

THE ROLE OF THE CRITIC –
AND THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM

G. A. WILKES

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If I were to venture on a sub-title, I would take it from Chapter 2 of Book IV of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith is there arguing that the individual pursuing his own interests, intending his own gain, is at the same time advancing the public good, 'led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention'. I want to argue something similar about the activity of the critic. I do not take up the possibility which an interpreter of *The Wealth of Nations* might have to pursue, that the 'invisible hand' may be the hand of Providence. I am suggesting only that the professed aims and the published pronouncements of critics are no more than a partial record, and that it is through the study of what is unprofessed and unpronounced that the actual role of the critic is to be understood. There is in this sense an invisible hand at work, its presence betrayed sometimes not so much in critical judgements themselves as in the language in which they are couched.

The most persistent hidden influence upon literary critics is the model of composition which they assume, their theory of how literature comes to be written. One Renaissance model of literary composition is made explicit in the nude bathing scene in chapter 10 of Book II of Sidney's *Arcadia*. The two princesses, Pamela and Philoclea, are in the woods accompanied by Pyrocles, who is in female disguise. When they come to a secluded spot on the river, the princesses decide to bathe, inviting the disguised Pyrocles to join them. He excuses himself, 'having taken a late cold', and so is able to observe Philoclea in the water. He is so transported with her beauty that he takes up his lute to do it homage in song, and is so inspired with a 'divine furie' that the song composes itself: it occupies the next five pages of the narrative.

There are three things to notice in this episode. First is the actual girl bathing in the river, the occasion of the poem. Second is the 'divine furie' which possesses the poet—this is a traditional concept of poetic inspiration, sometimes formalized in the figure of the Muse. Third is the girl described in the poem. This is a figure which excels the actual Philoclea bathing in the stream, because poetry (as Sidney argues in his *Defence*) is concerned to present the ideal. The ordinary world in which we live is a brazen world, the world created in poetry is golden. The Philoclea bathing in the stream remains in that imperfect existence, the Philoclea represented in the poem transcends it, becoming part of an ideal order.

The episode illustrates the main principle which Sidney advances in the *Defence* for the superiority of poetry to all other human pursuits. It has another aspect more immediately relevant to my purpose. Although the poet is inspired, the song in which he celebrates Philoclea's beauty assumes a particular form. It belongs to the genre of the 'catalogue of delights', in which the beauties of the mistress are described from the top of her head to the tips of her toes, in a systematic progression. This is sometimes called the 'blazon' of the mistress's beauty, borrowing a term from heraldry. However inspirational the process, the poem itself assumes a set form, and can be assigned to a particular class.

This is the second principle of Renaissance poetics that I should single out —

the concept of the poem as artefact. In the period before the Romantics, one did not sit down to write 'poetry'—one sat down to write an elegy, or a pastoral, or a satire or an epic. Poetry was thought of in terms of genres, each with its own laws, and to observe the laws was necessary to 'decorum' and 'correctness'. Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* is so structured that he deals with the subject genre by genre, answering the objections to each in turn.

It follows that anyone who did venture on satire or epic had certain expectations to meet, certain obligations already set. In a satire the language would be colloquial, the versification would have vigour rather than smoothness, the comparisons would be drawn from the lower levels of the scale of being, taking in insects and reptiles. In an epic, on the other hand, the language would be remote from everyday speech; the versification would be measured, the style would encompass the epic simile and the epic catalogue. As the mode was preordained, one could adopt a more recent formula here and say that to some degree the poet wrote the poem, and to some degree the poem wrote him.

The song in which Pyrocles celebrates the beauty of Philoclea, as I have said, belongs to the genre of the 'catalogue of delights'. I might go further and say that this whole episode from the *Arcadia* is a *topos*, a literary set piece. (As it is not one of those named by Curtius, we may call it *Herself Surprised*.) The nude bathing scene goes back at least to the myth of Actaeon, who surprised Diana bathing, with disastrous consequences to himself. The most systematic Renaissance treatment of it is probably Chapman's poem, *Ovids Banquet of Sence*, and it survives still in the old-fashioned Hollywood western. It is interesting that as the princesses approach the secluded spot on the river, and look about them 'for the more surety', they notice only a water-spaniel, which has come down to the water hunting a duck. The water-spaniel, sometimes referred to as a realistic touch in this scene, is in fact part of the *topos*, the small animal as privileged observer. He is like the sparrow in poems by Catullus or Skelton, envied for the intimacies available to him but denied to the lover, or like the cat in Manet's 'Olympia' or the terrier in Renoir's 'Baigneuse au griffon'.

