

LITERARY CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY: A REPLY¹

I MUST thank Dr. Wellek, not merely for his explicit compliments (which, coming from a dissentient critic, are especially gratifying), but for bringing fundamental criticism to my work, and above all for raising in so complete a way an issue that a reviewer or two had more or less vaguely touched on—an issue of which no one can have been more conscious than myself, who had seen the recognition of it as an essential constituent of what I naturally (whatever the quality of my performance) hoped for: an appreciation of my undertaking. Dr. Wellek points out, justly, that in my dealings with English poetry I have made a number of assumptions that I neither defend nor even state: ‘I could wish,’ he says, ‘that you had made your assumptions more explicitly and defended them systematically.’ After offering me a summary of these assumptions, he asks me to ‘defend this position abstractly and to become conscious that large ethical, philosophical and, of course, ultimately, also æsthetic *choices* are involved.’

I in my turn would ask Dr. Wellek to believe that if I omitted to undertake the defence he desiderates it was not from any lack of consciousness: I knew I was making assumptions (even if I didn’t—and shouldn’t now—state them to myself quite as he states them) and I was not less aware than I am now of what they involve. I am interested that he should be able to say that, for the most part, he shares them with me. But, he adds, he would ‘have misgivings in pronouncing them without elaborating a specific defence or a theory in their defence.’—That, I suggest, is because Dr. Wellek is a philosopher; and my reply to him in the first place is that I myself am not a philosopher, and that I doubt whether in any case I could elaborate a theory that he would find satisfactory. I am not, however, relying upon modesty for my defence. If I profess myself so freely to be no philosopher it is because I feel that I can afford my modesty; it is because I have

¹See *Scrutiny* for March.

pretensions—pretensions to being a literary critic. And I would add that even if I had felt qualified to satisfy Dr. Wellek on his own ground I should have declined to attempt it in that book.

Literary criticism and philosophy seem to me to be quite distinct and different kinds of discipline—at least, I think they ought to be (for while in my innocence I hope that philosophic writing commonly represents a serious discipline, I am quite sure that literary-critical writing commonly doesn't). This is not to suggest that a literary critic might not, as such, be the better for a philosophic training, but if he were, the advantage, I believe, would manifest itself partly in a surer realization that literary criticism is not philosophy. I pulled up just short of saying 'the two disciplines . . .', a phrase that might suggest too great a simplification: it is no doubt possible to point to valuable writing of various kinds representing varying kinds of alliance between the literary critic and the philosopher. But I am not the less sure that it is necessary to have a strict literary criticism somewhere and to vindicate literary criticism as a distinct and separate discipline.

The difficulty that one who approaches with the habit of one kind of discipline has in duly recognizing the claims of a very different kind—the difficulty of reconciling the two in a working alliance—seems to me to be illustrated in Dr. Wellek's way of referring to the business of literary criticism: 'Allow me,' he says, 'to sketch your ideal of poetry, your "norm" with which you measure every poet . . .'. That he should slip into this way of putting things seems to me significant, for he would on being challenged agree, I imagine, that it suggests a false idea of the procedure of the critic. At any rate, he gives me an excuse for making, by way of reminder, some elementary observations about that procedure.

By the critic of poetry I understand the complete reader: the ideal critic is the ideal reader. The reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy. I should not find it easy to define the difference satisfactorily, but Dr. Wellek knows what it is and could give at least as good an account of it as I could. Philosophy, we say, is 'abstract' (thus Dr. Wellek asks me to defend my position 'more abstractly'), and poetry 'concrete.' Words in poetry invite us, not to 'think about' and

judge but to 'feel into' or 'become'—to realize a complex experience that is given in the words. They demand, not merely a fuller-bodied response, but a completer responsiveness—a kind of responsiveness that is incompatible with the judicial, one-eye-on-the-standard approach suggested by Dr. Wellek's phrase: 'your "norm" with which you measure every poet.' The critic—the reader of poetry—is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process. The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: 'Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to . . . ? How relatively important does it seem?' And the organization into which it settles as a constituent in becoming 'placed' is an organization of similarly 'placed' things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations.

