

TENTH TODD MEMORIAL LECTURE

METHOD IN CRITICISM

from A.E. Housman to Susan Sontag

Pol. Though this be madnesse,
Yet there is Method in't: will you walke
Out of the ayre my Lord?

Ham. Into my Graue?

Pol. Indeed that is out o' th' Ayre:
How pregnant (sometimes) his Replies are?
A happinesse,
That often Madnesse hits on,
Which reason and Sanitie could not.

Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii (Folio 1243-51)

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at 8.15 p.m.

My subject is one small corner in the history of ideas. What makes it interesting is that, in the history of ideas, the diachronic component (as we are fond of saying in the social sciences) refuses to be ignored. In the history of ideas, as Heraclitus put it (what? 2,500 years ago), you can never step in the same river twice. What Housman meant by literary criticism (seventy years ago) isn't what we mean today; what Susan Sontag meant by interpretation (a mere twenty years ago) isn't what most of us mean who use the term today. In the social sciences there are no constants; all definitions are provisional. Not only do ideas about a subject change; the frontiers of the subject itself keep changing. As a literary critic, I have become interested in the role of method in criticism. Though one small corner, it is none the less an immense subject: it starts with Aristotle, and ends (provisionally) with each new book that brings to the subject, if not a fresh confusion of our understanding (to misquote a splendid poem by Robert Graves), at best a fresh understanding of our confusion. A man with only an hour at his disposal (and an audience most of whom have never heard his voice before) might begin and end almost anywhere. Convention demands, however, that a lecture, like a novel or a poem, must begin somewhere definite and end somewhere definite, however arbitrary the beginning and the end may be, and however implausible the process of logic which appears to relate the two. I have bowed to this convention (because it is only by bowing occasionally to convention that one can hope to get anywhere with an argument - or with life) and have built my lecture round two texts: A.E. Housman's Inaugural Lecture as professor of Latin at Cambridge, delivered 9 May 1911,¹ and Susan Sontag's essay 'Against Interpretation', first published in book form in 1966.² Both are short, both are wrong-headed, perverse even, if you take them seriously - for both were intended more to provoke by overstatement than to argue a case. It would be absurd to

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1. First published 1969 under the title The Confines of Criticism.
 2. Against Interpretation and Other Essays, 1966.

compare either Housman or Sontag, as critics, to Aristotle, or even to Northrop Frye. What makes these two texts important is that they have been taken seriously - not for what was said, but as symbols of a reaction against attempts to institutionalize the study of literature. Housman's Inaugural represents the stand taken by a well known figure in literary life at a key point in his career against new ideas about how literature should be taught: he was opposed to making literary criticism part of the curriculum. He did not get his way: the effect of the Inaugural was to reinforce the determination to change things among those who wanted things changed, rather than to isolate and disarm them. The notion that literary criticism was a subject which could be taught to undergraduates was destined to spread in Housman's lifetime around the world like an influenza virus, undergoing as it spread a series of mutations (so that exposure to the virus in its original form was no protection against subsequent mutants). Susan Sontag's essay represents (or has been taken to represent) the first positive attempt to attack the mutant of the virus prevalent in English studies in the United States half a century after Housman's Inaugural: this was the notion that the task of the critic was to discover (and reveal to others) the one authoritative interpretation of a literary work which served as the key that unlocked the meaning of the work; without the key you were nowhere; with it all was revealed. Susan Sontag thought that dangerous nonsense.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, the role of the critic as interpreter has been one of the central issues in criticism. The result has been open war between the critics, a war marked by an increasing sophistication in the offensive weapons used, and a diminishing prospect of victory for any one school or method. As clever, ingenious, incomprehensible book follows clever, ingenious, incomprehensible book, as one turns, bemused, the pages of the latest contribution to the subject, the best one can hope for, it seems, is to be able to echo the words of Polonius:

Though this be madnesse,
Yet there is Method in't

and less and less often

How pregnant (sometimes) his Replies are?
A happinesse,
That often Madnesse hits on,
Which reason and Sanitie could not.

The case I am putting to you tonight is that we have reached the point where the battle raging around us cannot be ignored by any with a serious concern for literature. After something like a century during which new disciplines, as they came into existence, went pretty much their own way, we now find ourselves, in the social sciences, confronted with ideas of so general an application as to constitute a challenge to us all to participate in a fresh synthesis of the intellectual life - or remain forever on the periphery.

