Interpretation, Criticism and the Problem of Poetic Structure

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> IT is the business of the critical power . . . in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science, to see the object as in itself it really is.
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> —Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"

TWO ANCIENT DISTINCTIONS have generally maintained throughout the long and highly polemicized history of the arts: that between the art object itself and whatever is said about it, and that between the artist and the critic. Now the former of these may be seen, with E. D. Hirsch, as the "distinction between the meaning of an interpretation and the construction of meaning to which it refers," or, "between the art of understanding and the art of explaining—the *subtilitas intelligendi* and the *subtilitas explicandi.*" (*Validity in Interpretation*, p. 129.) The latter, of course, is nothing more than the commonplace invidious comparison between the primary act of creation and the secondary process of accounting for the phenomena known collectively as "art." With this latter I shall have little to do, for to speak of art and artistry as wholly or even mostly ineffable is a species of anti-intellectualism which precludes the possibility of knowledge: at least of the sort of knowledge with which Arnold's "critical power" is concerned: the description and explanation of an art object "as in itself it really is." One of the most important of the assumptions underlying this essay will be the notion that not only can we *know* (*i. e.*, have knowledge about) art, and particularly literary

art, but we may discover *how* and *what* we know through a process—involving both a method of inquiry (empirical) and a mode of discourse (expository)—which insists upon treating literary art as a class or classes of intelligible objects in the real world, not all that different, *vis a vis* their accessibility or recoverability, from a rock, the weather or Doppler shifting in starlight. The task, then, of this essay will be to treat the problem, not of truth *in* poetry, but of truth *in what we say about* poetry.

Because art is experienced by human beings, who clearly bring into the encounter an entire matrix of emotions, preconceptions and knowledge, one further distinction must be introduced at this point: that between interpretation and criticism. Perhaps recourse to a fundamental model in communications theory will help make this distinction clear. If one thinks of artistic activity (in this case in language) as a process of encoding, and of the aesthetic experience as a process of decoding, then the criterion for successful communication will be the degree and extent to which what is encoded is in fact recovered at the other end of the model. And in poetry, as in all art, decoding involves both the affective and the cognitive faculties—but with a priority of the latter to the former, in as much as the *power* (*dynamis*, final cause) of a poem can only be realized more or less fully when the audience at the decoding end understands the nature of the communication at hand. Thus, *re*cognition in some sense controls realization of a poetic power. Now there is a basic triad of terms upon which a theory of criticism may be built: recognition (or understanding), interpretation and criticism. Interpretation strives to account, qualitatively, for the peculiar part-whole relationships in literary art, recognized by an audience, which give rise to the affective dimension in a poem; criticism, on the other hand, provides us with a series of judgments—subjective

and external—about that poem: its social complexion, its politics, its psychology, etc. Certainly, to be sound, these judgments must be grounded in knowledge of the nature of the poem's concrete wholeness. In this important sense, then, interpretation may be said to be prior to criticism and a necessary condition for criticism to progress.

Showing this to be true in an exhaustive fashion would transcend the scope of the essay. Yet the problem is a crucial one, both in this context and in the field of contemporary hermeneutics. The notion of an objective interpretation, prior to value judgments about literature, seems to be the only intellectual antidote to the doctrines of opinion and skepticism which are today the bane of critics and teachers who make serious attempts at recovering what is popularly called the "meaning" of a text. The twentieth century has seen such a tremendous explosion of critical writing—a good deal of it impressive and timely—that it is perhaps inevitable that such a radical hermeneutic skepticism develop. We are mired beneath a Babel of interpretations. And, to mix historical analogies, we are apt to go the way of all sophistry: he is said to be right who is persuasive. And to be sure many of the most touted critical books of our day have not cared a whit for such uncreative terms as objectivity, validity, or, indeed, logic. R. S. Crane, who fought this attritive war of methods for more than three decades, comments on the lengths to which critics in this modern, creative mold will stretch our credulity:

> And only less shocking . . . are the arguments that require us, as a condition of receiving the new truth the critic has to offer, to disregard our natural emotional response to the poem when we read it naively without benefit of the critic's hypothesis. An instance of this that deserves to become classic is Mr. Wilson Knight's essay on *Hamlet*, in which we are told that, if only we will "refuse to be diverted from a clear vision by questions of praise and blame, responsibility and causality, and watch only

