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REVIEW ARTICLE :
THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS RENEWED *

In 1964 a fierce literary battle broke out between Raymond Picard, the specialist on Racine at the University of Paris (Sorbonne), and Roland Barthes, a renegade (structuralist) critic of literature. The quarrel brought to light the sharp cleavage separating the old French criticism practised in established university circles and the French "new criticism" emergent in the works of Georges Poulet (Zurich, Nice), Jean Starobinski (Geneva), Jean-Pierre Richard (Madrid, London, Vincennes), and others. In 1966 Serge Doubrovski, himself a member of the loosely defined "group" denounced and persecuted by the academic potentates of the Sorbonne, published a treatise entitled *Pourquoi la nouvelle critique*. Under the title of *The New Criticism in France*, this monumental work, a landmark in the historical geography of contemporary literary criticism, is now available in English translation. The volume gives a full and high-spirited account of the serious but often amusing quarrel between the two battling factions. It is, however, more than a scholarly account. In analyzing the respective conceptions underlying the old and the new modes of criticism, and in thinking through, anew, questions about the nature of literature and of literary criticism, the book offers an insight into the embattlements generally typical of the intellectual world today.

In a collective attack against the new critics, members of the old guard took the polemics into the newspapers and so to the breakfast table, declaiming that the upstarts should be "dragged to the stakes" or "put to the guillotine". What provoked such an outburst of violence? The occasion for it was simply a *book*, and a very intellectual one at that. Roland Barthes, a critic lodged outside the university system, published *Sur Racine*, a new interpretation of the plays written by the most venerated classic poet of the French tradition. This seemingly harmless act transformed the university professors from the aloof curators of their national literary heritage into a militant police force enforcing, self-appointedly, the thoughts and values of established French society. The French university critics had traditionally been the faithful guardians of the national art collections. They had regularly kept the public informed about the recent events in the arts. But what now came to light was a further function of theirs, one which they had been performing all along without ever quite admitting it. The good professors had been,

**The New Criticism in France*. By Serge Doubrovsky. Translated by Derek Coltman. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973. Pp. 328. \$10.39.

Yet Barthes sees correctly that beyond the quarrel of objectivity lies the real disagreement: the differing conceptions of language endorsed by the two factions. The conception promoted by the Sorbonne camp is closely tied to an institutional ideology—and to pedagogical exigencies. It is no coincidence that Picard, who calls himself a “flexible humanistic neo-positivist”, is also a university professor. As long as universities confer degrees they will have to set up norms according to which they can grade (graduate, graduate) students. Norms of specifically determined knowledge are necessarily positivistic in nature. They provide a professional measure. The norm of new criticism is, in contrast, resonant thought, something which, though encompassing facts, is not itself based on or even oriented toward facts. For good reasons, then, the university must reject all *immanent* analysis and so all contemporary streams of criticism which work from within the experience of literature and only then connect up with outside data.

Barthes claims that the dispute over language centres on the fact that for the bourgeois society or “culture” language must remain a mere tool. Reflection which serves such society must continue to discourse in language so conceived (in an effort to sell its wares) and so to construe literary discourse as further exemplifying such language. For the new critics, however, language is not at all a tool: it is the very subject of reflection. To think about a literary work (e.g., of Racine’s) is to call the language into question, to think and speak *within* it, and in doing this to make the very language of criticism problematic. Such immersion demands that all territories (philosophy, literature, history, etc.) be subjected to the flux-oriented probe of the twentieth century. No longer satisfied with crisp anecdotes about authors and their works, no longer impressed with professorial exclamations about the inherent beauty of some classical line, the new critics integrate their literary criticism into a total view of man: literary criticism must, in their view, incorporate into its studies a penetrating perspective on the human condition inasmuch as this condition is inextricably bound up with language itself.

Dobrovsky takes his own stand on the battlefield. In the central portion of his work, he analyzes the wide variety of currents in French criticism—Marxism, Freudianism, structuralism, existentialism—particularly as each conceives of language. Although he is clearly “on Barthes’ side” in the effort to dethrone the simplistic standards of judgement (taste and clarity) advanced by the Sorbonne, he still voices reservations about Barthes’ rather hard-line structural approach. In a 1966 address at Cerisy-la-Salle, during a conference on “The Contemporary Tendencies of Criticism” Dobrovsky gave an unequivocal and blistering indictment of Barthes, something he does not do in the present book (see *Les Chemins actuels de la critique*, 1968; pp. 143-157). There he claimed that an exclusively structural approach runs the risk of dehumanizing art, suppressing the existential view of the creative consciousness, and gravitating toward empty formalism. In any case, Dobrovsky is highly critical of the modern surrender to scientific thinking which takes the supposed certainties of fact-oriented investigation as the ultimate point of reference for human knowledge, and he sees in Barthes’ work, self-questioning as it may be, the same temptations to accept, uncritically, the standards of science.

