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Heroes and Mandarins: Criticism and the Demands of Life

... it is precisely communities with adjoining territories ... who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other.... I gave this phenomenon the name of "the narcissism of minor differences"....

— Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

In 1965 Lionel Trilling delivered a lecture at Cambridge University in which he offered what he called "reflections on the study of English." In the course of his remarks, Trilling turned to the then recent debate on the "two cultures" and shrewdly pointed to the issue of "style" as a source of the outrage that C. P. Snow had aroused in F. R. Leavis:

The extraordinary anger that Dr. Leavis directed against C. P. Snow ... is to be accounted for by the latter's having dared to conjure the sources of life in a style that Dr. Leavis believed to be wrong. In Dr. Leavis's view, it was not so much that his antagonist held mistaken opinions or subscribed to wrong doctrines, the imputed error being demonstrable by reason, it was rather that his magic was of the wrong kind, his medicines of bad omen: Lord Snow's incantations were in a style that Dr. Leavis held to be inadmissible.¹

In an essay he wrote on the Snow-Leavis debate, Trilling amplified this point by reference to the tendency of those who think in what he called "cultural terms"

to consider human expressions not only in their overt existence and avowed intention, but in, as it were, their secret life, taking cognizance of the desires and impulses which lie behind the open formulations.²

In a debate between, for example, "two moralities of, say, equal strictness or equal laxness," the "criterion by which" the cultural critic will choose sides is, Trilling argues, "likely to be an aesthetic one." I do not take Trilling's point to be an *aestheticist* one, however, but one that insists that the style of an utterance may warn us of a fault-line beneath the surface of discourse.

At the moment, literary studies are not engaged in a polemic with the exact sciences, but polemic defines much of the academic literary

scene. The turmoil of the past decade has arisen on the question of how we should conduct the general business of literary study, including critical study and graduate education. During these years, certain unsettling changes have occurred in the linguistic gestures and the points of intellectual reference of those who write about critical theory. These changes are as unsettling now as were the changes that occurred forty to fifty years ago, during a comparable period of theoretical turmoil because in critical theory we find our professional reflection upon our own activity. However, the recent turbulence is not restricted to the plane of theory; for as we read the latest studies of authors, genres, and historical periods, we are likely to have noticed here, too, similar changes in the style of "practical criticism."

It is as if we are witnesses at a process of extinction. Certain words, for example, that ruled the pages of critical journals when I entered graduate school, nineteen years ago, are going the way of the California condor and the grizzly bear. Those master-words of the New Criticism—"irony," "ambiguity," "tension," and "paradox"—lying somewhere between description and evaluation, are the equivalents in literary studies of endangered species. We still encounter them, of course—as campers may encounter grouchy grizzly bears—but the force-field generated around those words by virtue of the relationships that held among them and the prestige of the critics who gave them currency has diminished noticeably in intensity. Now it has been a convention of nearly twenty years to speak of the waning of the New Criticism, and I mean only to discuss certain aspects of the manner of its demise as well as some of the implications for literary studies of the movement that has claimed the throne of the New Criticism. However, since I will be critical of the claimant, it is worth noting that I, for one, do not weep o' nights for the deposed monarch. Criticism of certain aspects of the new and nostalgia for certain aspects of the old entail no dreams of Restoration.

Those once-powerful New Critical words have grown shabby. One hesitates to be heard using them, as, in *Sister Carrie*, old Chicago cronies of Hurstwood hesitate to be seen in the company of that down-on-his-luck former manager. The shabbiness of the word "symbol" will serve as an example. We now pursue signs. How the mighty have fallen! For Coleridge, "symbol" was a word of numinous power: "It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative." The symbol was the gift language made to us of the *real*. It would allow us, Yeats wrote, "to gaze upon some reality, some beauty;" and the poetic Word would be "as full of mysterious life as the body of a flower or of a woman."³ Under the

impact of post-structuralism, what such remarks as those of Coleridge and Yeats betray is a nostalgia for "presence," for an access to the real that represents a nostalgia for some "transcendental signified" beyond the diacritical play of "traces" that is language. It represents, in short, a displacement onto literature of the religious impulse.

At the very moment the graduate students of the 1960s were being initiated into the Rite of the Symbol, Sartre, in *Words*, was disabusing himself of the mystification whereby literature served as the last refuge of the presecular Spirit. In the library of the sixth-floor apartment of his grandfather, the child, Sartre, pursued literary mystification: "There I would once again breathe the rarefied air of belles-lettres; the Universe would rise in tiers at my feet and all things would humbly beg for a name; to name the thing was both to create it and take it. Without this fundamental illusion I would never have written."⁴ "I palmed off on the writer," Sartre adds, "the sacred powers of the hero." The Hero: Giver of Presence, of Reality, of Being *as* Being. The Hero: The Sovereign Subject.

Sartre liked to suggest that by a turn of the heroic screw he rid himself of illusion. One may wonder, however, whether, in the late 1950s, he was not in his own way reacting to that new force-field that, a decade later, would begin to displace from literary studies in English the idiom of the New Criticism and to substitute for it a style of austerity that traces its lineage to a shotgun marriage—because an arbitrary, a contingent, relationship—of Signifier to Signified.

When I call this style "austere," I mean that it bristles with abstractions and that it revels in the display of or allusion to concepts. It is first this style—so seductive to a new generation of graduate students—that has outraged a critical tradition raised on the courtly periods of Ransom, the Olympian off-handedness of Eliot, the Cambridge ideal of clarity of Richards, and the Cambridge earnestness of Leavis—or, for that matter, the late Jamesian opacity of R.P. Blackmur. All the instruments seem to agree that the Golden Time of Kenneth Burke should be at hand.