The dominance of genre and *topos* in this period does not mean that 'inspiration' is unimportant: it means rather that it is directed into specific channels. As a poet was doing something which had been done before, he had to do it in a novel way, or with a higher level of accomplishment. In Renaissance poetics, *invention* is a key term. It is still used in the Latin sense (the action of coming upon, finding out, making a discovery), so that 'invention' meant to think up a new way of expressing something, to come up with a bright idea on presentation. As Gascoigne wrote in his advice to poets in 1575, 'If I should undertake to wryte in prayse of a gentlewoman, I would neither praise hir christal eye, nor hir cherrie lippe, etc. For these things are *trita et obvia*. But I would either finde some supernaturall cause wherby my penne might walke in the superlative degree, or els I would undertake to aunswere for any imperfection that shee hath, and thereupon raise the prayse of hir

commendacion'.¹ In the episode in the *Arcadia*, the poet is so transported that the 'invention' and the 'utterance' are simultaneous, and the song seems to write itself.

It is usually in the language of criticism that the invisible hand inscribes itself. The term 'invention' focuses the need to present what is to some extent preordained in a novel or striking way. A cluster of terms in Renaissance poetics show this preoccupation with excellence in accomplishment, skill in execution, the craftsmanship of the thing made. The cultivation of rhetoric in this period is a subject in itself, and its vocabulary reinforces the concept of the poem as a 'dainty device'. It would have been inconceivable at this time that such words as 'pretty' and 'nice' could be used pejoratively in literary discussion. There were of course different virtues in different genres. In the sonnet sequences of the 1590's, 'sugared' and 'honeyed' were terms of praise, while Donne in opposition cultivated 'strong lines', and Ben Jonson set aside honey for salt. What these epithets have in common is the praise of accomplishment, in whatever mode, and sometimes a gentlemanly poet might allow his verses to be published only in the hope that someone more skilled would revise and correct them, smooth them with his 'file'.² I have sometimes wondered if in Shakespeare's sonnets the so-called Rival Poet is to be explained as an extension of this concept.

The demands of genre could obviously require a poet to assume a personality not his own. Donne, in his elegies and songs and sonnets, seems to figure in a number of escapades in Elizabethan London, but some of the situations he dramatizes are borrowed from Ovid, and in at least one poem, 'Breake of Day', the speaker is a woman. That the speaker of a poem does not coincide with the author of it is a discovery made more recently by another route, but there is nothing new about the fictional self in poetry. If you wrote in the form of the Horatian epistle, as Wyatt and Ben Jonson and Pope all did, then you adopted a position of detachment (from the city, or from the court); you looked at the behaviour of others with a tolerant and civilized eye; and through your own discourse you probably defined the model of behaviour you were recommending. Given that you were addressing an intimate, you might be permitted an indignant or even an irascible note, but this was a guarantee of the candour of your performance. If on the other hand you were attempting a Pindarique ode, as they understood it in the seventeenth century, your feelings could be de-controlled and the expression could approach the baroque.

The fictional self that is generated in this way carries me forward to Dr

¹ George Gascoigne, *Certaine Notes of Instruction*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. Gregory Smith (1904; repr. 1950), i.48.

² Sir John Davies in *Orchestra* (1956) paid such a tribute to Samuel Daniel (as the author of the sonnet sequence *Delia*) when he wished that he might 'smooth my rimes with *Delias* servants file' (stanza 128). The use of a physical implement to smooth away rough edges emphasizes again the notion of the poem as artefact.

Johnson. The theory of genres was still strong in the eighteenth century, but in his criticism of *Lycidas*, Johnson might seem to have come into collision with it. The fiction in pastoral elegy is that the writer of the poem and the subject of it are shepherds. Milton, the writer of *Lycidas*, and Edward King, the subject of it, were both members of the same Cambridge college. When Milton writes

We drove afield, and both together heard
What time the grey fly winds her sultry horn,
Battening our flocks with the fresh dews of night

Johnson objects 'We know that they never drove afield, and that they had no flocks to batten'. He is of course aware that these things are allowed for in the pastoral convention, because he has introduced *Lycidas* by saying that 'Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting'.³