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Housman was born in 1859 and died in 1936. He belonged to the generation before Frederick Augustus Todd (who was born in 1880): if Todd had gone from Sydney to University College, London instead of to Germany, he would have had Housman as one of his teachers. In 1911, at the age of 52, Housman came to Cambridge as the third Kennedy Professor of Latin. There can be few now alive who heard him deliver his Inaugural that May day in 1911, seventy years ago: the possibility that anyone much less than twenty was present in the Cambridge Senate House (and is still alive) seems remote; anyone in his twenties that day would now be in his nineties. The number still alive who heard Housman deliver the Leslie Stephen Lecture on 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' in 1933 (22 years later) cannot be large. What we are talking about is the turning point in history which occurs when an important public figure (for Housman was that) stands up in public and adopts a position on a controversial issue, so that the public pronouncement becomes the symbol of a position adopted, a standard to which others can rally; or is so seen in retrospect by the participants; or is so seen by the historian when (in the

words of Manning Clark) he sets out to impose his own order on the chaos of fact. Both the Inaugural and 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' have acquired this symbolic status. The Inaugural symbolizes the last stand of nineteenth-century classical philology. 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' symbolizes the last stand of Romanticism - a last, ineffectual gesture rather than a serious attempt to fan the forces of resistance within the citadel of English studies itself. It was Housman's destiny (or his temperament - or is that the same thing?) on each occasion to throw the weight of his austere, authoritative personality in with a losing cause. If both the Inaugural and the Leslie Stephen have won more lasting notoriety than their content deserved, that is because time deals more kindly with symbols than with the real human beings, of whom the symbols are our simplifying, distorting projections.

What Housman said in 1933 in his Leslie Stephen Lecture we have known all along, since the lecture was published. What he said in 1911 remained something that faded, or was distorted, in the minds of those present for more than half a century, something about which the rest of us could only guess: since 1969 we have had to guess no longer; in 1969, thanks to what I suspect Housman would have called the Oedipidean piety of his disciple and literary executor John Carter, a copy of the Inaugural was at last tracked down and published under the title The Confines of Criticism.³

The title is Mr. Carter's (Housman seems to have referred to the lecture simply as his 'Inaugural') and I do not think Housman would have approved of it: for Housman, criticism was a comprehensive term with ancient and honourable associations. It owes its origin to the great Pergamene scholar Crates of Mallos (second century BC), who adopted the title κριτικός as emphasizing the breadth of his literary interests,

3. The Confines of Criticism: The Cambridge Inaugural 1911. The complete Text with Notes by John Carter, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

his superiority to the ordinary γραμματικός or φιλόλογος; the critic, according to Crates, was as superior to the ordinary grammarian as the architect is to the workman on the construction site.⁴

The subject of Housman's Inaugural (or rather, the first subject, for there were two) was one aspect only of criticism, the aspect which he was careful to call literary criticism, as opposed to textual criticism: criticism was for Housman what it had been for Crates, the whole business of making sensible, informed decisions about literary works; textual criticism involved making sensible, informed decisions about the text of an author - getting right what the author actually wrote; literary criticism involved appraisal or discussion of what the author wrote; for Housman the two were quite separate activities.

By literary criticism, moreover, Housman meant something different from what most of us today mean (whatever we mean) when we talk about criticism. For Housman, literary criticism meant pretty much what my Toronto colleague Professor Northrop Frye has called 'judicial criticism', that kind of criticism which involves passing judgment on writers and their works.⁵ For anyone trained in the classics, 'judicial criticism' sounds an unfortunate tautology, but let us accept the term since it has acquired a certain currency.⁶ Whatever the term we use, passing judgment on writers and their works was what most people understood in 1911 by 'literary criticism'; it is what T.S. Eliot means by criticism in Tradition and the Individual Talent (published in 1917). It is the aspect of the

4. Sextus Empiricus, adv. Math. 1. 79: εοικέναι ἐκεῖνον μὲν ἀρχιτέκτονι τὸν δὲ γραμματικὸν ὑπρόετη.
5. Northrop Frye, 'Literary Criticism' in James Thorpe (ed.), The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures, 1963.
6. The old-fashioned term 'aesthetic criticism' can hardly serve since it has acquired pejorative overtones, at any rate in Cambridge.

teaching of F.R. Leavis in the forties and fifties (the process of 'placing' and 'displacing' writers and their works) with which the public is most familiar.

I don't think it would have occurred to Housman (or to Eliot in 1917) that literary criticism meant anything other than passing judgment on writers and their works. Housman was not against this kind of criticism.⁷ His position was simply that this kind of criticism was none of the scholar's business. In the long debate about the status and function of literary criticism, he lined himself up implicitly against Dionysius Thrax, who described it as the 'finest part of the literary scholar's profession' (τὸ κάλλιστον τῶν ἐν τῇ τέχνῃ), taking his place instead alongside Longinus, for whom it was 'a final by-product of long experience' (πολλῆς πείρας τελευταῖον ἐπιγέννημα). According to Housman, scholarship was scientific and objective, literary criticism was neither; to scholarship belonged only that part of criticism where sensible, informed decisions were within the scholar's grasp. Literary criticism (literary criticism worth taking seriously, as opposed to the snap judgments and the eye-catching opinions of those who wrote for the popular press) was a rare talent; it dealt with things over and beyond scholarship. There was no reason to expect, and indeed good reason not to expect, that a professor of Latin should be a better judge (that is to say, a more authoritative judge) of the text he edited or expounded than the next man. To put it with the incisive simplicity of Housman's own words, 'A scholar, unless by accident, is not a literary critic' (Inaugural 26).