No doubt (as I have admitted) a philosophic training might possibly—ideally would—make a critic surer and more penetrating in the perception of significance and relation and in the judgment of value. But it is to be noted that the improvement we ask for is of the critic, the critic as critic, and to count on it would be to count on the attainment of an arduous ideal. It would be reasonable to fear—to fear blunting of edge, blurring of focus and muddled misdirection of attention: consequences of queering one discipline with the habits of another. The business of the literary critic is to attain a peculiar completeness of response and to observe a peculiarly strict relevance in developing his response into commentary; he must be on his guard against abstracting improperly from what is in front of him and against any premature or irrelevant generalizing—of it or from it. His first concern is to enter into possession of the given poem (let us say) in its concrete fulness, and his constant concern is never to lose his completeness of possession, but rather to increase it. In making value-judgments (and judgments as to significance), implicitly or explicitly, he does so out of that completeness of possession and with that fulness of response. He doesn't ask, 'How does this accord with these

specifications of goodness in poetry?'; he aims to make fully conscious and articulate the immediate sense of value that 'places' the poem.

Of course, the process of 'making fully conscious and articulate' is a process of relating and organizing, and the 'immediate sense of value' should, as the critic matures with experience, represent a growing stability of organization (the problem is to combine stability with growth). What, on testing and re-testing and wider experience, turn out to be my more constant preferences, what the relative permanencies in my response, and what structure begins to assert itself in the field of poetry with which I am familiar? What map or chart of English poetry as a whole represents my utmost consistency and most inclusive coherence of response?

From this consistency and this coherence (in so far as I have achieved them) it should, of course, be possible to elicit principles and abstractly formulable norms. Dr. Wellek's first criticism of me is (to give it its least exceptionable force) that I haven't proceeded to elicit them; that, having written the book I undertook to write, I haven't gone on to write another book in which I develop the theoretical implications of the first (for it would be essentially a matter of two books, even if there were only one binding). To this I make again my modest reply that I doubt, in any case, my capacity to satisfy Dr. Wellek in this respect. And I add again that I do not think my modesty has any adverse bearing on my qualifications for writing the book I did undertake to write. The cogency I hoped to achieve was to be for other readers of poetry—readers of poetry as such. I hoped, by putting in front of them in a criticism that should keep as close to the concrete as possible my own developed 'coherence of response,' to get them to agree (with, no doubt, critical qualifications) that the map, the essential order, of English poetry seen as a whole did, when they interrogated their experience, look like that to them also. Ideally I ought perhaps (though, I repeat, I should not put my position in quite the terms Dr. Wellek ascribes to me) to be able to complete the work with a theoretical statement. But I am sure that the kind of work that I have attempted comes first, and would, for such a theoretical statement to be worth anything, have to be done first.