Again, in Johnson's life of Cowley, when he first considers Cowley's love poetry, it is significant for Johnson that the experiences described were never undergone by the poet. We know from Barnes that Cowley 'in reality was in love but once, and then never had resolution to tell his passion'. 'This consideration', Johnson says, 'cannot but abate in some measure the reader's esteem for the works and the author . . . It is surely not difficult in the solitude of a college, or in the bustle of the world, to find useful studies and serious employment. No man needs to be so burdened with life as to squander it in voluntary dreams of fictitious occurrences. The man that sits down to suppose himself charged with treason or peculation . . . differs only by the infrequency of his folly from him who praises beauty which he never saw, complains of jealousy which he never felt, supposes himself sometimes invited, and sometimes forsaken, fatigues his fancy and ransacks his memory for images which may exhibit the gaiety of hope or the gloominess of despair'.⁴

Johnson is too complex a critic to be reduced to these two statements, but I leave that distortion uncorrected in order to anticipate in him the impatience with the poem as artefact that was to distinguish the Romantics. The programme that Wordsworth put forward in the 'Advertisement' to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), although it seems to be stated in terms of style, is really an attempt to establish poetry afresh in human experience. The *Lyrical Ballads* are to offer 'a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents', and 'the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society' is looked to as the natural medium for such a delineation. 'Conversation', I suggest, is used here not in the sense of talk, but as referring to the interchange between people in their everyday affairs (the conversation which if carried too far can become 'criminal conversation', the legal term for adultery). Wordsworth (or Coleridge speaking through him) was to go on in later versions of the 'Preface' to characterize poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' or as springing from 'emotion recollected in tranquillity',

³ *Johnson's Lives of the Poets*, ed. J.P. Hardy (1971), p.94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.4-5.

and in this way the poem as artefact was replaced by the poem as a confessional document, a transcript of the experience of the poet.

The Romantic theory of composition has a more particular emphasis. It came to be concerned less with human experience in general than with what was particular, transient and elusive. One Romantic metaphor was the wind harp, its strings touched by the vagrant breeze, giving forth sound without any conscious activity on the poet's part, and another was the likening of the mind in composition to a fading coal, awakened by an invisible influence to a transitory brightness, but never more than a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. This attempt to capture fleeting impressions was destructive of the genres which had been dominant hitherto. Poems with such headings as 'Stanzas written in Dejection' or 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' offended against decorum, as though the poet were saying 'I haven't had time to write a poem. Here are some lines or stanzas instead'.⁵ Romantic poetry continued to favour the ode and the elegy, as more flexible forms, and developed some genres of its own, so that the 'fragment' became something of an art form.

The broader changes occurring point to the main assumption which I take as underlying Romantic poetics: the assumption that the human personality is illimitable, that consciousness has no bounds, that the poet may communicate with the transcendent. Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* writes of 'visitations of thought and feeling' which are like 'the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own', but 'its footsteps are like those of a wind over the sea, which the morning calm erases', so that in capturing such moments 'poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man'. This ruling idea that the self is immeasurable is formalized in the Romantic theory of the imagination, and reflected in the language of Romantic criticism. On the same two pages of Shelley's *Defence* from which I have quoted,⁶ I notice the adjectives evanescent, elevating, ethereal, enchanted; the nouns intuition, desire, regret, beauty, radiance; and the verbs arrest, veil, exalt, transmute, send forth. They indicate the cast of criticism from then onward, the script of the invisible hand.

This sense that the personality is boundless may be seen under another aspect as faith in human perfectibility. Shelley's view of poetry is a moral view, and when he writes in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound* of familiarizing the imagination of his readers with 'beautiful idealisms of moral excellence', he is like a Sidney writing in nineteenth-century terms. The moral dimension which we have inherited from nineteenth-century criticism comes much more from Matthew Arnold. Arnold is perhaps the first ideologue, in the modern sense, in that he does not simply see a moral role for literature, but also has a particular social organization as his objective. In his lecture on 'The Function of Criticism

⁵ Although it is true that such titles were already emerging in the late eighteenth century, before Wordsworth. See Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of *Lyrical Ballads*' in the Macmillan Casebook edited by Alun R. Jones and William Tydeman.

⁶ From the Percy Reprints No.3, ed. H.F.B. Brett-Smith (1923), pp.54-5.

at the Present Time' Arnold shows his distaste for a society in which the newspaper report of a child murder can end with the 'short, bleak and inhuman' sentence: 'Wragg is in custody'.⁷ He propounds against this a role for criticism as 'a disinterested endeavour to propagate the best that is known and thought in the world',⁸ and shows how this might operate, in the lecture on 'The Study of Poetry', through the 'touchstones' that will distinguish what is best and finest from what is not.