Let me cite an example of the new style, from the work of a theoretician of prominence these days: Julia Kristeva. I choose Kristeva rather than a critic whose first language is English because her stylistic condition is one to which many of those who now write in English aspire. She is here writing on a topic that was central to the New Criticism: "poetic language." Hold on:

This *heterogeneousness*, detected genetically in the first echolalias of infants as rhythms and intonations anterior to the first phonemes, morphemes, lexemes, and sentences; this heterogeneousness, which is later reactivated as rhythms, intonations, glossolalias in psychotic dis-

course, serving as ultimate support of the speaking subject threatened by the collapse of the signifying function; this heterogeneity to signification operates through, despite, and in excess of it and produces in poetic language "musical" but also nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself, that guarantee of thetic consciousness (of the signified object and ego)—for example, carnivalesque discourse, Artaud, a number of texts by Mallarmé, certain Dadaist and Surrealist experiments.⁵

Kristeva goes on—but you see the point, of the *style*, I mean. That it is an abstract and allusive style needs no comment, but it is worth noting how the new force-field is generated by the network of relationships implicit among certain of Kristeva's key words and by the bravura performance of a critic at home in this network.

One is first struck by how odd it is to find such a style issuing from a writer of French. Gone is the *clarté* of a Voltaire or Valéry. Nor is it elliptical, quite, in the gnomic yet sinuous manner of Mallarmé (which is not to say that the poet is without influence on certain *nouvelle vague* stylists). Nor has the oddity much, if anything, to do with Kristeva's Bulgarian background, alluded to in the title of Roland Barthes' 1970 article on her: "L'Etrangère." But that title points in the right direction, for if Sartre was no longer a *maître à penser* for intellectuals of Kristeva's generation, he has, all the same, influenced her by that deliberate act of violence he did, in *Being and Nothingness*, to French prose, when he brilliantly forced it to accommodate aspects of the thought and language of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger.

In fact, Kristeva's use of the word "thetic" immediately evokes both Sartre and Husserl, as "signification" sets up a train of associations to Saussure and the linguistic model that has influenced French thought for a generation. "Morpheme" and "phoneme" heighten the intensity of the force-field by the associations they awaken to Roman Jakobson and, across Jakobson, to Lévi-Strauss. The reference to the language of psychotics puts one in mind, by its relationship to the collapse of signification and an endangered subject, of Lacan and all that Lacan owes to Saussure, Heidegger, and the early Sartre—not to mention Freud, that John the Baptist to Lacan's Christ. When I read Kristeva's "lexemes" my own association is to the *S/Z* of Roland Barthes, a book that appeared, I think, after the essay from which Kristeva's passage is taken. Kristeva should not mind such a possible anachronism, for she is the priestess of inter-textuality and was a student of Barthes. In *S/Z* Barthes had reduced Balzac's "Sarrasine" to a series of reading-units, or "lexies," and both that book and its author represent a vast and busy intersection across which pass all the major discursive systems that define contemporary French criticism, including "deconstruction"

and the idea of the "heterogeneity" of literary language that overthrows all "accepted beliefs and significations."⁶

I have no intention of paraphrasing Kristeva's text, but I want to suggest that her reference to poetic language's de-stabilizing function is one that might not distress even a classical New Critic. This disruptive effect of poetic language on accepted beliefs puts one in mind of the effect that poetic language has, for Cleanth Brooks, on certain forms of stability. In *Literature Against Itself*, Gerald Graff has traced certain overlapping concerns and assumptions of the now *démodé* New Criticism and the criticism of the *nouvelle vague*, and insofar as Kristeva's celebration of the carnivalesque force of poetic language challenges bourgeois "seriousness," one can draw a Venn diagram that would bring her view partially into the circle of *The Well Wrought Urn*—at least with respect to the New Critical assumption that "the language of paradox" challenges the abstractions that issue from the most serious epistemic enterprise of bourgeois society: science.

However, Graff's account of these matters is definitive, and I am merely interested, at this point, in the linguistic choices that set these critical traditions apart. On the one hand, the traditionalists view the language of austerity as an almost Faustian conjuring of the Spectre of Abstraction. This Faustian idiom invites into the House of Criticism the greatest demon of a criticism that insisted on literature's gift to us of what Ransom called "the world's body," its *living* body, not its anatomized corpse. And this Faustianism works its spell with formulae borrowed from what I will call the "Disciplinary Others." Traditionalism had repeatedly warned against allowing the Disciplinary Others past the threshold of criticism's house. Philosophy, ethnology, linguistics, Marxism, psychoanalysis: what could criticism have to do with *them*, the Others?

Certainly the New Criticism had gone to school to philosophy. Certainly T.S. Eliot had turned his back on a possible philosophical career. Certainly I.A. Richards had felt linguistics and psychology beating on his pulses. But this is not to say that traditionalism was Faustian. Its philosophico-linguistic background always furthered the ideal of a criticism that was a field of knowledge in its own right, one in which the critic had to keep rigorously under control his conceptual heritage. My impression is that the uneasiness of certain of his contemporaries with Richards suggests their feeling that he was the Enemy Within—a bit too eager to reveal his legacy, one that smacked too much, for his contemporaries, of "positivism." Nevertheless, the spokesmen for the World's Body *were* erudite men. But their erudition was not allowed to have on the living body of the world what a Cleanth

Brooks would surely see as the effect on it of Kristevan erudition or the erudition of a Frederic Jameson: *hemorrhage*.