> the actions and reactions of the persons as they appear," and if only we will refuse, in reading the play, to "think in terms of logic," we shall then "observe a striking reversal of the usual commentary" on what is going on in Shakespeare's tragedy. . . . (*The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*, p. 34)

The gist of this "striking reversal": Hamlet is the instrument of evil; Claudius, poor misunderstood man, a benevolent and sensitive character. "But why," Crane asks, "must we make these refusals? . . . There seems to be only one possible answer: because, without them, there could be no 'striking reversal of the usual commentary.' The whole procedure, in short, is one designed to save, not the phenomena, but the hypothesis about Shakespeare and dramatic poetry to which Mr. Wilson Knight has attached his faith." (*Languages of Criticism*, p. 35) The real danger, however, is not from such enormities of judgment as this, but from those books of approaches that stake claims of exclusive truth, and base them on some parochial exercise in further mystification of that which, by their own definition, is already a mystery in the first place. Cleanth Brooks, in his book on Faulkner, does something of this sort. The book is really about the kind of man one has to be to appreciate Faulkner, and, of course, Brooks turns out to be a rare example of the type. This variety of modern criticism may be creative, beautiful, daring, iconoclastic, liberated. But it cannot be said to be "true," any more than the primary documents upon which it is based can be so denominated.

Among a set of questions about poetry that may be fairly asked, and validly answered, that dealing with quiddity would seem to be primary. *What* is it? What is its nature? Or, in the special case of imitative poetry, what is it about? This last version occurs generally in talk about art, and *a fortiori* almost universally in discussions of art in language, because of a crucial peculiarity of language

when it is taken as the medium for art: it is impossible to make a poem (or even a sentence for that matter) which is not *about* something. There is no such thing as abstract or non-representational poetry. This difference from abtract art is enough to render literary talk about special aesthetic or psychological or affective perceptions virtually meaningless except in the determinative context of the quiddity question: what is it about? There is a conveniently notorious example of the conditioning effect of this question upon the perceptions of an audience. In John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" an initial ambiguity with regard to the subject matter is introduced in the title and amplified in the opening stanza:

> As virtuous men pass mildly away,
> And whisper to their souls to go,
> Whilst some of their sad friends do say
> The breath goes now, and some say, No;

So pressing is the reader's need to *know*, to discern quiddity, that frequently he has concluded by line five or six that the poem is about the imminent death of a loved one. This generalization from the part to the nature of the whole has been made because of a clearly felt need in the reader for such knowledge. But it is faulty. The poem actually is concerned with the problem of the temporary separation of two lovers: he is going to travel on the Continent, she, remain behind. The question of death is handled metaphorically, in a conceit, to give significance to this leave-taking and the censure against mourning. Surely the special perceptions of an audience, attendant to a reading of Donne's poem, will be formidably influenced by this very basic question of subject matter. Surely it makes a difference whether a poem is about death or about traveling on the Continent. Surely, in short, interpretation matters.

II. Objective Interpretation

The object of scientific knowledge is something that cannot be other than it is.

—Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*

In the twentieth century the term "criticism" has come to designate all operations on a given text, from simple taxonomy of its words and sentences, through description of its qualitative parts and their relationship to the whole, to evaluation according to any number of external criteria (*e. g.*, text as myth, as psychology, as history, etc.). The immediate result of this lack of differentiation has been the emergence of the doctrine that criticism may not be systematic, that it must be as many co-existing things as is humanly possible, since it apparently is not at all amenable to any uniform line of inquiry. That this doctrine has been too little examined may be seen from a survey of the literature of critical theory: the paucity of writings on formal criticism under an inductive or empirical aegis is a remarkable indication of the intellectual disinclination to talk about literature analytically. With the exceptions of two generations of Chicago neo-Aristotelians, Hirsch's phenomenology and Kenneth Burke's "symbolic action" approach, scarcely any attention has been offered to the problem of the nature of a poem when a poem is conceived as thing, object, event or phenomenon. Even the so-called New Critics, who until recently held the field against all comers with their anti-historical insistence on "the text itself," are not strictly critics of the formal nature of poetry, for they hold the poem to be primarily a collocation of sentences whose "structure" or "meaning" is a function of what they call the "specialized" use of language. Thus Cleanth Brooks finds "irony" to be the principle of structure in a poem; William Empson holds to "ambiguity;" John Crowe Ransom to the deliberately counter-logical in a poem, and so on. New Criticism is