Arnold is using literature and criticism as a way of training an aristocracy of the spirit. Although he described himself as a 'feeble unit'⁹ of the middle class, it is clear that the 'disinterested endeavour' which he recommends is not for 'the mass of mankind' but for a 'small circle resolutely doing its own work'.¹⁰ They will presumably respond to the touchstones, which from the examples Arnold gives seem to define the rather bleak and cheerless view of the world that was personal to him. He is also an ideologue in that he is propelled by motives he may not be aware of entertaining.

While Arnold is a confessed reformer, the moral tenets of nineteenth-century criticism more often remain unstated. This lends a particular interest to the criticism of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century, especially when it engaged with the issue of how the world of Shakespearean tragedy was compatible with the order of providence, subduing evil to its purposes despite the mute testimony of the corpses of Lear and Cordelia on the stage. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* is such fascinating reading because it shows Shakespeare's tragic plays being brought into conformity with the philosophy of Hegel. The same preoccupations are revealed in the characteristic language of Shakespearean criticism in the nineteenth century, in the recurrence of such terms as justice, retribution, flaw, self-knowledge, ordeal, waste, redemption. Shakespeare has become a moral thinker, and Shakespearean tragedy a legal and ethical problem.

Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* was published in 1904, and by that time critical theory was already taking a new direction. The aesthetic movement usually identified with the 1890s was to seek to divorce from morality, to assert that the work of art was autotelic. The statement in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all' was meant to be provocative, but it is still a symptom of the change. The inspiration came largely from France, and the French symbolist movement was influential in setting English poetry on a new path. Although Arthur Symonds's book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* can be read today without sending the mind reeling, it was a landmark for Yeats when it appeared in 1899, and the second edition had a similar influence on T.S. Eliot when it was published in 1908.

⁷ *Essays in Criticism, First Series* (Macmillan, 1896), p.24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.ix.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.25

The new influences came to be focused in the image. Ezra Pound, the entrepreneur of modernism, was to define the image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time',¹¹ and while the Imagist movement itself may have been short-lived, the cult of the image in twentieth-century poetry was to be as insistent and as tyrannical as any of the demands of genre in the centuries preceding. Again the language of criticism changes, outlawing whatever is discursive and explicit, defining the preferred range of effects in terms of obliquity, implication, suggestiveness. Although in a way this is a reborn Romanticism, the degree of blur that may have been permissible in a poet like Shelley is impermissible now: the qualities of the image are precision, hardness of outline, firmness of edge.

The more important departure from Romanticism was in the changed relationship between the poem and the author. The definition of the image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time' is dismissive of the author, who is presumably present at this conjunction, but after that not responsible. The modern poet is typically reluctant to say what any of his poems mean, because as Yeats replied to one enquirer, 'If an author interprets a poem of his own he limits its suggestibility'.¹² T.S. Eliot likened the element of 'meaning' in a poem to the piece of meat brought by the burglar for the house-dog, to keep the reader's mind diverted and quiet while the poem did its work upon him.¹³ Both poets claimed also to be only imperfectly in control of what they wrote. T.S. Eliot described moments (sometimes related to forms of ill health or debility) when barriers were lifted and words welled up from the subconscious,¹⁴ and Yeats, the student and editor of Blake, was to receive a whole symbolic system in this way (with Mrs Yeats proving more co-operative than Mrs Blake had been).

These tendencies are carried further in the poets' attitude to myth. Yeats, partly through his interest in Irish legend, partly through his study of Blake and Shelley, came to see the myths as a repository of the consciousness of the race, awakened to new significance by the poets exploring them. Yeats's contemporary, C.J. Brennan, extended this idea to metaphysics also, seeing the systems of Kant or Hegel as myths put forward by men in the effort to interpret the universe for themselves. Eliot, who was aware of the work of Lévy-Bruhl (as others were to be aware of the work of Lévi-Strauss) used myth in *The Waste Land* as a way of controlling and ordering, giving shape and significance, making the modern world possible for art.¹⁵ While attempts to codify the relationship of myth and literature were made by Maud Bodkin in

¹¹ *Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot (1954: repr. 1963), p.4.

¹² *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (1980), p.840.

¹³ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; repr. 1950), p.151.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.144-48.

¹⁵ I echo his account of James Joyce's practice in 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', *The Dial*, LXXV (1923), 480-83.

Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (1934)—and later, with more fearful symmetry, by Northrop Frye—what I am fixing on here is the different relationship of the work to the author, who becomes a wanderer in the world of myth, reaching back into the consciousness of the race, reporting news from elsewhere.

Again this model of composition has implications for the reader, who is placed in a quandary. On the one hand he is offered a greater liberty than ever before, responding to a poem which is infinitely suggestive, with no significance fixed even by the author. Eliot said that he would prefer an audience which could neither read nor write.¹⁶ On the other hand the cult of the image puts another set of poetic qualities in vogue, best realized in the verse of Donne as interpreted by T.S. Eliot: an ideal of style that is strenuous, concrete, tough and ironic, and opposed to the apparent flaccidity of the Tennysonian tradition. The reader was liberated into a kind of gymnasium, where he was put through exercises in strenuous reading, to graduate as a New Critic. The New Critics maintained that the poem meant itself and contained its own meaning, and had no meaning outside it, and went on to prove this in one explication after another. This was largely a North American phenomenon, and it is something of a distortion to see a parallel in England in the work of F.R. Leavis. The emphasis placed by Leavis on 'the words on the page' was much more a counter to the *belles lettres* tradition, and he would not have claimed that criticism could be value-free. If Leavis is grouped with the New Critics it would be as sharing the concept of the poem 'enacting' its meaning, and sharing also the preferred effects of complexity, tension, irony and so on.

The New Critical mode, loosely designated, was the dominant mode of the 1950s and early 1960s. When we look back now, this has the aspect of a period in which criticism was ideologically complacent, if not inert. This impression is false, but it may be due to the protest movements of the 1960s having intervened, so that someone like Leavis, who was as much a moralist as Arnold, now seems irretrievably bourgeois. The moral drive in criticism from the 1960s onward has come much more from Marxism and Feminism, which set out to redress the injustices of the past. The main effect of the Marxist and Feminist movements has been to show that no form of criticism can claim to be ideologically innocent. The critic who declares that he has no political views, or who is genuinely unaware of entertaining them, will be contributing to some orthodoxy none the less—he will be investing in the status quo, preserving a code which admits some and excludes others, or acquiescing in some canon of privileged works. This argument extends to the institutions where critical pursuits are followed, and these are seen as perpetuating species which might not survive outside them, and also as privileging some types of discourse at the expense of others. As every critique advanced is (in terms of its own argument) as ideologically based as whatever it criticizes, the imprisonment in ideology is complete.

¹⁶ *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, p.152.

Equally disconcerting influences have come from linguistics. If one accepts the view put forward by the followers of Saussure, that words take their meaning not from the things they refer to but from their relationship to other words, the whole tradition of literature as mimetic collapses. The language in which we assume that reality is being represented is in fact a system of its own, not a window through which we can look either at the world of nature or the experience of the writer. As the language existed in advance of the user of it, the concept of the poem as recording the individual experience of the poet is delusory, because his expression is conditioned by the medium he uses and the beliefs encoded in it.

The surface indications of this underlying change are again to be found in the vocabulary of criticism. So far as it comes from linguistics, the terminology seems more scientific: literary discussions may be conducted in terms of the signifier and the signified, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, and more broadly in terms of structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. One notes the absence now of such words as inspiration, creativity, intuition and originality, and the words on the page will more often give way to tables and diagrams.

These are indications of another model of composition being established. Through the nineteenth century the assumption had been that the poem gave the reader access to the experience of the poet, and that the critic writing about it would share that experience, even reliving it for himself and the reader. Against this, the modern view is that language as a system is precluded from being mimetic of the world, and that as it is socially conditioned, the personality of the writer is eclipsed by it. We have a model of composition in which the author has almost been dispensed with.

When Roland Barthes proclaimed *The Death of the Author* in 1968, it was with a certain Gallic insouciance. Authors with such names as Foucault and Derrida could survive to write and communicate, the academic institutions in which their works were studied continued to accommodate writers in residence, and publishers continued to issue books of interviews—on another Parisian precedent—in which authors were interrogated about their intentions and invited to explain their activities in writing. The genres had already been dismantled so that only poetry, novel, drama remained: as they may have retained some authority, they were superseded by the neutral term *text*, as ‘the very index of *nonpower*’.¹⁷ The author who had died in 1968 was the author as authority figure, the author who could be appealed to in order to give the meaning of the text or to limit its meaning.