For its part, the *nouvelle vague* responds to the prose of traditionalism as a radical feminist, flaunting a black belt in karate, might respond to some latter-day Blanche du Bois, flouncing in the quaint attitudes of a Southern Lady. Those "attitudes" are an embarrassment to a movement that has "styled" itself in such a way as to gain access to the world of the Disciplinary Others. In that world, the measure of one's competence and one's freedom from illusions is the ability to manipulate concepts. When one is in the presence of weak sisters, however—in, say, a common room—one must show them indulgence. But one can count on not finding them when the conversation shifts to linguistic transformations, the undecidability theorems of mathematicians, the ideas of Althusser, or the Heideggerian notion of the ontological difference between Being and beings.

What seems to have occurred is a kind of displacement into academic literary culture of the conflict between the "two cultures" that aroused so much heat twenty years ago. All that has changed is that the "scientific" culture should be understood to include not only whatever concepts the *nouvelle vague* finds of use in the exact sciences but also the conceptual apparatus it has introduced from philosophy, the social sciences, linguistics, and psychoanalysis. What has not changed is the feeling of the contending parties that the wrong style represents "bad medicine."

There are, of course, serious ideological issues separating the parties to this argument. In *Furious Alphabets* Denis Donoghue has pointed, by his distinction between "epireaders" and "graphireaders", to one such issue: the epireader seeks always the vocal source of a text, some sustaining human point-of-origin, or "subject"; the graphireader prefers liberation from the magnetic north of the sustaining subject. Never to know a final destination—this is the graphireader's joy; and it represents a curious displacement onto a textual plane of the old existentialist rejection of the magnetic north of moral and psychological limitations on the freedom of the self. The graphireader is delighted by the wildly fluctuating compass needle that sets him free to lose himself in the labyrinth of language. Among the epireaders we find Leavis, Lawrence, Sartre, and Harold Bloom. Among the graphireaders de Man, Jameson, Hartman, and Derrida.⁷

Let me return to Gerald Graff and to my analogy of the overlapping circles of the Venn diagram, for Graff has shown how it is possible for the *nouvelle vague* to have "caught on" among Anglo-North American critics raised on a diet of Eliot, Brooks, Richards, Wimsatt, et al. The distrust of mimesis that Graff finds in traditionalism and its emphasis

on an auto-telic or self-referential text have made possible the *limited* ideological and methodological *rapprochement* between two movements that scorn each other's bad stylistic medicine. The New Critics did, of course, insist that literature provided a knowledge of the world's body that science could not provide; but, fighting as they did against "positivism" and against "reductivist" attempts to rewrite literary meaning in the language of some Disciplinary Other, they also, inevitably, emphasized the self-enclosure of literature, its refusal to compete in the mere marketplace of ideological exchange.⁸ A classical instance of the problem is to be found in Brooks' effort to deal with the final two lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by emphasizing the strictly dramatic propriety of that sweeping utterance and, thereby, protecting Keats' poem against efforts to measure it against some extra-textual yardstick.

It was only a short step from the position that spoke of literary self-enclosure to the appalling position that Graff has cited from an essay of Robert Scholes:

Once we knew that fiction was about life and criticism was about fiction—and everything was simple. Now we know that fiction is about other fiction, is criticism in fact, or metafiction. And we know that criticism is about the impossibility of anything being about life, really, or even about fiction, or finally, about anything. Criticism has taken the very idea of "aboutness" away from us. It has taught us that language is tautological, if it is not nonsense, and to the extent that it is about anything it is about itself. Mathematics is about mathematics, poetry is about poetry and criticism is about the impossibility of its own existence.⁹

Yes, mathematics is about itself—unless it is about insuring that a missile's trajectory will take it from a location in North Dakota to a location in the Soviet Union. And language is about itself—unless it is telling us what mathematics is about. One never encountered such woolly thinking in the work of Wimsatt or Ransom.

Still, one must admit that the New Criticism's war against abstractions and against the epistemic imperialism of the Disciplinary Others left criticism open to Scholes' silliness or to the more powerful assertions of a criticism that lives by the Derridean principle that "there is no outside-text (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*"). But this slogan represents nothing so much as a post-mortem triumph of the New Criticism, for is not the world *well lost* when it is transfigured into a text and when critics hold the keys to textuality?

But what does such a post-mortem triumph entail for the study of literature in the universities? After all, it is not necessary to be on the *qui vive* these days to see that the social and intellectual position of the

literary disciplines has deteriorated markedly since Trilling "reflected" on the study of English, no matter how strong may be the "vital signs" in critical theory. The most ominous sign of the problem is the decline in enrollments and, after this, the waning of opportunities for graduate students of literature to find employment in the universities. The result will be, surely, a decline in the influence of the Humanities in the councils of the university. Their influence in the councils of State is long gone. And as influence, or, more brutally, as *power* recedes, prestige will inevitably follow. But prestige is what economists call a "lagging indicator," and it may remain relatively high, for a time, when real power is a memory.

