussion of theories of metaphor in my *New Criticism und die Entwicklung bürgerlicher Literaturwissenschaft*, pp. 220-277; there is a much shorter French version in *Recherches internationales*, VIII (1964), no. 43 (mai-juin), 201-11.

33 Harry Levin, "Thematics and Criticism," *The Disciplines of Criticism*, ed. Peter Demetz et al. (New Haven and London, 1968), p. 145.

method and purpose. To say that the historian is concerned with a task like "A is derived from X" is in itself a somewhat superficial formula; but even if this is read as a symbol of the genetic approach, it will not do merely to combine or to *link* the study of genesis with the critical evaluation of the art-work. One has to be contained in the other, and the historical sense of the critic needs to be quite indistinguishable from the critical sense of the historian.

A postulate like this may sound presumptuous and, perhaps, over-optimistic, but really the object and the function of literary history can demand no less. Let us for a moment ask the question: What is the object of the literary historian as critic? Is it the work of art as it is experienced today? Or is it the work of art in *statu nascendi*, in the contemporary context of its genesis and original audience? To ask the question is to draw attention to both the unity and the contradiction of the past world of the art-work and the present world of its reception; or, in other words, to suggest that the historian's task (and the pastness of the work) cannot be separated from the critic's task (and the work of art as a present experience). Obviously, we cannot afford to isolate these two necessary aspects: merely to do the former is to fall back into some kind of antiquarianism; merely to do the latter is to run all the risks of misunderstanding and distortion that the New Criticism was guilty of so often. The one alternative will finally reduce literary history to a study of origins and influences, a mere *Entstehungsgeschichte*; the other reduces the discipline to a series of modern appreciations, a mere *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Neither is (as an alternative) acceptable: in the last resort, for literary history to study past significance makes no sense without an awareness of present meaning, and an awareness of present meaning is incoherent without the study of past significance.

Thus the object of the literary historian as critic is necessarily complex. It involves both genesis and value, development and order, the work of art as a product of the past and the work of art as an experience in the present. To stress these two dimensions of the art-work in terms of their interrelationships is to argue for more than just expediency (in the sense that an awareness of history might prevent us from making a mistake or overlooking an anachronism in interpretation). The point that has to be made is not that the historian (or the critic) had better do his job thoroughly. The point is that these two dimensions are *inherent* in the work of art, and that the study of genesis and the pursuit of evaluation find an equivalent in the similar relationship, which is a historical *and* an aesthetic one, between the mimesis and the morality of the work of art itself. Or, to make this point from a somewhat different angle, one might refer to two basic functions of literature: on the one hand the work of art

as a product of its time, a mirror of its age, a historical reflection of the society to which both the author and original audience belonged. On the other hand, it is surely no idealism to assume that the work of art is not merely a product, but a "producer" of its age; not merely a mirror of the past, but a lamp to the future. Incidentally, it was Karl Marx who pointed out that art is one of the "besondere Weisen der Produktion"³⁴ — the "special forms of production" — as in the sense that the work of art can produce its audience, and influence their attitudes and values.

In order to distinguish these two basic functions of literature one might call them, although this is to over-simplify, the mimetic and the moral. (The over-simplification does not bring out that actually each is correlated to the other: the moral element is implicit in *mimesis* as representation, just as the sensuous nature of representation and imitation points to the only process through which morality can be translated into art.) But if we for the present purpose accept this convenient distinction of terms, it may be said that the twofold function of art calls for a corresponding activity of the historian as critic and of the critic as historian. Once the work of art is seen as both imitation and creation, it must be conceived as not merely a product of the past, but also as a "producer" of the future. And while the former function is involved in the genesis (and is rooted in the past world of the artwork), the latter function is realized in both the past world and the present world of its reception: it is rooted in a creative capacity for "production," which transcends the very time and age that are the object of the *mimesis*. Thus, the "mimetic" (the historical) and the "moral" (the ever present) functions interact: the literary historian as critic approaches an object in which *Zeitlichkeit* and *Überzeitlichkeit*, time and "timelessness," can be fused into one.

This is the very stuff that literary history is made of. The past significance of the work of art, its background and origins, is in the last resort indivisible from its present meaning and its survival into the future. The literary historian is confronted with more than the coexistence of these aspects: he has to face both their contradiction and unity. But to say this is not to make a new and particularly sophisticated demand on the historian of literature. Eventually, this is the same problem that, some 350 years ago, Ben Jonson faced, when he paid his highly complex tribute to his dead rival's work as "a Monument, without a tombe"; Shakespeare's work, he said, was "for all time," but at the same time (or even before this) he also remarked that Shakespeare was the "Soule of the Age."³⁵ Jonson's epitaph can

³⁴ Marx and Engels, *Werke*, Ergänzungsband I, 53f.