It was a neat formulation of the position Housman had decided to adopt on coming to Cambridge, and a powerful source of comfort to professors of Latin, then and since. Its adoption by Housman carried all the more weight since most of his

7. Though he clearly considered that criticism (in this sense) had reached in his day a pretty low ebb, Eliot's object was to renew criticism by changing its basic assumptions without changing its scope.

audience were no doubt only too ready to accord this particular professor of Latin the authority he disclaimed. Then (as now), as Housman's new colleague at Trinity, F.M. Cornford, had said in 1908, universities appointed people to teach because they were once able to learn. Total insensitivity to literature, taste so bad as to amount to non-taste, is as disconcerting a phenomenon as tone deafness or colour blindness: especially disconcerting when we meet it in somebody who is in other respects above average intelligence. But there was nothing to stop such a man becoming professor of Latin in 1911. Housman must have been aware, uncomfortably aware, that his poet's sensitivity marked him off from his fellow scholars almost as much as it marked him off from his fellow men. Throughout his life, his defence of the profession which had initially rejected him was characterized by an ambiguous irony rather than wholehearted esprit de corps. But ironic distancing from a position adopted need not mean you do not in fact adopt that position. Housman was perfectly clear in his own mind that his status as poet had nothing to do with his job. Sensitivity for poetry did not make him a critic. Still less did it entitle him to teach others to be literary critics: literary criticism was unteachable; that an acceptable method might exist of communicating one's feelings about a text with the precision and authority appropriate to the lecture room was for Housman inconceivable.⁸

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That a stand has been taken, a moment in history arrived, is not always perceived at the time. Housman's

8. Cornford, a pupil of Arthur Verrall, thought that was wrong. In an early pamphlet (The Cambridge Classical Course, 1903) he 'advocated a more humane, less philological type of instruction' (R. Hackforth, DNB article on Housman). The pamphlet helped to win for Cornford the reputation for being something of an eccentric.

Inaugural did not set the Cam on fire. Some years before the lecture was published, I searched the Times for that week in 1911, but found no reference to it. Housman, though appointed in December 1910, did not move to Cambridge until the late summer of 1911. He seems to have come up from London for what he regarded very much as an end-of-term frolic - the examination for Part I of the Classical Tripos began the following Monday. His opening flattery of Cambridge at the expense of Oxford, his laudation (so laudatory as surely to be tongue-in-cheek) of his predecessors (Munro and Mayor) in the Cambridge Latin chair suggest a performance casually thrown together for local consumption: a vigorous statement of prejudices which Housman expected his audience to share. Oxford was reproached for having failed, unlike Cambridge, to stick to 'scholarship with no nonsense about it'. Everybody understood the reference to Greats, the Oxford final examination in classics which, unlike the Cambridge Tripos, placed a heavy emphasis on history and philosophy. The sally was doubtless received with smiles, since Housman had notoriously done badly in the Oxford examination (having handed in, it is said, blank answers to the questions he did not approve of).

From Oxford Housman passed to another conventional butt for ridicule, German scholarship and its fondness for heavy-handed systematization of scholarly problems. Those who heard the Inaugural seem to have been more taken with Housman's second theme, his hilarious dismissal of the learned editorial team of the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae, slaving away in the 'chaingangs...in the ergastulum at Munich' than with Housman's assault upon the literary critics. If so, they missed the point. However light-hearted Housman's statement of his position with regard to literary criticism, however wickedly captious the arguments he used to defend it, the Inaugural represented a serious statement of a position adopted. And to that position Housman stuck with uncompromising, austere authority throughout his time in Cambridge. When, towards the end of that time, he was prevailed upon to give the Leslie Stephen Lecture (delivered in 1933 on the same day, 9 May, as his Inaugural), he began with words he had used from the same

platform twenty-two years before:

Whether the faculty of literary criticism is the best gift that heaven has in its treasuries I cannot say, but heaven seems to think so, for assuredly it is the gift most charily bestowed. Orators and poets, sages and saints and heroes, if rare in comparison with blackberries, are yet commoner than the appearance of Hailey's comet; literary critics are less common. And when, once in a century, or once in two centuries, the literary critic does appear - will someone in this home of mathematics tell me what are the chances that his appearance will be made among that small number of people who possess a considerable knowledge of the Latin language? It may be said that Latin scholarship and literary criticism were united in the person of Lessing. Lessing, to be sure, was a great critic, and, though not a great scholar, was a good one; but if this purely accidental conjunction occurred so lately as the eighteenth century, it ought to be thousands of years before it occurs again. If, in spite of the doctrine of probabilities, the twentieth century is also to behold a Latin scholar who is a literary critic, all I know is that I am not he.