Although sympathetic to these varieties of new criticism, Doubrovsky does express doubts about the Marxist interpretations of Lucien Goldmann and the psychoanalytic criticism of Charles Mauron. In an attempt to read the work of literature as an element within a concrete, real-life context, these two differently oriented, yet basically united modes of criticism study what relates the work to the world external to the work of art. While thinking the concrete human condition, Goldmann and Mauron tend to dissolve the work into its social or psychological context, and this pre-literary concretion becomes a sufficient cause for the emergency of the work. Both aspire to read a given work of literature with a view to latent meanings. Doubrovsky (and Barthes) can agree with them. However, these same critics claim that their ideologies hold already *in advance* the key to the meaning of the work; the work then becomes a mere "manifestation" of truth which is "really" known already by the educated reader and critic. This is dogmatism, and Doubrovsky rejects it. For it is in literature that we first learn our social context or our psychological "make-up", and this learning, grounded in art, is much more penetrating to our social and/or psychic nature than pre-fabricated ideologies can ever be. In general, though, Doubrovsky does not discard the aid of critical approaches taking their inspiration from the social sciences. He merely contests their claim and competence "to discern and define the unity and totality of the significations that form the meaning of the work" (p. 223).

For Doubrovsky, all serious literary criticism is philosophical in nature. This does not mean that literary criticism should become subservient to a philosophical system or should promote a metaphysical pretension. Rather, it means that a serious critic must ally himself with the existential need for "hearing" and "welcoming" what happens in the eventfulness of works of literature. Doubrovsky does claim that philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty have articulated this need in a way helpful to literary criticism. From such philosophers the critic can learn how his own rapport to the work is (in Heideggerian terms) not a being toward (or in front of) the work, but a being *with* the work, how he may avoid simply bringing works into his own grasp and allow the work to engulf him in its significance. Thus a meaning may never be used, although it may be sought. The subject-object conception implicit in much criticism then vanishes, for the subject becomes one with the object.

At the end of his study, Doubrovsky states explicitly his own view of literary criticism. He is after all a noteworthy critic in his own right, and he engages in the renewed "battle of the books" only because his own creative interests are at stake. His is a philosophically oriented criticism, what he calls more specifically "existential-psychoanalytic" criticism. What he here means is to be carefully distinguished from the popular "existentialism" as well as from the familiar psychologism. This view advocates an unfinished and therefore living dialectic with the work. That is, in the process of understanding a work, the critic participates in his own tradition and in that of the work. Thus he mixes past and present. Therefore, as the text is gradually penetrated, an historical meaning is integrated into the present. This kind of criticism does not seek correctness and agreement (without, of course, defying these); it participates in the innermost dynamic of the

work. Through his own openness the critic retrieves the original disclosure of the text; the world of the work opens up and the interpreter moves into the open clearing of the disclosure. However, not only the work emerges, the critic himself also realizes his own possibilities for being within the context of the text he is interpreting. His own world and self-understanding are disclosed; he becomes more fully present.

In the Introduction to the book, Edward Wasiolek discusses the differences between the French new criticism, the American new criticism, and Russian formalism; he provides, incidentally, a brief but useful bibliography of the three movements. Mr. Wasiolek expresses what seems to me undue pessimism about the possible reverberations of the French position in North America. He claims:

We are a nation that is attached or condemned to scientism and the faith that the mind is an instrument for the analysis of given entities. Russian formalism, if ever enough texts are adequately translated and if ever enough intelligent commentaries are produced, is likely to exercise a greater influence on American criticism than the French New Criticism. (p. 34)

However, precisely because there does exist an enormous gulf between the American and the French ways of looking at (reading) literature, there is a pressing need now for an open discussion of the basic issues which separate them. If we North Americans can understand and explore phenomenological modes of criticism, we may develop a more adequate approach to literary interpretation in the future. And we must not forget that most readers are heavily influenced, if not by *what* their local critics say, at least by *how* they say it, i.e., by the attitude permeating the criticism.

In North America, critics have developed not so much a criticism as a *science* of literature. In their commentaries they generally imitate the approach of scientific investigators who dissect complex phenomena to display underlying simplicities, i.e., data. For such a vision, a work of literature floats in a strange isolation, its alienated world is expressed only in categories of object-analysis. Hence the cultivation of "values" to "pretty up" the objects. Yves Bonnefoy, a French poet and critic, once pointed out that even though the English language critics Blackmur and Empson deal directly and primarily with meanings and images, a critic of consciousness like Jean-Pierre Richard, proceeding only indirectly to these themes, gives us the impression of greater insight, and this simply because Richard "takes his position in the twilight of language where truth is felt rather than formulated" (*Encounter*; July 11, 1958 page 44).

In France today, criticism is a literature in itself, unlike what it is in North America (where it is either journalistic or pedantic). It is a para-literature, a consciousness of literature, an integral part of the work (understood as activity and not as an object). It continues the creative experience while attempting to understand the experience as well. It knows that literature cannot rightly be reduced to an object of knowledge, but must remain a subject of concern. The new French orientation sees in the work of literature a world which the critic unfolds in

its terms. If he succeeds in his task, his readers will perceive the living totality of the work in its emergent presence. From these Frenchmen we can learn that literature does not speak to us as long as we insist on defining its force in scientific language.

Doubrovsky's *New Criticism in France* is a rewarding reading experience in its own right. It shows that and how we can participate in the beginning of a great experiment in which the gulf between Continental European and Anglo-American critics is tentatively crossed.