monisticly medium criticism. And to call it formal is to reduce poetry to sentences which differ from "ordinary" sentences only insofar as they are "ironic" or "paradoxical" or "ambiguous." In fact such criticism in no way isolates the peculiarities of poetic structure. On the contrary it merely synthesizes poetry into a platonizing dialectic of the Many and the One: Language is the whole and poetry an aspect of Language. Moreover, it is anything but obvious that the sentences of poetry are fundamentally different from the sentences of exposition, say, or from other sorts of discourse. Contemporary linguistic theory (I am thinking of the developments in generative grammar from Chomsky onward) tends to show that the *totality* of our linguistic competence is rule-governed. And the commonplace that poets somehow "break the rules" would seem to be an absurdity. Perhaps the only such poet is the ultra-romantic one of Carlyle's imagination: he who is the poet by virtue of his ethos and not by virtue of his verse—which, of course, he never writes, but carries around in his Personality, thereby at once reaching a larger audience and protecting himself against critical attack in the Quarterlies.

All this is by way of illustrating two related matters: first, that literary criticism, like all intellectual endeavor, has theoretical underpinnings; and, second, that the almost universal aversion to theorizing is an important cause of the haphazard condition of contemporary criticism. The remedy, I am convinced, is a meta-theory that orders the priorities of criticism, putting interpretation first and providing principles by which the necessary plurality of criticisms may be properly applied to a given text. Interpretation involves a univocal and carefully contrived system of discourse, one which must articulate and account for our understanding of a poem. Now and then (witness the example from Donne) it will be called upon to cor-

rect or fulfill that initial understanding. A large job, you may say. And a crucial one, a *sine qua non* for subsequent critical exercises. Were interpretation always a matter of consensus—*Oedipus Rex* is a Greek tragedy . . .—the task of specifying the workings of the part-whole relationship would *still* be the beginning point of any critical inquiry. Unfortunately, most cases for interpretation are hardly consensus candidates, and one wonders how clear-cut Greek tragedy would be today, had not Aristotle so splendidly given us a comprehensive *theory* of its workings. Interpretation confronts the basic questions of artistry: the processes by which form and matter are uniquely made into a concrete whole. It details the constructional aspects of poetry so that the pre-and-post-constructional can be legitimately treated by criticism. It describes the interaction of poetic object, means and manner with a particularity sufficient to account for a unique (*sui generis*) poetic power, and with a generality sufficient to place the poem in its proper species. Of all methods which begin with the poem as thing or object and proceed to genus and species distinctions, that of Aristotle is the most successful. A brief description of Aristotelian poetics, with modern adaptations and extensions, should help clarify both the task of interpretation and the means necessary to achieve it.

When Aristotle came to lecture on poetics, he brought to bear on the problem a highly developed method for differentiation of one thing from another. Holding that it was the very materiality of the universe which made it intelligible, Aristotle classified things according to the concurrence of causes that gave them their natures, and, where causes were similar or identical, made the largest generalization consistent with a given grouping of things; and poems, as made things, certainly had their causes, effects, materials, natures. Because they were objects with

natures, they could be shown to have principles and structures, a genus and species. And, most importantly, a theory to explain them might be evolved. And in the case of the Aristotelian theory of Greek tragic drama, it is noteworthy that only two assumptions are employed: that man delights in making and experiencing imitations, and that according to his nature he delights in making *harmonious* imitations (*Poetics*, 4, 1448 B). Note also that Aristotle has *observed* the dramas that are and have been to determine whether they are imitations. The existence of mimetic poetry is established from an inductive survey of history, while the peculiarities of tragic drama are isolated through a careful differentiation of this form from others such as lyric, epic and comic. And when he has adequately determined the differentia—according to object, means, manner and end, corresponding to the larger doctrine of the fourfold causation of all things: formal, material, efficient and final—Aristotle is ready for his famous definition of Greek tragic drama: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language, embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in dramatic rather than narrative manner; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (*Poetics*, 6, 1449 B) The beauty of this definition is to be found in the fact that it simultaneously treats both the uniqueness of the made thing, the concrete wholeness of a particular tragedy, or, to put it another way, the tragedy *sui generis*, and the formal or species characteristics of the tragedy which make it part of a recognizable (and continuous if not universal) *kind* of literature. Thus the interpreter who employs the method of Aristotle will be able to account for the fact of greatness within a piece of drama, while at the same time (and using the same notions of

causation) he can place the piece within the "history" of its form through a generalization of kind.