³⁵ I use the text in E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare. A Study of Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1930), II, 208f.

hardly be said to anticipate the systematic approach of a modern literary history, but the basic problem, which is a dialectical one, is there quite clearly. It is the problem of origin and survival or, in a different light, of a great work as the product of its age and the "producer" of its future. For the modern literary historian to grasp the dialectics of *Zeitlichkeit* und *Überzeitlichkeit* calls for an awareness of the art-work as having both a past and a present dimension (as well as a present and a future existence). And it calls for a perception from this awareness, that these dimensions are, as an object of literary history, simultaneous in their interaction and tension.

The task of the literary historian, consequently, cannot be abstracted from either the genetic or the functional aspects of literature. For the historical study of origins helps to assess the continuity of, or the degree of change in, its social functions; while the study of its present functions can, in its turn, help us to appreciate the potential richness of the original constellation of its origin. In this sense, history can be studied as meaning: the structure of the work of art is potentially inherent in its genesis, but in society it becomes functional only through its affect in terms of a human and social experience. Structure is intimately linked up with, though not determined by either its genesis or its affective relations. It is correlated to both its past genesis and its present functioning; for the critic to understand the full measure of this correlation is to become conscious of the necessary complexity of structure as history.

IV

But to discuss this correlation in terms of history and aesthetics yields only very general results which do not by themselves suggest a more practical application of theory. In order to illustrate some of the issues involved, we propose to raise the problem in the more practical context of the historical, critical and theatrical interpretation of Shakespearean drama. Although here the gulf that separates the critical and the historical approaches has in recent years been considerably narrowed, there still exists an astonishing number of conflicting assumptions as to what are the aims and methods of literary inquiry into a great work of the past. Among these, the unresolved tension between past genesis and present function looms large, although as a problem of method it has hardly been perceived or discussed.

At the risk of repetition, the basic problem may perhaps again be phrased in terms of the question which we have asked above; What is the object of a historical and critical approach to Shakespeare? What does the literary historian as critic mean when he refers to *Hamlet*?

Presumably the answer would still be quite different according to whether the person in question would wish to stress the importance of historical research or the priority of critical judgment. On the one hand (in terms of historical research) the answer would preferably be: the Renaissance play. Hamlet, according to this approach, will be a historical figure, the play's message an Elizabethan one in the sense that its past significance is to be explored without (explicit) reference to its modern meaning. On the other hand (and this would be the more critical approach) the answer would involve a different object which is primarily related not to the Elizabethan theatre or even the Elizabethan text, but to the modern sensibility that it is meant to evoke. From this angle, an interpretation (or a theatrical production) would be authentic as long as it achieves the tone and tenor of our own age: Hamlet will be a modern symbol and the play's message a contemporary one in the sense that in the last resort its present meaning has priority over its past significance.

Actually, the two points of reference may not be so diametrically opposed, but the contradiction involved is an objective one. No matter what the approach is, there remains a historical text for modern readers (or actors); on the one hand there is the Elizabethan context and meaning, on the other, the modern understanding and interpretation. There is no getting away from this inevitable tension between the historical and the modern points of view, and no one-sided solution is feasible. The most learned and historically-minded scholar cannot physically become an Elizabethan; he cannot recreate the Globe or visualize the original production. Even if he conceived of Shakespeare's drama as being enacted in the theatre, he would still be influenced by his own experience of the modern stage, its twentieth-century audience and actors and their social relationships that are quite different from those which, in Shakespeare's Globe, then constituted part of the play's meaning.

The underlying contradiction is not an academic one, and the more we think of it in terms of practical interpretation (including the theatrical interpretation of Shakespeare on the modern stage) the clearer the theoretical implications will emerge. Since today it is just as impossible to understand Shakespeare without a modern interpretation as it is to have an interpretation without Shakespeare, we cannot proceed from either a genuine Elizabethan production (and this already contained an interpretation of the text) or from one which makes us believe that *Hamlet* is a modern play. Today any Shakespeare interpretation has to come to terms with the tension between historical values and modern evaluations. But this contradiction is not necessarily frustrating, and the way it is solved constitutes the most essential decision of both historical criticism and serious theatri-

cal interpretation. Viewed from the angle of the drama as a work of the theatre, this contradiction involves an inevitable tension between the mimetic (or expressive) and the affective aspects, between the significance of what Shakespeare's work reflected (or expressed) in plot and character, and the changing impact of this on the contemporary spectator. Now to re-create the mimetic and the expressive dimensions is impossible without reference to Shakespeare's world and his intentions; to re-assess their affective and moral effects is impossible without reference to our audience and our world.