Intellectual power and its shadow, prestige, are with those Disciplinary Others whom one can call, in a term borrowed from Saul Bellow, "Reality Instructors." By and large they have not lost their intellectual nerve and do not wimpishly claim that their discourses refer to nothing beyond the activity of discourse.¹⁰ The Reality Instructors represent the forces that have sapped the World's Body of its enchantment by their dissemination of the values of "rationalization" and "secularization." These are the twin and executive agents of modernity, whose course Max Weber began to chart nearly a century ago. There is no place in disenchanted modernity—where Signifier and Signified co-exist, sullenly, across the space of arbitrariness—for the luminous Symbol that, by its mysterious and necessary relation to the real, could *incarnate* the reality that it also made intelligible. Thus, in *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler urges that we abandon interpretation—the hermeneut's boring quest for meaning—and seek only the processes of linguistico-secular reality by which meaning-effects are generated.¹¹

In a prose that by its clarity makes Culler the most appealing of *nouvelle vague* spokesmen in North America he admits that "readers will continue to read and interpret literary works, and interpretation will continue in the classroom, since it is through interpretation that teachers attempt to transmit cultural values, but critics should explore ways of moving beyond interpretation." (Culler, 16) One may wonder, however, whether Culler, who moves easily in the circles of the Disciplinary Others, is really taking seriously this residual and pedagogical interpretation that "critics" should move beyond. Within a few pages his language begins to register the pathos of secularism, its inability to take seriously mere cultural *values*:

But as meaning is explained in terms of systems of signs—systems which the subject does not control—the subject is deprived of his role as source of meaning. I know a language, certainly, but since I need a linguist to tell me what it is that I know, the status and the nature of the "I" which

knows is called into question: "The goal of the human sciences," says Lévi-Strauss, "is not to constitute man but to dissolve him." (Culler, 33)

There is some confusion here. Culler is, first, repeating a cliché of the *nouvelle vague* that has always made certain humanists blubber: the Reality Instructors (e.g., Marx, Saussure, Freud, et al.) have "decentered the subject." Second, because a linguist tells one what language is and how it works, one must rewrite the common expression, "I know English," as "I only know what can be gleaned from texts in linguistics"—*not* as, "Because I know English I can generate meanings that are elaborated upon, but not reducible to, the rules that make possible meaningful expressions." It is as if the utterance, "I know how to ride a bicycle," were to make my decision to drive it to the campus or in a race merely a matter of what a mechanic might tell me about the gears, pedals, chains, and roadways that make bicycle-riding possible.¹²

But it is useless to offer such a reply to someone who is luxuriating in the sentimentality and self-pity of the pathos of secularism. Of course, the sentimental is something for which the New Critics were always on the alert, and sentimentality is what distinguishes the literati who are merely the "groupies" of the Disciplinary Others from the charming and tonic callousness of those whom they admire. A few years ago, Michel Foucault addressed himself to the manner in which the literati assigned themselves to the entourage of the Disciplinary Others and, in particular, to the "relentless theorization of writing" in 1960s France. In this theorization Foucault heard not the triumphant note of a literary renaissance but only the melancholy strains of a "swansong":

Through it [theorization] the writer was fighting for the preservation of his political privilege; but the fact that it was precisely a matter of theory, that he needed scientific credentials, ... that this theory took its references from the direction of Saussure, or Chomsky, etc.... all this proves that the activity of the writer was no longer at the focus of things.¹³

That French swansong has been given English lyrics.

Foucault's point is, I think, that the literary intellectual realizes he is caught in a process that relegates him to the margins of society—perhaps this is why so much is made, in certain quarters of the *nouvelle vague*, of "marginal" matters: prefaces and the very margins of texts. In *The Pursuit of Signs* Culler is trying to provide a method whereby we may learn to stop worrying and to love the bomb. Unlike the enterprise of those latter-day versions of Horatius at the Bridge, the New Critics, Culler's is not heroic. It is a Mandarin's accommodation to Power. And, like any good Mandarin, who is always resentful of his Overlords, Culler is, without knowing it, working *against* those whom

he serves. In his proposal for an overhaul of graduate literary education, he urges that we formalize our ties with the Disciplinary Others and make clear to our students (and to the world) what "narratology," rhetoric, and poetics have to offer.

But what they have to offer is *dental*. They are instruments by which to pull the teeth of the Reality Instructors:

One could argue that philosophy has always depended for its existence on a notion of literary discourse and that the move which represses or ignores the signifier and sets aside certain kinds of language as fictional or rhetorical, with an oblique and problematical relationship to truth, is the gesture by which philosophy, since Plato, has exorcized certain problems and defined itself. This positing of an opposition between the philosophical and the literary has been philosophy's way of recognizing (and containing) the threat that language poses to its activities. (Culler, 222)

Armed with notions derived from Derrida, whose philosophical texts aspire to the condition of a poem by Mallarmé, Culler is prepared to open wide the departments of literature to their philosophical neighbor and to show their students that "it is always possible to read a philosophical text not as truth but as act—as act of persuasion, narrative, trope, rhetoric." (Culler, 224) But note: this admits the old philosophical charge against literature only to return the blow by replying, discretely *sotto voce*, "You're another." Culler adds, quickly and disingenuously, that "language can always be read referentially or rhetorically." I suspect, however, that this is only to guarantee that we do not ask if his own referential claims about philosophy are themselves merely tissues of tropes, merely "rhetoric," merely "act," and not "truth."