(Inaugural Lecture, 26-7)

In 1911 the words were in the nature of a manifesto; in 1933 they took on the character of a final, impotent gesture. The invitation to give the Leslie Stephen Lecture had clearly come to Housman in recognition of his standing as poet and man of letters. Circumstances had changed: the 'home of mathematics' had since 1911 become a nest of literary critics. To come forward in the Cambridge of 1933 as the humble professor of Latin, incompetent to speak as a critic, was as ironic, as much intended to undermine the authority of those who professed authority, as it was sincere. Housman was fighting again the battle he had fought in 1911 before a sympathetic audience of reactionaries alarmed at the goings-on in the new Cambridge English School: he knew he had many on his side.

There is more to it than that, however, and to understand fully the background to the Leslie Stephen (much more widely known than the Inaugural) we have to know something about the history of the Cambridge English School. When in his Inaugural in 1911 Housman praised his predecessors in the Cambridge chair for their adherence to 'scholarship with no nonsense about it', his remarks had a relevance to Cambridge which those assembled in the Senate House that day could hardly have failed to miss. Housman, we can imagine, did not approve of Greats and found the Cambridge Tripos more congenial. But the serious thrust of his lecture was directed at a more specific threat to Cambridge non-nonsense scholarship. In recent years Oxford had fallen victim to what Housman called 'erroneous tendencies'.⁹ By these he meant the aesthetic movement (which had its centre in Oxford) and the threat the movement represented to philology proper by mixing literary criticism with scholarship. It was against this threat that the newly appointed Professor of Latin felt impelled to warn his Cambridge audience on the first occasion on which he addressed them.

The warning was timely: the terms of appointment to the recently founded King Edward VII Chair of English Literature had been published the previous November (10 November 1910), about a month before the announcement of Housman's appointment to the Latin chair. In the terms of appointment to the King Edward VII chair it was stated:

The Professor shall treat his subject on literary and critical rather than on philological and linguistic lines.

By the time Housman came to Cambridge for his Inaugural, the electors to the King Edward VII chair had appointed (in February 1911) a distinguished but unorthodox Cambridge classic to the new chair of English literature, Arthur Verrall. There were perhaps hopes that the appointment of a Professor of Latin who

9. Inaugural 26.

was a poet as well as a scholar followed two months later by the appointment, for the first time in Cambridge, of a Professor of English Literature, might mean the beginning of a new era. If there were such hopes, they were quickly dashed. Housman chose his Inaugural to make it clear from the outset that, whatever the disposition in certain quarters to move with the times, Cambridge was not going to get that sort of nonsense from him. Those for whom history is a matter - not merely of what happened, but of what might easily have been the case (as Professor Trevor Roper has recently argued in his *Valedictory to Oxford*),¹⁰ will see an opportunity left ungrasped to bring the ancient discipline of classics into a fruitful collaboration with the new Cambridge School of English Literature. What might have been remains what might have been. What happened is that classics and English literature at Cambridge went their separate ways. How serious that has been for English studies I shall not presume to speculate: I know it has been a disaster for classics. The ignorance of the members of each discipline of what was going on in the other increased with successive generations; the point was soon reached where teachers of English literature had small or no acquaintance with classical literature, while teachers of classics remained ignorant of literary criticism (and proud of the fact); those like A.J.A. Waldock¹¹ who felt they must do what they could to bridge the gap had to cope with the double handicap of their own ignorance and the prospect of a frigid reception from those in theory best able to appreciate the value of what they were doing.

When Housman returned to the attack in 1933, the Cambridge English School was a fait accompli. As in 1911, Housman obliged those of his audience who shared his prejudices with a superb rhetorical performance; only those beyond the pale could refuse to be disarmed by the pardonably reactionary sentiments of a distinguished septuagenarian (Housman was nearly

10. 'History and Imagination', *TLS* 1980, 833.

11. Challis Professor of English Literature in Sydney, author of *Sophocles the Dramatist*, 1951.

74) and retired poet (Last Poems had appeared eleven years previously in 1922), understandably out of sympathy with almost everything that had been going on in literary studies around him in Cambridge for the past decade. In 1933, the Cambridge English School was dominated by Richards, was soon to be dominated by Leavis: between them, they transformed literary criticism. A subject which in 1911 seemed capable of treatment only by a rare talent, a critic of unusual gifts, had become a subject with goals and methods of attaining them, even if it had done so over the far from dead bodies of colleagues who believed with Housman that literary criticism (whatever it was) was not a subject for professors to teach at all.