But to specify what, in an inductive poetics, constitutes evidence or a viable principle of validation, it is necessary to look more closely at the Aristotelian concept of form. For Aristotle the *form* Greek tragedy was not in itself universal, only the instinct to imitate which lay behind its production. He noted that artistic imitations were imitations of men's actions (*Poetics*, 1, 1447 A), and that such forms as comedy and tragedy had traditionally been used to structure represented action. Beyond this he was too prudent to go. He speaks of tragedy not as it should be or will be, but as it is and has been, stressing the organic evolution of a literary form: "Tragedy advanced by slow degrees; each new element that showed itself was in turn developed. Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped." (*Poetics*, 4, 1449 A) The universality of literature derives from its mimetic basis. Aristotle could not have known—though perhaps he would have predicted—that tragedy would continue to be a feature of Western culture; nor, of course, could he have foreseen the emergence of a new form, the novel, a kind of prose fiction narrative which would dominate modern literature. Yet Aristotelian poetics is possibly the most functional approach to art in language ever conceived, and it works in our era precisely because it defeats reductive relativism by taking advantage of the obvious: literature represents the actions of human beings and does so in forms that are fully describable.

Aristotelian form is the same for natural and man-made things. It is the principle that synthesizes matter into something objective—hence the formal cause of a saw is the appropriate architecture for wood-cutting. In mimetic literature it is clear that this form becomes efficacious

through a peculiar synthesis of the qualitative parts involved: plot, character, thought and diction. It is not, however, so easy to discern the nature of the synthesizing principle which is the "architecture" for a poetic power. How does one get a sense of form in literature? Certainly it must come from the immediate experience of the art, for that is what we use in lieu of the empirical tools of science; certainly it must be consonant with the emotions we feel, for these are the direct result of the final cause of poetry; and certainly it must be on the order of a hypothetical generalization about the nature of the whole, one that can be formulated so as to be testable both on the evidence of our reaction to the artistry and on the internal evidence indicating the actual construction. The process, then, is one starting from experience, moving to a hypothetical statement about the nature of the whole, and continuing through evidence-culling and testing of the hypothesis. R. S. Crane, who has been the main intelligence behind the development of the neo-Aristotelian approach, describes his method:

> . . . the solution most consonant with this mode of criticism is one that consists in taking the concrete wholeness of a work as the proximate end of its author's productive activity and reasoning back from what the work is, as an object of critical analysis, to the particular problems and decisions—defined artistically rather than psychologically—which its production entailed, and thence to the particular materials and qualities of mind which set the conditions in which the author's choices of form and of formative devices took place. (*The Idea of the Humanities*, Vol. II, p. 66)

In general it is a question of the way in which a work's material nature is related to its formal nature, when by form I intend that principle (or set of principles) which gives to the matter its considerable power to affect our emotions in a way that would not have been possible had this formal synthesizing principle been of another

type. It is a problem of experiencing a concrete whole and, in the process of interpretation, attempting to reason back to its causes. And we have adequately done so only when we have made as intelligible as possible the functioning of materials (scenes, incidents, themes, character-traits, words, symbols, etc.) in a formal whole that can reasonably be asserted as the final cause of the work, that is, its emotional effect on human beings. The discovery of the synthesizing principle may indeed involve whatever evidence there is surrounding the circumstances of the construction of the work, including any statements the author may have made about intention. But the task, it should be reiterated, is one of tracing artistry and not psychology, so that historical evidence must be seen in the light of the formal hypothesis if it is to be seen at all.