For the literary historian and critic the question, then, is not *whether or not* to accept both worlds as points of reference, but rather *how* to relate them so as to obtain their maximum dimensions. To put it like this may appear provocatively superficial, but to resolve the contradiction one cannot minimize the conflicting elements when each is — in its different world — so inevitable and necessary. The "maximum dimensions" then, can mean no more and no less than this: to have as much of the historical significance and as much of the contemporary meaning merged into a new unity. Of course there is no easy formula as to how this synthesis of historical values and modern evaluations can be achieved. But in order to grasp its dialectic, it is well to remember that it is not entirely a case of opposites. On the contrary, it would be a grave mistake to overlook those many points of contact and identity, where, say, Shakespeare's Renaissance values can today be considered valid. This area of identity or interaction, however, is not simply given; it will be enlarged from a contemporary point of view which can conceive its own social direction as historical in the sense that it affirms both the revulsions and the links of contact between the past and the future. In the last resort this relationship involves a social and a methodological position from which both the change and the continuity can be accepted as part of a meaningful movement in history. In the present reception of Renaissance drama, therefore, the area of identity will radically differ between, say, a Marxist interpretation and one based on the premises of Jacques Maritain's neoscholasticism. Where the Renaissance heritage is not repudiated, there is bound to be a wide range of living contact, in which the "historical" element can be viewed as part of a wider configuration in which the present reproduction of past art is one way of bringing about a meaningful future.

Nor is this area of identity, which of course is also one of humanity and derives from man's anthropological status, confined to the Renaissance tradition. We are all, the great dramatists of the past, their contemporary producers and critics, characters in history; our own points of reference are, like our predecessors', products of history. In this, our present values emerge from the same historical process which is both

reflected in, and accelerated by, Shakespeare's contribution. This is quite obvious in the history of literature which can only be written in reference to a scheme of values that (among other things) has to be abstracted from its great objects, including Shakespeare's dramas. Their greatness has been confirmed by the very contribution they have made for furnishing us with criteria by which to judge, and to judge not only modern plays but also the history of the drama as a whole.

Since such area of identity may be accepted as given, the relationship between Shakespeare's vision and its modern perspectives cannot simply be described as one of conflict or opposition. The difference between his world and ours is obvious enough, but it does not exclude some kind of concurrence. As Arnold Kettle has remarked, "the best way to emphasize the value of Shakespeare in *our* changing world is to see him in *his*, recognizing that the two worlds, though very different, are at the same time a unity."³⁶ This unity is at the basis of all our veneration for Shakespeare; without it, the impact of his work would not be possible. At the same, this unity does not preclude a contradiction which is at the basis of all our conflicting interpretations. In very much oversimplified terms: the unity creates the need of our interpretations of *Shakespeare*; the contradiction accounts for the need of our *interpretations* of Shakespeare. But actually each is contained in the other, and the interpretation as a whole can only succeed when these two aspects are inextricably welded into one. (By himself the modern historian can, as we have seen, either enhance or reduce the sphere of unity or the area of contradiction, but he can never entirely annihilate either.)

Once this relationship (although here still oversimplified) is understood more deeply, the historical study of literature has gained at least two negative standards of evaluation, but they may have some practical use for judging not only the literary but also the theatrical interpretation of the great drama of the past. For in the theatre as elsewhere, the modernized classic is no more acceptable than the museum version. This may not be saying anything new, but perhaps it helps to recover certain assumptions which might prove practicable to both the theatre director and the historical scholar. If the rift between them could thus be narrowed, the present theatrical reception of Shakespeare need be neither academic nor irresponsible. In modern Shakespearean productions, then, Hamlet need not become a hippy in order to convince, nor would it be necessary, as Martin Walser thinks it is, to produce "the old play" in order "to show us what things were like formerly" ("um uns zu sagen, wie es früher war"). If the past can be conceived, neither in its identity with, nor

36 *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London, 1964), p. 10.

in its isolation from, the present, a historical perspective could evolve which might be both theatrically effective and convincing to the scholar. No topical effects are wanted, but a sense of history which can discover permanence in change but also change in seeming permanence; the past in the present but also the present in the past. Hence the "timeless" would result through a sense of time and history. It is in this sense that Shakespeare is "for all time" precisely because he was the "Soule of the Age." In this view, a historical vision can be made to yield a contemporary meaning. Its past significance was achieved because, at the time, it was contemporary and *then* incorporated the experience of the present. The meaning of literary history today can best be discovered through this past present, or that part of it which — although past — is still present and meaningful in a contemporary frame of reference. Thus, past significance and present meaning engage in a relationship which, in its interdependence, may illuminate either — the past work as against its present reception, and the contemporary interpretation against the historical significance of the work of art.

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