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It might seem a weakness of Housman's argument that his own version of classical scholarship also called for a rare talent: Housman was able to argue, however, that, even if a professor of Latin possessed no judgment, so long as he stuck to scholarship with no nonsense about it, there was still a subject to profess, still difficult facts to sort out - and perhaps get right; still a last to cobble away at. There was, in short, a method that could be learnt and taught to others (provided you warned them against practising that method in the absence of judgment). If you set yourself up to treat your subject 'on literary and critical rather than on philological and linguistic lines', and did not possess the rare talent needed, it was a different matter: there was no method to follow and inculcate, no last to cobble away at.

Every scholar of course has his individual way of going about things, which others can describe, if he cannot, as we can describe the habits of a pet dog. By method I mean more than that: I mean a set of procedures consciously adopted which can be described and justified to others. In 1911, where literary criticism was concerned, nothing like that existed. The prevailing fashion in criticism in 1911 was for exquisite

statement of the critic's beautiful, sensitive reaction to what he read. In the seventy years since Housman's Inaugural, literary criticism has become a discipline based on well thought out procedures whose primary task is to describe and interpret the work under discussion, not to judge it. Today it is a waste of time to dispute the possibility of literary criticism as an academic subject. To do so would be like talking about the possibility of a science of economics, or anthropology, or linguistics. Whether you and I like it or not, whatever we think of them, these subjects exist: their procedures can be described, attacked, justified, their results evaluated. Those who practise literary criticism, like those whose subject is history or philosophy, have a sense of professional identity: their goals and procedures, if not agreed about (often they are the subject of hot debate), are debated in the context of the kinds of assumptions which govern scientific debate - that the subject exists; that serious discussion requires those who take part to understand what they are talking about.

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To have a method implies a theory. The theory you adopt is your justification for adopting that method. Those who pride themselves on having no method usually have no theory either. To me it seems obvious that, if you presume to talk seriously about literature, you must have some general ideas (a theory) of what literature is and how it works.

When a new subject is created, the practitioners possibly ask themselves: What should we teach? What are the important problems? But such questions are commonly regarded as something of a luxury, a proof of an open mind. What the practitioners of the new subject proceed to do is what they know how to do. They do what others have done. When English literature first became a university subject, that is to say in the second half of the nineteenth century, the form it took was essentially what we now call literary history. The approach to

literature via the author and his works was familiar since Johnson. For the transformation of that approach into a teachable (and learnable) academic discipline, the model of political history was available to be copied. The questions addressed were: Who wrote what when? In what order? It is the method we associate with names like George Saintsbury (Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature in Edinburgh from 1895 to 1915), the French literary historian Gustave Lanson. In Roman literature it was the method adopted by Wight Duff. The object was to present the facts, what H.J. Rose called 'such things as are known or reasonably supposed'; only the most conventional and perfunctory value judgments were admitted. It was the method the Germans called Positivismus.

I'm not saying the questions literary history tackles are unimportant or silly. I think it is important for all who regard themselves as serious students of a national literature to possess this kind of knowledge of their subject: it corresponds to anatomy in the medical course, both in its fundamental importance (logically speaking) and the natural tendency to make a fetish of it because it is the sort of subject it's relatively easy to make neat and tidy and teach well. The basic fact of academic life is that most teachers are happiest teaching what they know how to teach. Any uneasy feeling the first professors of English literature had that they should be inculcating literary judgment (supposing they had any to inculcate) was satisfied by the kind of perfunctory judgments from on high which the literary historians dealt in; or dispelled by the thought that judgment was unteachable, or not their business. The polemicists for this approach in the current row in Cambridge (where literary history has never flourished as it has elsewhere) talk of 'preserving the canon of English literature'.

Today, now that we have had more time (upwards of a century) to think about what literature is and how it should be taught, it's become fairly obvious that the questions literary historians ask aren't the most important questions. Worse than that, literary history as a method, if practised in vacuo (to

the virtual exclusion of the serious discussion of literary texts), encourages a beguiling sense of security. The concept of a canon to be preserved has come under suspicion: the judgments expressed by literary historians of the canonical authors, the discussion of 'influences', are often - not merely perfunctory, but outmoded (representing the taste of a previous age) or absurd as criticism. Not all canonical authors correspond any more to our concept of what constitutes literature; many are boring, not worth reading, except as part of the 'history of the subject'.

The fact of the matter is that literary history, like anatomy, can only be justified as a basis for something else. You're not much of a doctor if you don't know where the bones and muscles and so on are; but you can't cure a man of disease if that is all you know. Systematic literary history on the scale of a Lanson or a Saintsbury can only be justified on the assumption that the works about which this knowledge is acquired are read and understood by all involved. That such an assumption was unfounded was shown beyond argument by I.A. Richards when he published Practical Criticism in 1929. What made Practical Criticism epoch-making was that it let the cat out of the bag; the shocking truth was that Cambridge undergraduates specializing in English literature were grossly incompetent readers of moderately straightforward poetic texts.