If Dr. Wellek should still insist that I ought, even if I declined

to elaborate the philosophy implicit in my assumptions, at any rate to have been more explicit about them, I can only reply that I think I have gone as far in explicitness as I could profitably attempt to go, and that I do not see what would be gained by the kind of explicitness he demands (though I see what is lost by it). Has any reader of my book been less aware of the essential criteria that emerge than he would have been if I had laid down such general propositions as: 'poetry must be in serious relation to actuality, it must have a firm grasp of the actual, of the object, it must be in relation to life, it must not be cut off from direct vulgar living, it should be normally human . . .'? If, as I did, I avoided such generalities, it was not out of timidity; it was because they seemed too clumsy to be of any use. I thought I had provided something better. My whole effort was to work in terms of concrete judgments and particular analyses: 'This—doesn't it?—bears such a relation to that; this kind of thing—don't you find it so?—wears better than that,' etc. If I had to generalize, my generalization regarding the relation between poetry and 'direct vulgar living' or the 'actual' would run rather in the following way than in that suggested by Dr. Wellek: traditions, or prevailing conventions or habits, that tend to cut poetry in general off from direct vulgar living and the actual, or that make it difficult for the poet to bring into poetry his most serious interests as an adult living in his own time, have a devitalizing effect. But I cannot see that I should have added to the clarity, cogency or usefulness of my book by enunciating such a proposition (or by arguing it theoretically). Again, I did not say that the language of poetry 'should not flatter the singing voice, should not be merely mellifluous,' etc. I illustrated concretely in comparison and analysis the qualities indicated by those phrases, pointed to certain attendant limitations, and tried to show in terms of actual poetic history that there were serious disadvantages to be recognized in a tradition that insisted on such qualities as essential to poetry. In fact, though I am very much aware of the shortcomings of my work, I feel that by my own methods I have attained a relative precision that makes this summarizing seem intolerably clumsy and inadequate. I do not, again, argue in general terms that there should be 'no emotion for its own sake, no afflatus, no mere generous emotionality, no luxury in pain and joy'; but by choice,

arrangement and analysis of concrete examples I give those phrases (in so far, that is, as I have achieved my purpose) a precision of meaning they couldn't have got in any other way. There is, I hope, a chance that I may in this way have advanced theory, even if I haven't done the theorizing. I know that the cogency and precision I have aimed at are limited; but I believe that any approach involves limitations, and that it is by recognizing them and working within them that one may hope to get something done.

Dr. Wellek has a further main criticism to bring against me: it is that my lack of interest in philosophy makes me unfair to the poets of the Romantic period. I hope he will forgive me if I say that his demonstration has, for me, mainly the effect of demonstrating how difficult it is to be a philosopher and a literary critic at the same time. The positive aim of his remarks he sums as being 'to show that the romantic view of the world . . . underlies and pervades the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley, elucidates many apparent difficulties, and is, at least, a debatable view of the world.'—'The romantic view of the world,' a view common to Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley and others—yes, I have heard of it; but what interest can it have for the literary critic? For the critic, for the reader whose primary interest is in poetry, those three poets are so radically different, immediately and finally, from one another that the offer to assimilate them in a common philosophy can only suggest the irrelevance of the philosophic approach.

My attitude towards Blake Dr. Wellek, I think, misunderstands. He certainly misrepresents my verdict on the particular poem, the *Introduction to Songs of Experience*. The comparison with *Ash-Wednesday* has a context in the chapter to which the note challenged by Dr. Wellek is appended, and, so far from arguing that Blake's poem is 'so ambiguous as to have no "right sense,"' I have in that note the explicit aim of showing how Blake, with his astonishingly original technique, achieves something like the extraordinary precision of *Ash-Wednesday*. And in general, where Blake is concerned, my intention is the reverse of a slighting one. My view of the poem, in fact, seems to me more favourable than that implied by Dr. Wellek, who says: 'Actually, I think the poem has only one possible meaning, which

can be ascertained by a study of the whole of Blake's symbolical philosophy.' I myself, a literary critic, am interested in Blake because it is possible to say with reference to some of his work that his symbolical philosophy is one thing, his poetry another. I know that even in his best poetry symbolism appears, and I was aware of symbolism in the poem I picked on ; but I judged that I might fairly avoid a large discussion that seemed inessential to the point I was proposing to make.

I will say now, though, that when in Blake's poetry his symbols function poetically they have, I believe, a life that is independent of his 'symbolical philosophy': for instance, 'Earth,' 'starry pole,' 'dewy grass' and 'wat'ry shore,' in the *Introduction to Songs of Experience*, seem to me to have a direct evocative power. Knowledge of Blake's arbitrary assignment of value to a symbol may often help to explain why he should have written as he has done here, there and elsewhere ; I do not believe that it will ever turn what was before an unsuccessful poem into a good one. And I think *Hear the voice of the Bard!* decidedly a good one. Dr. Wellek's account of it seems to me to justify my assumption that I could fairly discuss the poem without talking about symbols ; for I cannot see that his account tends to invalidate mine. I cannot, in fact, see why he should suppose it does. Or rather, I see it is because he assumes that what we are elucidating is a text of symbolical philosophy—written as such and to be read as such.