When he turns to the *liaison dangereuse* of criticism and psychoanalysis, Culler's point remains formally the same. Like the older criticism, he is anxious about psychoanalytic claims to "truth". But where that older criticism accepted canons of truth and tried to elaborate a division of disciplinary labor that would keep Reality Instructors in their place, Culler wants to undermine psychoanalytic claims to truth, to "an interpretation that reveals the truth of the patient's condition." (Culler, 223) He wants no "interpreters," armed with Freud's rationalist weapons, to speak of certain fundamental realities operative in a text. In a curious way, this ally of the Disciplinary Others is unaware of how, like a good lit'ry man, he is working against secularism by trying to make Reason commit suicide. *Ecrasez l'infame* is a slogan that need not be uttered consciously and need not be directed against the Church. In a move that is characteristic of recent criticism that thinks itself advanced, Culler brushes past the Freudian

faith in the interpretive quest for truth to draw an analogy between criticism and the interaction between psychoanalyst and patient:

The interpreter who was expected to master the text from a position of detachment and scientific authority discovers that he has become involved...in a relationship...that he has not sought or controlled.... (Culler, 224)

This is the sort of thing one can expect in a culture where notions of "encounter" and "interaction" make it difficult for that monastically rationalistic discipline, psychoanalysis, to survive. It represents the influence on criticism of the Essalen Institute.

In Culler's view it is not the analyst's interpretations, insofar as these guide the general interpretation of the transference, that matter. Rather, the graduate student of literature, trained in the pursuit of signs, will attend to the "unexpected relationship" of analyst to patient—or of critic to text. Analysts will smile at this "resistance" of the *nouvelle vague*, for it is an *old one*; and it points to the frenzied desire of the patient to sway the analyst and to learn what his laconic physician is "really like." No accident, then, that Culler adds, "Psychoanalysis is not a way of solving literary problems, since to every claim that psychoanalysis can master literature one can reply that literature, with its manipulation of irony, can comprehend and master psychoanalysis." (Culler, 226) Scratch a mandarin and find a *hero-manqué*. Or an unintended heir to the New Criticism. In this case, the *hero-manqué*, otherwise rigorously secularist, rewrites "solving literary problems" as "trying to master literature." And, of course, inevitably he evokes "irony," that master-trope of the New Criticism's campaign against reductivism and abstraction. In all of this Freud would see only what he called "the return of the repressed."

The embrace that Culler offers the Reality Instructors recalls a scene in a film called "The Thief of Baghdad," where an old king, with a fondness for gadgets, is offered, by an evil wizard, a seductive mechanical woman, with multiple arms that entice the king toward her. Once the old man is in her arms, she strangles him. For Culler, literary studies will embrace the Reality Instructors *to death*. Who needs it? Certainly not the Reality Instructors, who are not impotent old men. Only the Instructors in Unreality, who have de-realized the world and re-imagined it as Text. This is the dream of *ressentiment*, seeking, by night, and in wish-fulfillment, to wield power by a mastery of re-enchanted words in a dis-enchanted world. Better the warriors of culture—whether Coleridge, Yeats, or Ransom—even if *they* have "lost." Better the Disciplinary Others, even if they have "won."

In the final analysis these Instructors in Unreality make no demands of life other than the pitiful demand for a place in the sun. Now, when

we are told that everything *about* is textual and that we are less signifying subjects than the signified objects of signifying systems, it is worth recalling Trilling's account of the distinctive marks of greatness in criticism:

No critic is ever right in the sense that he says all that may be said about an art, or in the sense that what he does say about an art cannot, by one example or another, be shown to be incomplete. We properly judge a critic's virtue not by his freedom from error but by the nature of the mistakes he does make, for he makes them, if he is worth reading, because he has in mind something beside his perceptions about art in itself—he has in mind the demands he makes upon life; and those critics are most to be trusted who will allow those demands, in all their particularity, to be detected by their readers.¹⁴

What needs to be noticed here are the words "literary judgment" and the insistence that the critic's cards be on the table, his demands upon life there for all to see, when he offers his literary judgment.

I have tried to suggest that in Culler's program for criticism and for graduate education there is no demand made upon life—no demand comparable, say, to the demand that led Arnold to his monumental error about Dryden and Pope, or Johnson to his error about the metaphysical poets. Given Culler's program such errors are, in principle, *impossible to make*. That Culler's program makes no demand is apparent by the absence from it of any place for literary judgment. Instead, there is a mixture of programmatic chippiness and a covert intention to deprive Reason of its weapons—or of its goal.

Critical greatness has no hidden agenda. Nor does it hesitate to make literary judgments, and thus it is impossible to say of critical greatness what can be said of Culler's program: that it is merely "academic." And that it should not make such a *fuss* about itself. Culler offers a criticism that is insulated against errors of judgment. This high-tech poetics is open only to the mistakes one makes when one describes literary phenomena—whether *Hamlet* or a Harlequin Romance—and such mistakes are the results of misapplications of method or of lacunae in one's research. In such a mandarin enterprise there is no place for literary judgment, for the risk-taking, in full daylight, that the critical hero undertakes as he performs the high-wire-walk of criticism: the evaluation of new work and the reevaluation of old. It is an enterprise that promises a static canon of "texts," and it works with a safety net beneath it.

Although it is impossible here to consider at any length Culler's recently published textbook on deconstruction, a first impression suggests that it follows faithfully in the wake of its undemanding predecessor.¹⁵ If Culler does vigorously endorse the demands of femi-

nist criticism (the one area of the North American *nouvelle vague* from which may yet issue a great critic), his own judgments of the value of literary texts remain—in his favorite word—deferred. Of course, it is ineffably easier to judge the merits of critical arguments than of poems or novels. Nor will it do to attempt to postpone this latter task by insisting on the literariness of (other people's) criticism (or philosophy, or psychoanalysis) or by focusing one's critical attention on the philosophical "oppositions" and "hierarchies" hidden (like Poe's purloined letter) within literary texts.