Cambridge English studies of the twenties and thirties represent a radical reorientation away from facts about texts in favour of careful reading of the texts themselves. It was a reorientation to which many factors contributed: Cambridge linguistic philosophy (Richards was a product of the Moral Sciences Tripos), Russian formalism, the impact of the social sciences, especially psychology, the need, perceived especially by F.R. Leavis, to give the study of literature a moral basis. If practical criticism began almost at the remedial level, its goal became to develop the sophistication needed to read literary texts as the expression of the writer's moral vision. The object now was no longer to preserve the canon, but to make sense of texts the difficulty and subtlety of

which were recognized as much as their literary quality. The centre of interest shifted from the writer to the literary work itself.

Practical criticism developed a method for arriving at important, sometimes exciting results. During the thirties, forties and fifties, it became the method on both sides of the Atlantic. Its limitation is that, if practised in vacuo, it too encourages a beguiling sense of security; it produces an artificial atmosphere of the scientific laboratory. The objective description of a text in minute detail (as practised especially by the Chicago New Critics) was ultimately sterile, as we can now see, after the excitement of novelty has died down. To objective description of a text there is no limit. If you are to make sense of the text you are studying, you have to have some notion of what details to select and what to reject; you have to be able to locate the text in the context of expectations about how literary texts work. To make your description something more than a laboratory report, you have to make your report an interpretation. However objective you try to be, in short, common sense keeps driving you back to subjective judgment, keeps driving you in the direction of interpretation.

You have to accept, moreover, that there can be no finality in your pursuit of an interpretation, because the cultural ramifications of the text you are studying are infinite. There is in fact no hope of objectivity. Literature involves readers as well as authors and texts. You can leave the author out of consideration, perhaps, but you can't leave out the situation (literary, intellectual, political) to which his work expresses a reaction; above all, you can't leave out the reader.

The reader corresponds to the observer in science: no observer, no experiment. We come now to the central paradox of criticism. If a literary text is anything, it is a structure of words. Yet all texts (all poems, all novels) exist only in particular readings, to which individual readers must make their

own varying contributions. There can be no question, therefore, of a single right reading; no question of a single authoritative interpretation. The apparent objectivity of the printed text on the page in front of you is an illusion. The text only records where the author left off. What comes into existence in your mind as you read can never be the same as what comes into existence in mine; what existed in the author's mind when he left off was certainly different again.

There are different ways of coping with this paradox. One is to reject attempts at interpretation, as Housman rejected literary criticism, as no part of the scholar's business: how can anything so subjective carry any scholarly weight or authority? My way round the paradox depends on the argument that even in a poem there is usually quite a lot to be objective about. Most poems can't be made to mean anything you like. I assume the existence of a central area within which the poet decides what his poem is going to say and plans our reactions to his poem; inside that area we are responding to the poem; outside it we are responding to our private reactions. Not all would accept that solution. Some of the hottest critical fighting of the last twenty years or so has been conducted around this issue. Many despair of the agreement I assume. And therefore of the possibility of any 'validity' in interpretation.

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Which brings me to Susan Sontag and the controversies of the sixties and seventies. Her essay 'Against Interpretation' would be negligible now fifteen years or so later if it had not acquired the status, like the Housman Inaugural, of a symbol - a sign that the infatuation with interpretation (or rather, with more and more pretentious interpretations) was over. To come out against interpretation in 1964 was like coming out against democracy or the rights of women. Interpretation was the new order, which had replaced the bad old way of doing

things of fifty years before - before the rise of the Cambridge English School in the twenties and the spread of the mutants of that virus round the English-speaking world.

It would be nice if we could say that Susan Sontag's essay was a blow struck for common sense. It was more a blow struck against authority - the authority of the critic. The mood of the sixties was to reject authority wherever it could be detected. The smear word was *élitist*. What could be more *élitist* than to set yourself up as possessing the key to the understanding of a novel or a poem? Why should a professor of English expect you to accept his interpretation of a novel or a poem as the only key which unlocks its meaning - why shouldn't your opinion be as good as his?

Susan Sontag's essay begins by loosing on the new critical establishment a furious salvo of rhetoric: 'interpretation is the revenge of the intellectual upon art'; interpretation 'is the compliment that mediocrity pays to genius'. But once again we have to tread warily. Susan Sontag is not so much attacking interpretation in the sense I have been using the term (meaning, roughly, 'making sense' of complex texts where what is going on isn't evident') but a mutant form of that method. Her chief bugbear are those interpreters who deal in basic concepts, basic symbols which are supposed to constitute the 'key' to interpretation.