The confidence of his paraphrase made me open my eyes. It is a philosopher's confidence—the confidence of one who in the double strength of a philosophic training and a knowledge of Blake's system ignores the working of poetry. The main difference, one gathers, between the philosopher and the poet is that to the poet there may be allowed, in the interests of rhythm and formal matters like that, a certain looseness, a laxity of expression: 'Delete "and"' (in line 7) which was inserted only because of the rhythm and sense is quite clear'—Yes, immediately clear, if one derives from a study of 'the whole of Blake's symbolical philosophy' the confidence to perform these little operations. But I myself believe that in this poem Blake is using words with very unusual precision—the precision of a poet working as a poet.

And it is this precision that Dr. Wellek ignores in his paraphrase and objects to my noticing :

' In spite of his fall Man might yet control the universe (" the starry pole ") . . . The next " that " cannot possibly refer to God, but to the soul or to Man, who after his re-birth might control the " starry pole." There is no need to evoke Lucifer.'

—' Man ' capable of controlling the universe may surely be said to have taken on something of God, and may be, I suggest, in Blake's syntax—in his peculiar organization of meaning—not so sharply distinguishable from God as Dr. Wellek's notion of ' clear sense ' and ' one possible meaning ' demands. And if ' fallen, fallen light ' does not for Dr. Wellek bring into the complex of associations Lucifer—

from morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,
A summer's day, and with the setting sun,
Dropt from the zenith like a falling star
On Lemnos, the Aegean isle

—then I think we have an instance of the philosopher disabling the critic ; an instance of the philosophical approach inducing in the reader of poetry a serious imperciption or insensitiveness. Blake is not referring to abstract ideas of Man and rebirth ; he works in the concrete, evoking by a quite unproselike (that was my point) use of associations a sense of a state of desolation that is the more grievous by contrast with an imagined state of bliss, in which Man, in harmonious mastery of his full potentialities, might be godlike—an unfallen and un sinful Lucifer (Milton, we remember was of the Devil's party without knowing it).

' The twinkling stars in Blake mean always the light of Reason and the watery shore the limit of matter or of Time and Space. The identification of Earth and Man in this poem is explicitly recognized by Blake in the illustration to this very poem which represents a masculine figure lying upon the " watery shore " and, with the " starry floor " as a background, painfully lifting his head.'

—I would call Dr. Wellek's attention to the poem, *Earth's Answer*, immediately following that which is under discussion. It opens :

Earth raised up *her* head
 From the darkness dread and drear.
 Her light fled,
 Stony dread!
 And her locks cover'd with grey despair.

' Prison'd on wat'ry shore,
 ' Starry Jealousy does keep my den :
 ' Cold and hoar,
 ' Weeping o'er,
 ' I hear the father of the ancient men.'

I quote these stanzas as a way of suggesting to him that his neat and confident translation of symbols will not do (I am not saying that 'Reason' and 'Jealousy' could not be reconciled), and that even an argument from one of Blake's illustrations may not be as coercive as Dr. Wellek supposes.