Moreover, one will look with apprehension at any engagement Culler may make with literary texts as recent, say, as the feminist criticism he discusses; for Culler absorbs the pronouncements of the latter as uncritically as fundamentalists absorb the pronouncements of TV evangelists. As one would expect of the author of *In Pursuit of Signs*, he follows cheerfully the lead of those feminists who dispute, for example, the Freudian notion of "penis envy" without reference to clinical evidence that might—or that might not—support their position. Such evidence is, of course, the object of the high Parisian disdain for "empiricism."¹⁶ Worse: what is one to expect in the way of evaluative forays into literature from a critic who takes uncritically the *Sexual Politics* of Kate Millett? It is strange criticism that manages to find in so many different books so much that is worthy of supportive explication. (And it recalls nothing so much as the knee-jerk explications of poems that marked the decline and fall of the New Criticism.) After a while, one begins to wonder (while recalling certain passages that Arnold wrote on the "organs of criticism" of his own time) whether this is criticism or merely liberalism.

In place of the literary judgment that the heroic critic makes of value, the mandarin offers an erudition that bears comparison to the philological erudition that, fifty years ago, was challenged by critics who were prepared to risk themselves. They risked themselves by exposing values that transcended literature and that left the critic open to the counter-valuation of the reader, whose demands upon life might be other than those of the critic. And what demands had those critics? Certain of them are summoned up when one recalls such notions as those of "dissociated" or "unified" sensibility, such cultural ideals as those of the "organic society" or of the ante-bellum agrarian South, such personal and historical values as those that lie at the horizon of *The Liberal Imagination* or of the early *Partisan Review* or that grab the reader of *Studies in Classic American Literature* by the throat.

But let the *nouvelle vague* reveal its attitude toward evaluation in the words of its most authoritative spokesman. Paul de Man has recently performed the critical equivalent of what nuclear war strategists call a

“pre-emptive strike” by celebrating what he calls the “return to philology” in literary theory. And he makes clear where he locates evaluation on *his* scale of values:

Attention to the philosophical or rhetorical devices of language is not the same as aesthetic appreciation, although the latter can be a way of access to the former. Perhaps the most difficult thing for students and teachers of literature to realize is that their appreciation is measured by the analytic rigour of their own discourse about literature, a criterion that is not primarily or exclusively aesthetic. Yet it separates the sheep from the goats, the consumers from the “professors” of literature, the chit-chat of evaluation from actual perception.¹⁷

Here “rigour” is on the side of an “analysis” defined by what de Man calls an “examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces.” (de Man, 1355) When de Man wants to adduce an instance of “evaluation,” however, it is not Johnson on Milton, Sartre on Genet, Eliot on Massinger, or Leavis on Eliot that he cites.¹⁸ Rather, it is the anonymity of chit-chat, something better left to “consumers” than to “professors,” to goats and not to sheep.

Later, in the obligatory gesture of the *nouvelle vague*, de Man argues that “the attribution of a reliable or even exemplary, cognitive, and by extension, ethical function to literature...becomes more difficult” (1355) as a result of the withering attention to literary language that reveals it as suffering from deficiencies that de Man’s own language is mysteriously spared. Something seems to *happen* to literary or philosophical language that does not happen to critical “discourse.” Critics have what poets and philosophers only dream of having: cognitive and ethical functions. After all, de Man never hesitates to assert, to infer, to weigh, to analyze, to conclude, and, *sub rosa*, to enjoin. This restriction to the critic of a truth-telling role permits him to propose “a change in the rationale for the teaching of literature away from standards of cultural excellence that, in the final analysis, are always based on some form of religious faith, to a principle of disbelief that is not so much scientific as it is critical, in the full philosophical sense of the term.” (de Man, 1356) This eliminates that residual transmission of cultural values that Culler reserved to mere teachers, for de Man is suffering more profoundly the pathos of secularism than was the “upbeat” Culler. One recognizes the weary acceptance of the burden of “disbelief” in anything but the critic’s bad faith that leaves intact for criticism a language transparent to itself while reserving to the writer the dubious distinction of a language clotted with itself.

Culler and de Man suffer from the professorial delusion that it is easier to know one’s response to a book (“appreciation”) than to deploy the high-tech erudition of a “return to philology” that is the time-

honored mechanism for keeping a book at a discrete arm's length from one's self. "We judge a book," Lawrence wrote, "by its effect on our sincere and vital emotion, and nothing else. All the critical twiddle-twaddle about style and form, all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of books in an imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and mostly dull jargon."¹⁹ The "impertinence" arises from the attempt to pass off erudition as personal response. But in our time Lawrence's charge is evaded by the insistence that our personal response represents the play within us of the systems that lie without us.

If criticism cannot evaluate and reevaluate, it is doomed to turn endlessly in the high winds of erudition, in a hell of its own making, as the lackey of Power. Evaluation represents critical *desire*: everything that the critic finds lacking, all that the critic wants, at his moment of history, from history. At its best, critical desire always reaches *outside the text*. Or if you prefer, it is by means of the text that the heroic critic reaches *out to the world*.