She makes two main points. The first is that interpreters prefer to concentrate on the content at the expense of what she calls the 'sensory experience' of the work of art. Her second point is that the interpreters limit the sensory potential of a work of art by imposing their own interpretation as the only valid interpretation. Well, of course, there are those who do that. It's not my intention to defend them. What concerns me here is the notion, which grew like wildfire during the sixties, that it is somehow morally wrong or intellectually not respectable to offer an interpretation of a work of art at all, and the related notion (as it seemed to those who mounted the attack) that all

interpretations are equally valid. Both these notions have attained wide popularity. The first seems to me wrong-headed but to deserve serious consideration. The second seems to me quite crazy.

To make her case, Susan Sontag cheats a little by passing backwards and forwards between literary works and works of visual art - pictures, sculpture, and in particular film. She does not distinguish between those who put forward an interpretation as definitive and those who set out to construct an interpretation as the basis for a performance. The analogy of the film is not fair because the film is a visual experience. I don't say the director of a film takes all the decisions for us: obviously, he doesn't. But that he must take major interpretative decisions on matters the novelist can leave open is surely beyond argument: what a character looks like, the setting of an action, the emotions registered by the participants. He has to reduce a complex non-visual experience to a visual experience lasting only a couple of hours. He has to find some substitute for the tone of the narrator's speaking voice. He has to build into dialogue what a novelist can get across in other ways, more obliquely. In a good film, everything isn't cut and dried. But the director has to work out an interpretation of his text (in order to make of it a coherent visual experience) and make his film project this interpretation at the expense of other interpretations which the text might stand equally well. What Susan Sontag objects to is the tendency of critics to reduce interpretation of films to a pursuit of key visual symbols: the tank rumbling down the empty night street in Bergman's The Silence is interpreted as a phallic symbol, to miss which is to incur the critic's ridicule and contempt. Similar symbols occur in good writing too, but they aren't (so to speak) thrust under our noses to the same extent; in a film the visual details chosen for emphasis (by close-up, etc.) are necessarily limited in number, their effect is more powerful and the implication of them more circumscribed.

With a novel or a poem we must construct our own performance. The performance I will construct will differ from

the performance you will construct. It must. But you and I can only construct one performance, build one consistency of the text at a time. You or I may want to change our performance the next day, or a year later; but we can hardly change it in mid-performance. Or if we do, our impulse is to go back to the beginning and build up an interpretation which will hang together.

For the author, the text is a finishing point: in the end, he settled for those words in that order making those statements. For the reader, however, the text is a starting point: we all set out from the same verbal structure and make different things from it each time.¹²

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to insist with Harold Bloom that every reading (every performance, that is) is a misreading. There is a sense in which Bloom and the deconstructionists are only making the best of a bad job. The trouble is they don't stop there. Bloom distinguishes only between strong and weak misreadings and tends to talk as though there were no responsibility to the author to be acknowledged in this matter.

The controversy revolves round many issues, all related, many highly complex. There is little disposition among those who take part to state their positions simply and clearly. To make a defence of authority which isn't an assertion of authority isn't easy. Most critics since Susan Sontag, instead of answering back in clear reasoned terms we can understand, have preferred to show what clever fellows they are. A retreat is noticeable, none the less: the fashion now is for increasingly clever (and increasingly obscure) talk about literary theory, and less and less about the interpretation of

12. To speak of this as a process of encoding and decoding is a gross simplification: one normally encodes a message which has been thought out and already expressed in words; to this uncoded text nothing in the case of a novel or a poem corresponds.

texts. Literary criticism in the seventies looks like British linguistic philosophy in the fifties and sixties: a game for experienced players with relevance to reality virtually excluded by the rules. One can understand this: having a theory of his own restores the critic to his position of authority; the less clear the theory, the greater the authority of the critic, its sole begetter who alone understands it. In such circumstances the pressure to be clear becomes negligible.

You can see I think the abandonment in the sixties and seventies of interpretation for theory a mistake. It has landed us in what an eminent member of the Yale English Department, Geoffrey Hartman, calls a critical wilderness.¹³ Our predicament is not that we lack a voice crying out in the wilderness: it is that there are so many, and we cannot make head or tail of what any is saying. Any intrusion of common sense, any attempt to adopt a position short of a methodological fanaticism which forbids us to see sense in anything besides the method we practise is apt to be branded as feeble-minded eclecticism.

It is not my intention to extract a new, obviously valid order from the prevailing chaos. All I can do on an occasion like this is tell you roughly where I stand personally. My position is, first, that the interpretation of texts is the critic's main task; second, that interpretation, if it is not to be arbitrary, must depend on a thought-out theory; third, that agreement about interpretation is possible - not of course complete agreement, but agreement sufficient to make discussion possible and profitable. By interpretation I don't mean providing keys, discovering central symbols (I don't deny these sometimes exist and are then important) but explaining how a text works. I accept the distinction made by E.D. Hirsh between what he calls meaning and significance.¹⁴ Meaning in this sense

13. Criticism in the Wilderness, 1980.

14. Validity in Interpretation, 1967; The Aims of Interpretation, 1976.

is what the text says in as many words. It can't really be made to say something else or you misunderstand it. Significance is what you and I make out of what the text says in as many words. A reading, to be taken seriously, must respect meaning. With regard to significance, there are responsibilities to the text also. If we move out of what I call the central area, we may be having fun, but we aren't any more making a serious attempt to read the text.