Again where Wordsworth is concerned Dr. Wellek seems to misunderstand my intention. 'So contrary to your own conclusion' (p. 164), he says, 'I would maintain the coherence, unity, and subtlety of Wordsworth's thought.'—Well, I had heard of and read about Wordsworth's thought, which, indeed, has received a great deal of notice, but my business was with Wordsworth's poetry; I never proposed, and do not propose now, to consider him as a philosophic thinker. When I look up p. 164 in my book I find this as the only passage Dr. Wellek can be referring to: 'His philosophizing (in the sense of the Hartleian studies and applications) had not the value he meant it to have; but it is an expression of his intense moral seriousness and a mode of that essential discipline of contemplation which gave consistency and stability to his experience.' In saying that Wordsworth's philosophizing hadn't the value he meant it to have I was pointing out that it hadn't the relation he supposed to his business as a poet, and my analysis still seems to me conclusive. Dr. Wellek merely says in general terms that it isn't conclusive for him: 'I cannot see why the argument of Canto II of the *Prelude* could not be paraphrased.'—It can, I freely grant, be very easily paraphrased if one brings to it a general knowledge of the kind of thought involved and an assumption that poets put loosely what philosophers formulate with precision. For would Dr. Wellek in

prose philosophy be satisfied with, or even take seriously, such looseness of statement and argument as Wordsworth's in his philosophic verse? If so, he has a very much less strict criterion for philosophy as philosophy than I have for poetry as poetry. Even if Wordsworth had a philosophy, it is as a poet that he matters, and if we remember that even where he offers 'thought' the strength of what he gives is the poet's we shall, as critics, find something better to do than supply precision and completeness to his abstract argument.

I do not see what service Dr. Wellek does either himself or philosophy by adducing chapter V of *Science and the Modern World*. That an eminent mathematician, logician and speculative philosopher should be so interested in poetry as Professor Whitehead there shows himself to be is pleasing; but I have always thought the quality of his dealings with poetry to be exactly what one would expect of an authority so qualified. I will add, perhaps wantonly and irrelevantly, that the utterances of Professor Whitehead's quoted by Dr. Wellek look to me like bad poetry; in their context no doubt they become something different, but I cannot see why even then they should affect a literary critic's view of Wordsworth and Shelley.

When Dr. Wellek comes to Shelley he hardly makes any serious show of sustaining his case against me and the weakness of his own approach is most clearly exposed. He is so interested in philosophy that he pays no real attention to my analyses of poetry. Take, for instance, his suggested interpretations of points in the *Ode to the West Wind*: it is not merely that they are, it seems to me, quite unacceptable; even if they were otherwise, they would make no substantial difference to my carefully elaborated analysis of the way in which Shelley's poetry works. And why should Dr. Wellek suppose that he is defending Shelley in arguing that 'the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean may allude to "the old mystical conception of the two trees of Heaven and Earth intertwining"'? Not that I attack the *Ode to the West Wind*; I merely illustrate from it the characteristic working of Shelley's poetry.

Nor do I attack *Mont Blanc*. When Dr. Wellek says, 'I cannot see the slightest confusion in the opening paragraph of *Mont Blanc*,' he seems to me to be betraying an inappreciation of Shelley

—an inappreciation explained by the approach intimated in his next sentence: 'It states an epistemological proposition quite clearly.' Now to me the opening paragraph of *Mont Blanc* evokes with great vividness a state of excited bewilderment and wonder. The obvious Wordsworthian element in the poem suggests a comparison with Wordsworth, and, regarding as I do the two poets, not as stating epistemological propositions or asserting general conceptions, but as reacting characteristically to similar concrete occasions, the comparison I actually make seems to me justified. When Dr. Wellek tells me that the passage I quote from the *Prelude* 'has philosophically nothing to do with the introduction of Shelley's *Mont Blanc*,' he merely confirms my conviction that philosophy and literary criticism are very different things.

Having described certain Shelleyan habits I go on to point out that these carry with them a tendency to certain vices; vices such that, in diagnosing them, the literary critic finds himself becoming explicitly a moralist. I conduct the argument very carefully and in terms of particular analysis, and I cannot see that Dr. Wellek makes any serious attempt to deal with it. I cannot see why he should think that his alternative interpretation of the third stanza of *When the lamp is shattered* makes that poem less bad in any of the ways in which I have judged it adversely. But I do see that, *not* reading as a literary critic, he fails to respond with his sensibility to the peculiarly Shelleyan virtue, the personal voice, of the last stanza, and so fails to realize the force of my radical judgment on the poem (I cannot recapitulate the whole argument here).