However, to insist to a criticism indifferent to the expression of its own desire that it mend its ways is like insisting to someone in a chronic, low-level depression that he "cheer up." I draw this analogy deliberately, for my point is that the critical theory that has issued in the recent withdrawal of interest from the extra-textual world is the symptom of a professional depression. In writing of a literary phenomenon that he saw as a cultural malady, Eliot once argued that "the only cure for Romanticism is to analyze it."²⁰ He thought that cultural therapy demanded self-consciousness about Romantic consciousness of self and that "therapeutic" reflection, directed at pathological reflexiveness, would make his culture feel Romanticism as that alien intimacy that is the symptom of a symptom.

It is such an *analytic* attitude that must be brought to bear on the symptoms of professional depression. This attitude would abandon debate with the depressive and would maintain indifference to such metaphysical claims as those bearing on the waning of "aboutness," on the literariness that undermines all pretensions to truth-telling, and on the cant concerning the "decentered" self. It would be precisely such claims as these and the socio-historical context in which they have arisen that would be the objects of analysis. Analysis would assume that this metaphysics is entertained seriously only at typewriters and that those who promulgate it would never believe that "medical discourse," for example, is merely "about itself." This is especially likely to be true when the object of such discourse is the psychic health of the critic or the state of his bronchial tissues or the rhythms of his heart-beat. Analysis would treat the metaphysics of professional melanco-

lia as a malady of the cultural tissues, while remaining free to accept whatever valuable *techniques* recent criticism has developed.

But even techniques must bear analysis, at least to the extent that they cast light on the changing role of academic literary intellectuals. Alvin Gouldner has remarked that classical intellectuals "often transgress the boundaries of the conventional division of labor in intellectual life," and certainly one must not assume that border-crossing is a recent phenomenon.²¹ I have already recalled the extra-literary interests of many of the major critics of the earlier period of this century, and the list could be extended back through Arnold to Johnson and would include major figures of continental criticism. But when one evaluates border-crossers everything turns on whether the traveller is moving unselfconsciously across frontiers he barely acknowledges or whether he feels that the act of "transgression" is one of personal redemption.

As Gouldner notes, the interests of the classical intellectual "are primarily critical, emancipatory, hermeneutic, and hence often political." (Gouldner, 48) But the interests of what he calls the "technical intelligentsia" are reflections of their desire "to be allowed to enjoy their opiate obsessions with technical puzzles..." (Gouldner, 48). Their destiny is to disrupt "social solidarities" by refusing to call a halt to their "social mission to revolutionize technology." Revolutionary intellectuals are, Gouldner adds, "the medium of an ancient morality," and, like the prophets, they voice their desire and articulate judgments of value. But the "accommodating intelligentsia" are "the medium of a new amorality." This is the secular amorality of rationalism and disenchantment of the world. Both media represent disruptive forces, but the technical intelligentsia have seen their potential conditioned by their intimate ties to bureaucracy and Power. Freud and Marx combined technical achievement and "ancient morality," but both psychoanalysis and Marxism have been brought to heel by the conservative impulses of the states in which they have flourished.

In the universities, since World War II, the social and natural sciences have been the privileged training-ground for the bureaucracies of state and corporation and have provided "consultants" to Power. These disciplines have maintained with the world outside the university relationships profoundly different from those of the "reclusive" (Geoffrey Hartman's word) Humanities. Analysis of the metaphysics of avant-garde criticism would inquire closely concerning the consequences for the reclusive of this double and contradictory academic relationship with the outside world. It would, first, assume that the Humanities have probably suffered more seriously than they admit from a sense of shame about their marginal social role, although

analysis would *not* suggest that the external world should feel proud of the role it has assigned to the Humanities. Furthermore, analysis would relate to this sense of shame the pride that flowered in the late 1960s, when the outside world felt the wrath of those whom Erik Erikson called the "humanistic youth" who tried to transform marginality into a counter-cultural space that would shame those at the cultural center, the "text of the world." But that disruptive challenge to technical hegemony passed after a moment's euphoria, and the margins no longer provided redemption but, rather, regained their status as a place of damnation and outer blankness.

Second, analysis would recall a "mechanism of defense" that psychoanalysis calls "identification with the aggressor." At its worst, this mechanism might drive a concentration camp prisoner, appointed to some supervisory position, to behave toward his fellow-prisoners as the SS behaved to them all. In the placid world of the university, identification with the aggressor might appear as an aping of the tone and the linguistic and conceptual gestures of a style that one takes to be hostile to one's professional interests. This aping might include the adoption of that style's rules of exclusion—for example, the exclusion of evaluation or the expression of desire. In place of the latter, it would not be surprising to see the *word* "desire" even become a nervous tic of the style that undertook the identification. The discourse of the classical intellectual would, by contrast, always include evaluation as the outgrowth of critical desire, even when the classical intellectual makes forays across borders; for such forays would be merely "raids" for necessary supplies. They would not be undertaken in pursuit of Sanctifying Grace.

Finally, analysis would ask what has occurred to make criticism feel that the Disciplinary Others represent stores of Grace *and* rivals whose teeth must be pulled. And here I have only speculation to put forward. To call such a feeling an expression of covert Luddite attitudes might be descriptively accurate, but it would explain nothing. Assume, however, that the university, as an institution *of* society, reflects the prevailing values of society and the mechanisms that generate those values, especially the mechanisms generated by *scarcity*—by "not enough": of food, of air, of oil, of money, of power, of prestige.