There are, of course, hypotheses and hypotheses. It is not likely that the first formulation of an interpretive hypothesis will exhaust the "data" at hand. The problem of validation is especially troublesome with hypotheses about literature, for information about construction can be known only inferentially and not directly—in other words, from inferences consequent upon the conception of the form of the whole and developed from the observable qualities of the work. The formal hypothesis is always of the tentative sort, or what the scientist would call a "working" hypothesis. It is to be tested by the criterion of comprehensiveness, worked through and discarded if it cannot subsume the tremendous multiplicity of qualitative detail in a work of art in language. An entire series of formal hypotheses is possible, until that *one* is formulated which *best* accounts for the phenomenon, until, to use Chomsky's term, "explanatory adequacy" is achieved. (*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax,* pp. 25-26) An illustration of formulating and testing a formal hypothesis may be found in the treatment of *Macbeth,* a

case made classic by Crane in his *Languages of Criticism.* From the vast plurality of critical hypotheses available to him, Crane made a first selection: *Macbeth* would not be for him a morality play, an allegory of the workings of sin in the soul, a lyric statement of evil, or whatever; it would simply be "an imitative tragic drama based on historical materials." (*Languages of Criticism,* p. 170) Nor is this at all arbitrary on his part. For calling in an imitative tragic drama at least conforms with our initial intuitive account of our immediate emotional response. This first principle of selection determines the genus (imitative tragedy) and puts us on the track of the species: further specification will enable us to determine the nature, perhaps, of Elizabethan or Renaissance tragedy, and finally, the *sui generis* characteristics of *Macbeth* itself.

Crane recognizes in the play a familiar plot-type for Renaissance drama. "A form of serious action designed to arouse moral indignation for the deliberately unjust and seemingly prospering acts of the protagonist and moral satisfaction at his subsequent ruin." (*Languages of Criticism,* p. 170) Here is the "punitive" tragic plot, one which shapes and guides our expectations and desires for "poetic justice." We are terribly aware that Macbeth is a tyrant and a murderer and quickly Macduff's cause becomes our cause. "All this is made clear in the representation not only directly through the speeches and acts of the avengers but indirectly by those wonderfully vivid devices of imagery and general thought in which modern critics have found the central value and meaning of the play as a whole." (*Languages of Criticism,* p. 170) However, in desiring the complete and quick success of the counter-action against Macbeth, we do so not only for the sake of justice for Scotland and humanity, but for *Macbeth himself.* Thus the plot is taken beyond the merely retributive class, for if *Macbeth* were *only* a poetic

justice tragedy, one might ask, why should Shakespeare offer us that brilliant series of soliloquies and speeches, each one more intense than the one before, the cumulative effect of which is to give us a probing, horrifying and yet moving inner view of the bloody and deranged king? Obviously, any adequate hypothesis will have to account for our involvement with the fate of Macbeth: the sooner Birnam wood arrives at Dunsinane, the better it will be, we feel, for the tortured soul of Macbeth. Our interpretive hypothesis is designed to ask a crucial question: what synthesis of the qualitative parts of the play would bring about the maximization of the poetic power? And if our hypothesis gives us a means of integrating the two plot-types, it also offers a view of Macbeth consistent with the demands of the complex plot. Here is a man not naturally depraved, who is infatuated with an imagined better state for himself, who becomes a slave to its compulsive power, who acts immorally to realize it, and whose moral self progressively hardens at its insistent demand for more and more butchery. The cathartic power of the drama is effected not solely by Macbeth's demise, but by the suffering concomitant with the supremely affecting Aristotelian discovery, represented in the speech (V, v) immediately following Lady Macbeth's death:

> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
> And then is heard no more; it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

Formal hypotheses, when they are sound, inevitably tend to lead us to the most important parts of the work—such as this speech—and give us a frame of reference in which subsequent analysis may proceed. Or, as Crane puts it, ". . . if this, or something close to it, is indeed the complex emotional structure intended in *Macbeth*, then we have a basis for defining with some precision the various problems of incident, character, thought, imagery, diction, and representation which confronted Shakespeare in writing the play, and hence a starting-point for discussing, in detail, the rationale of its parts." (*Languages of Criticism*, p. 172)