I don't ask you to accept a critical position so summarily sketched out on so complicated and so controversial a matter. The important thing, the note on which I conclude, is that I think I know where I stand, could explain my position to you if we had more time, because where I stand depends on thought-out procedures, a method, and that method in its turn implies, as I said, a theory - a theory of how literary texts work. That theory can be set out and illustrated, though there is obviously not time for me to do it here. It involves treating literary texts as something more than packages of information about what happened to imaginary people, or strings of statements to be accepted or rejected on a simple basis of true or false; literary texts are something closer to a musical score - the starting point for a controlled experience, some elements of which are fixed by the score itself, others by conventions the participants have to learn, but possessing over and beyond these an enormous, exciting potential for an infinite series of related interpretations.

It's not my expectation, if I had the time to explain and illustrate this theory to you, you'd say: Yes, I agree with you, you are right. Or: No, I don't agree, you are wrong. My ideas about how literary texts work depend in their turn on ideas about the kind of agreement which is possible in the social sciences. We are beginning to realize that the old test of right or wrong is not adequate here; that the total certainty of a totally coherent conceptual system, however attractive, is to be guarded against; that in dealing with complex realities

we have to be content with a kind of theoretical pluralism;¹⁵ that once we step outside the world common sense and logic have constructed, common sense and logic are poor guides; that though the ostensible mode of academic discourse is logical argument, step by step, what takes place is more complicated. Even if my argument had been clearer that it is, I'd not expect that any of you would be able to take away in your heads a neat summary of my argument, and could thus say: I agree or don't agree. By a process which depends on a kind of osmosis rather than logical analysis of logical statement, you begin to see, as you listen, what it is I'm driving at. Agreement, total, instant agreement isn't to be expected. Disagreement on this basis is profitable, however: the issues become clearer; a method of dealing with them takes shape.

When I was a student in the late thirties, there was much talk of a book by French intellectual, Julien Benda, called 'The Scholars' Betrayal' (La trahison des clercs). The betrayal Benda had in mind was the failure of French scholars to discharge their political responsibilities. The failure I apprehend in our present runaway world is a failure by scholars to meet their intellectual responsibilities: a retreat - not any longer into what seems to them pure, objective scholarship, but into the elaboration of theories about literature instead of accepting their role as interpreters of texts.

To accept this responsibility is uncomfortable for those who would prefer a stable world, who can look back nostalgically to what seems in retrospect a stable world. In our runaway world of ideas as well as technology, stability is too much to expect. If there is a source of consolation for those who find the intellectual life increasingly confusing, it is that the intellectual life shows signs, for the first time for a hundred years, of hanging together. During that hundred years, one new exciting (or more or less exciting) subject after

15. See Wayne C. Booth, Critical Understanding, the Powers and Limits of Pluralism, 1980.

another has come into existence; the practitioners of that subject have worked out their subject matter, their methods and procedures. For a time it seemed, indeed, that they would then go off by themselves, to explore and conquer the new territory, never to be seen again. That is not what happened: the new subjects proved to have common problems, problems to which a method evolved in one seemed to offer a solution in another. We are beginning to realize the interdependence of the social sciences - to realize that literature (like language) is a social science. The intellectual life will never be, in the foreseeable future, the neat, tidy thing Housman tried to pretend to himself it was. If we feel any real impulse to understand the human condition - I almost said, if we have any sense - we must come to terms with our world, or abandon touch with reality.

TODD MEMORIAL LECTURES

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| 1 The Aristocratic Epoch in
Latin Literature | Professor R.E. Smith | (1947) |
| 2 The Emperor and his Clients | Harold Mattingly | (1948) |
| 3 A Roman Post-Mortem | Professor (<u>later</u> Sir)
Ronald Syme | (1950) |
| 4 The Initiation of Aeneas | Sir John Sheppard | (1955) |
| 5 The Character of the Romans
in Their History and Their
Literature | Sir Frank Adcock | (1961) |
| 6 On Reading a Horatian Satire | Professor C.O. Brink | (1965) |
| 7 Lucius Sulla - The Deadly
<u>Performer</u> | Professor E. Badian | (1969) |
| 8 Augustus the Patrician | Professor E.T. Salmon | (1974) |
| 9 What is happening to
interpretation of Virgil's
<u>Aeneid?</u> | Professor G.W. Williams | (1976) |
| 10 Method in Criticism | Professor Kenneth Quinn | (1981) |