Classical intellectuals have, of course, existed in the university and exist there now, but they have also flourished outside its walls—with Voltaire, Coleridge, Johnson, Arnold, *Partisan Review* intellectuals like the young Philip Rahv, "higher journalists" like Edmund Wilson, and renegades like Paul Goodman. Certain key figures of modern criticism—Leavis comes immediately to mind—and certain charismatic cultural Titans like Malraux, Russell, Lukacs, and Sartre have

been, at best, troublesome academics or have severed all ties with the university. It is difficult to imagine conditions that would make possible now extra-academic journals that had the influence of the early *Partisan Review* or of Sartre's *Les temps modernes*. And to imagine a critical "school" of Sartrean cast is as difficult as to imagine departments of philosophy peopled by activists like Russell.

Given the inherently conservative nature of universities and their reflection of the societies in which they exist, and given the metaphysics of a criticism that promises a share in that scarce commodity, the prestige of the Concept, it may be understandable how the *nouvelle vague* gained its prominence in literary studies. Moreover, this metaphysics comes trailing clouds of glory of 1960s radicalism, for many of its French luminaries once identified themselves with Parisian Maoism. But that episode stands in relation to the ongoing activity of academic criticism as an episode of *grand mal* to normal cerebro-electrical activity. It represents, that is, a *seizure*.

Scarcity has had on academic criticism an effect that has been mediated by the social situation of the post-war literary intellectuals of the university. But this effect is formally akin to the effect that scarcity often has on those who are moderately well-off: it has led the privileged to yearn to be at one with the *more* privileged. And it has been defined by the brilliant act of ideological oneupsmanship whereby the privileged suggest that no one intellectual estate has a special claim to privilege. For this ideology—"epistemological levelling"—the Concept is merely this acid which dissolves everything with which it comes into contact, leaving behind only itself and the mystery—deep as that of the Trinity—of the dissolution of the real. Perhaps, then, the history of a certain metaphysics of late-century criticism is the elaboration of an academic caste's dream of "great expectations." This is, of course, a *daydream*, and, like every daydream, it denies the real from a certain point of view, on the ground of a certain desire. Inevitably, however, the last word belongs to the real.

NOTES

1. "The Two Environments: Reflections on the Study of English," *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning* (New York: Viking, 1965), pp. 223-224.
2. "The Leavis-Snow Controversy," *Beyond Culture*, p. 174.
3. "The Symbolism of Poetry," *Yeats: Selected Criticism*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1964), p. 52.
4. *The Words*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Braziller, 1964), p. 60.
5. "From One Identity to an Other," *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora et al., ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980), p. 133.

6. See Roland Barthes, *Leçon* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978), pp. 15-16, 27-28, et passim.
7. *Furious Alphabets* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), pp. 146-147, 199-201. On the relationship of the "graphireaders" to the existentialist tradition, much remains to be done, but see the following discussion of Sartre and Derrida: Christina Howells, "Sartre and Derrida: *Qui perd gagne*," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 13 (1982), 26-33.
8. Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 140-146.
9. "The Fictional Criticism of the Future," *Tri-Quarterly*, 34 (Fall, 1975), 233; quoted in Graff, p. 60. In a discussion of what he calls "anti-objectivism" in the social sciences, Frank Cunningham has argued that "if...sincerely to believe a theory is to believe that it is objectively true, then the...consequence of the anti-objectivist position would be that he [sic] would have to admit either that he does not believe his theory or that it is objectively true.... If he does not believe the view, why does he advocate it? If it is objectively true, why cannot other theories also be objectively true? The burden would lie on the anti-objectivist to show what there is about his endeavour...that allows it and it alone to escape his own anti-objectivist claim (and he would have to show this without himself employing or supposing the conclusions of any theory the objectivity of which he has tried to show impossible)." *Objectivity in Social Science* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 22-23. There may be some "over-kill" in bringing such remarks to bear on Scholes' "argument," but it is an argument widespread in literary studies today, and Cunningham has sought to call into question the philosophical basis of such a position.
10. For a critique of those who *have* lost their nerve, see Cunningham, *Objectivity in Social Science*.
11. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 3-17. Subsequent references are given in the text.
12. Here secularist pathos would reply that "my decision to..." must be dissolved into the "codes" of other systems of signification and thereby deprived of its initiatory force. This process of dissolution always comes to a halt, however, at the border of the critical discourse that urges pathos upon the reader. If it violated that border and subjected the critic's urging to another acid-based system, then the force of that urging would itself be dissolved—and the reader would be free to ignore it. In short, secularist pathos represents criticism's version of what Sartre once described as "bad faith."
13. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-73*, trans. Colin Gordon et al., ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 127.
14. "Editor's Note," *The Portable Matthew Arnold*, ed. Lionel Trilling (New York: Viking, 1949), p. 184.
15. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca/New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982).
16. For a critique of Lévi-Strauss' indifference to empiricism, see Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism: The Struggle for a Science of Culture*, Vintage (New York: Random House, 1980), pp. 165-215.
17. "The Return to Philology," *The Times Literary Supplement* (10 December 1982), 1355. Subsequent references are given in the text.
18. In "The Perfect Critic," Eliot, writing of the "dogmatic critic," remarks that "in matters of great importance the critic must not coerce and he must not make judgments of worse and better. He must simply elucidate: the reader will form the correct judgment for himself." *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 11. Timid souls have sometimes taken comfort from this remark, but it would be an error to infer from it that Eliot's "elucidations" do not themselves contain an evaluative dimension. All of Eliot's work testifies to the contrary. See also his remarks on the "imperfect" criticism of Charles Whibley: *The Sacred Wood*, p. 37.
19. "John Galsworthy," *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1936), p. 539.
20. *The Sacred Wood*, p. 31.
21. *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 49. Subsequent references are given in the text.