With this sketch of a hypothetical view of *Macbeth* freshly in mind, I would like to re-affirm some of the general remarks made earlier about the nature of hypotheses themselves. In the first place, the only proof there can be—with this sort of interpretive hypothesis or any other—derives from the completeness and coherence of its explanation. In addition, the hypothesis must be judged in relation to all other formulations of the same data. But, at least in matters of literary criticism, yet another criterion is advisable: economy. We may say, with Crane, that that hypothesis is best which requires the fewest supplementary notions to keep it on its feet. Thus, if a certain critic asks us, as did Wilson Knight in the example of *Hamlet*, to stifle our natural reaction to the play, we may fairly expect him to go on to build a synthetic critical edifice as elaborate as Ptolemy's imaginative view of the cosmos—and very likely just as wrong. Discourse like Knight's seems bent upon self-conscious demonstration that art and art-criticism are different from or alternative to science and material reality, that they are insular and require special tools. And so they do. But not in order that fortified castles of paradox and mystery may be erected. Rather, they exist to see to it

that our common-sense apprehensions of art are intellectually accounted for. For only at that fundamental level may we begin to build a value-oriented criticism that will be both a credible and a creditable brand of humanism.

III. Criticism: the Case for Pluralism

> The terminology of artistic criticism, far from promoting understanding by its clarity and uniformity, has by its ambiguity and irregularity often supplanted the problems of art as a subject for dissension, and has often provided a fruitful ground for cavils upon propositions the truth of which, in a happier state of the subject, would have been recognized as unquestionable.
>
> —Elder Olson, "The Dialectical Foundations of Critical Pluralism"

With a certified interpretation in hand, how does one go about doing that business which has come to be known as criticism? Interpretation, as we have seen, is a matter of terms, propositions, validation: in short, a system of inference or universe of discourse. But so, plainly, is criticism. The difference lies in the fact that the former is intrinsic and therefore amenable to *one best* treatment, while the latter is extrinsic to the work—the universes of discourse referring to a given piece of art being in this case illimitable. And no one in the field of literary studies is apt to argue that the unchecked proliferation of critical writing in the twentieth century has been an unmixed blessing; for, as Olson so nicely puts it, criticism often draws attention to itself, obscuring the problems of art and artistry, until polemics among schools or between particular adversaries—often given such untoward authority in college curricula—drive the unfortunate student to a precocious cynicism regarding the possibility of knowledge or certitude in discussions of art. The recent appearance of the ultimate secondary source, the Cliff or Monarch Notes series, can only be seen, I think,

as a bitter and damning testament to the modern preoccupation with critical controversy. And the scholar who would sort out and evaluate this welter of criticism needs no caveats: he knows from the outset that he will encounter an entrenched prejudice against order in his profession, that he may be chided for co-opting scientific methods in an unscientific landscape, and that his efforts will bring him little thanks in an intellectual ambience that has thriven so long on argument for its own sake. Yet evaluation of the multiplicity of critical universes, of "languages," is surely the critic's task if it is anyone's. Has he not loosed this war of polemic upon an uninitiated world? Then to him falls the herculean labor of cleaning his profession's stables.

The first step either in doing or evaluating criticism is understanding the systems of inference involved. What are the cardinal terms, the kinds of propositions employed? What sorts of evidence allowed, what principles of validation invoked? This basic operation is really a matter of viewing the arts philosophically, removing an artificial separation maintained almost continuously throughout history (except in Plato and Aristotle). Isolating a given system of inference allows the critic of criticism to discriminate conflicting views from differing. For example consider the ways in which art may be seen: it ". . . may be viewed either as an object, thing, or product; or as an activity of the artist, or as a passivity of the artist, or as certain faculties or as a certain character of the artist; or as a certain activity or passivity of the audience, or certain faculties or a certain character of the audience; or as an instrument of some kind; or as a sign, either of the character or activity or passivity of the artist or of the audience, or of the nature of something else involved in art." (Elder Olson, "Dialectical Foundations of Critical Pluralism," *Texas Quarterly,* IX,