Actually, of course, Dr. Wellek's attention is elsewhere than on Shelley's poetry and my analysis. 'These notes,' he slips into saying, 'are made only to support my main point that Shelley's philosophy, I think, is astonishingly unified, and perfectly coherent.'—I do not consider it my business to discuss that proposition, and Dr. Wellek has given me no grounds for judging Shelley's poetry to be anything other than I have judged it to be. If, in reply to my charge that Shelley's poetry is repetitive, vaporous, monotonously self-regarding and often emotionally cheap, and so, in no very long run, boring, Dr. Wellek tells me that Shelley was an idealist, I can only wonder whether some unfavourable presumption has not been set up about idealism. Again, it is no

consolation for disliking the characteristic Shelleyan vapour to be told :

‘ This fusing of the spheres of the different senses in Shelley is exactly paralleled in his rapid transitions and fusions of the emotions, from pleasure to pain, from sorrow to joy. Shelley would like us similarly to ignore or rather to transcend the boundaries of individuality between persons just as Indian philosophy or Schopenhauer wants us to overcome the curse and burden of the *principium individuationis*.’

—Of course, according to that philosophy poetry may be a mistake or illusion, something to be left behind. But Dr. Wellek will hardly bring it against me that I have been unfair to Shelley’s poetry out of lack of sympathy with such a view.

Unfairness to poets out of lack of interest in their philosophy he does, of course, in general charge me with. His note concludes :

‘ Your book . . . raises anew the question of the poet’s “ belief ” and how far sympathy with this belief and comprehension of it is necessary for an appreciation of the poetry. A question which has been debated a good deal, as you know, and which I would not like to solve too hastily on the basis of your book.’

—I will only comment, without wishing to question the justice of this conclusion, that Dr. Wellek seems to me to assume too easily that the poet’s essential ‘ belief ’ is what can be most readily extracted as such from his works by a philosopher.

F. R. LEAVIS.

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

MRS. WOOLF AND LIFE

THE YEARS, by Virginia Woolf (Hogarth Press, 8/6).

Mrs. Woolf, we all know, is a Poet in Prose; or rather she *has*—perhaps one should say *had*—a range of sensuous impressions which would have stood a great poet in good stead. But sensuous impressions, though they are immensely important and perhaps the only means whereby a poet can make his apprehensions and his attitudes concrete and comprehensible, are not an end in themselves; if they were, most normally sensitive children would be great poets. Of course, Mrs. Woolf is an 'intelligent woman' but, as a reviewer in the *Calendar* pointed out¹ on the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway*, her intellectual capacity is oddly disproportionate to, and immature compared with, her sensitiveness, and, if she ventures outside the narrow range imposed on her by her sensuousness, she becomes a child. Since the range of experience implied in sensuous apprehension purely and simply, is, indeed, necessarily so limited, it is perhaps significant that the only occasion when she has been able to use her impressions, in their various subtle inter-relations, to form an organization, a whole, has been when she was concerned, to some extent at least, with personal reminiscence; and it is probable, moreover, that what she did in *To the Lighthouse* could only be done once.

In this book, anyway, Mrs. Woolf used her impressions triumphantly as imaginative concepts, and she perfected an original technique to express the order which she apprehended within these impressions. As she is a sensuous artist, and what the senses perceive is transitory and mutable, she saw them as dominated by Time; and she found a central symbol for her theme so just and integral that it is not as oversimple as it may superficially appear, to say that what differentiates *To the Lighthouse* from Mrs. Woolf's other books is precisely that in this work alone *something really happens*—the trip to the Lighthouse. And

¹See *Towards Standards of Criticism*, p. 48ff.