no. 1, p. 221.) Think of your favorite critic, if you have one, and plug him into one of the categories: archetypal critics, Freudian critics, Marxian critics, critics of audience effect or of the imagination; allegorists, symbolists, Zeitgeist critics, and, yes, Aristotelians. There are two great advantages to pluralism, and one of them is its timely power of showing so many abrasive critical conflicts to be, finally, just differences of dialectical object or method. Thus if a Marxian critic announces that all literature is the literature of class struggle, and a Freudian counters with the statement that all literature is a fantasy-avoidance of the reality principle, we may step into the fray before its gets out of hand and say, with some confidence, "Each of you is asserting a position from a deterministic framework that does not admit of empirical verification. Neither of your respective determinisms has any rigorous claim to truth. The best we can do for you is to let you take your places in the pluralistic critical universe, where perhaps someday some *part* of your systems may be of use in the critical elucidation of a piece of literature." The Freudian contention that underlying instinctual forces or patterns are determinative (in literature and life), the Marxian contention that over-arching Objective History determines what we know as literature, the Jungian doctrine that universal archetypes are necessarily embodied in literature—these and countless other systems of inference may be called upon *in part* to help us criticize. And in the use of the part we need not worry about the coercive, authoritative bulk of the deterministic whole.

The second advantage of pluralism, besides its helpfulness in encouraging clear thinking about universes of discourse, is its freedom from both dogmatism and skepticism. Dogmatic philosophy asserts only itself as valid and adequate; skeptical philosophy demurs: there are no

valid or adequate philosophies, either wholly or in part; but pluralistic philosophy holds to several valid and many adequate philosophies. (Elder Olson, "Dialectical Foundations", p. 220) Pluralism in literary criticism, while similar, does not go quite so far. It certainly holds that most of the variety of critical languages are helpful to practical criticism of literature, but it rarely asserts the validity of a given philosophy as a whole, and it always selects extrinsic critical viewpoints from the standpoint of the prior literary interpretation. Hence when criticizing Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode," one would choose the Platonic "universe" not because it is a valid or even a beautiful system of philosophy, but because the poem just happens to be about what its title suggests: "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." The poem involves the Platonic notion of the immortality of the soul. This being the case, it behooves us to know as much as possible about the *Phaedo*, though in no sense are we bound to assert any other Platonic doctrine, let alone Plato's entire philosophy.

In closing these remarks on interpretation and criticism, let me recur to the example of the Donne "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." I argued earlier in the essay that what a poem was about was crucial to our understanding and perception, and that interpretation was the operation used to specify what a poem was about and how it was so constituted as one thing and not another. I am convinced that the literary critic—and particularly the critic who finds himself a professor of literary studies in a liberal arts curriculum—bears a considerable responsibility to the texts he interprets and to his audience. We all, I am sure, sense the conservatism implicit in liberal arts humanism: we are committed to the propositions that some things are true and others false, some right and others wrong; that not much, really, is just a matter of

opinion, nor are all things relative—all this in a world impatient with knowledge, reasoning, value for their own sake. But the modern liberal arts curriculum was devised as a reaction against and eventual antidote for that very impatience. The humanities fight a holding action today so that man may prevail tomorrow, and within the humanities criticism celebrates man as a value-making organism energized by his powers of intellect, imagination and creation. The function of criticism at this or any other time is to see an object as in itself it actually is. For better or worse humanists are (by default?) the arbiters of value, when value is taken to be the best from the past and the most positive signposts to the future. In this rather grand conception of the humanist-critic's role, does it finally matter what Donne's poem is about? By way of answering, let us look a little further into the poem. Its most famous section is the justly praised conceit of the drafting-compass. Speaking of the lovers' souls, Donne says,

> If they be two, they are two so
> As stiff twin compasses are two;
> Thy soul the fixt foot, makes no show
> To move, but doth, if th' other do.
>
> And though it in the center sit,
> Yet when the other far doth roam,
> It leans and hearkens after it,
> And grows erect, as that comes home.

The final stanza clarifies the conceit: the poet is the traveller, who must "obliquely run" afar, while his beloved, the "fixt foot," remains the guiding force that "makes" his "circle just," and brings him home again. Why has Donne gone to the trouble of drawing such exquisite conceits? What does he value so much here? I want to know the answer with certainty and I want my students to know as well. Donne values love. "A

Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is a superb love poem treating the soul-bond between two lovers, one of whom must make a journey. It is not at all about death, for the traveller returns. This much can be made clear, and we may now swim as deeply as we like in the poem and our criticism of it. Because I value love and my students value love, it is a beautiful thing to witness Donne's valuation of the same emotion as manifested in this thing we call a poem. That is what it *is*. And I shudder to think what I should be doing if, in my *e*valuation, I began by calling it something else.

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