Obviously the role of the reader was enormously enlarged. He had been liberated already by Yeats and Eliot, but into a rather passive role, letting the poem work its effect upon him. There had been texts before Eliot—*Tristram Shandy* would be one—which required the reader to collaborate with them in

¹⁷ Roland Barthes, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Fontana, 1983), p.472.

different ways, and such writers as Beckett may have developed the 'open' text or the 'interrogative' text into an art form. But independently of that, the death of the author cast the reader into a more active role, so that he might even enter into an erotic relationship with the text.

This takes the model of composition one stage further: the author is now reconstituted in the reader. In place of the single author, we may have a multiplicity of them. This holds also for theories of deconstruction, for the critic who deconstructs the text is a temporary author of it, until he is deconstructed in turn.

I began with the concept of the 'invisible hand', used by a political economist back in 1776, in the hope of putting these views in perspective. We are being told things which are already known: that the self in the poem is not identical with the author of it; that the poem writes the poet, inasmuch as the outcome depends on the genre in which it falls; that some forms of discourse are always being preferred to some others; that any canon of writers will always be in some measure ideologically determined; that the preferred literary effects will reflect either that ideology, or the model of composition which is assumed. We are always participating in some myth which represents a particular view of the world, or engaging in some polemic to change it. Even the innocuous *belles lettres* critic, academically trained as a Quiller-Couch or Walter Raleigh, could be seen as using literature to recommend an ideal of cultivation or discernment.

While the whole history of criticism has been conducted in this way, the more recent movements may have taken to their logical extremity certain tendencies within it. The same arguments about language which discredit the reading of literature as representational of the world fail to confer authority on any other reading of literature. Although the death of the author was proclaimed in a festive spirit, it puts me in mind of that crowd flowing over London Bridge in *The Waste Land*, which prompts the reminiscence from the *Inferno*: 'I had not thought death had undone so many'. Reconstituting the author in the reader is promoting a kind of narcissism, taken up sportively if the critic happens to be French, but owlishly if he happens not to be.

What remains as a role for the critic? Given the relativity of everything, this becomes a matter of the acts of faith we may be willing to commit. Barthes, in his Inaugural Lecture of 1977, referred to the effort of literature to represent the real, although the real is not representable, explaining that 'a pluri-dimensional order (the real) cannot be made to coincide with a unidimensional order (language)'. But he went on to say 'it is precisely this topological impossibility that literature rejects and to which it never submits', and that the history of literature can be seen as a series of 'verbal *expedients* men have used to reduce, tame, deny . . . the fundamental inadequation of language and the real'. From the 'incessant commotion' of this refusal to give up, literature is born.¹⁸ I think the critic may join in this unequal contest, preferably on the

¹⁸ *Selected Writings*, p.465.

side of the original instigators of it.

As any text may have so many authors, we are not precluded from investigating the earliest one, however imperfectly he may be known, as a point of reference. In a recent monograph on Patrick White, the suggestion is made that the name 'Laura' in *Voss* comes from Petrarch. White himself is on record as saying that Laura 'has nothing to do with Petrarch, I chose it as an appropriate name for a woman of the time.'¹⁹ The critic is aware of this, but disallows it, for the 'name fits perfectly into the Dantean arrangement, and also with Leichhardt's L-marked trees and the repeated references to "laurels".'²⁰ We have a choice here of invoking the authority figure of the author, committing the intentional fallacy, and accepting the impoverished text in which 'Laura' is no more than a suitable woman's name of the time, or on the other hand opting for the greater subtlety and complexity of the Dantean arrangement, the L-marked trees and the references to laurels through the book.

The choice we make will be determined ultimately by what we think literature is for. My hypothesis is that the works so imperfectly known to us by putative authors with such names as Shakespeare and Milton offer a conjectural body of presumed experience which exceeds the range and depth of our own, and that is why we seek access to it. If the later authors of *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost* are really preferable to the first ones, they would be better employed in writing their own poems and plays, instead of going over ground already covered. If we explore texts only to meet ourselves, returning by the same door where out we went, then literature exists simply as new material waiting to be smothered in our ego. Initially this may be stimulating, but we shall end by being cut off from it.

I value criticism as it illuminates, enlightens, provides access to this range of experience beyond our own. There can never be any absolute judgements, and indeed some judgements may be stimulating in their wrongness. When Dr Johnson said that to enumerate the improbabilities of the plot of *Cymbeline* would be 'to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility',²¹ he made a classic comment on the play; when Dr Leavis promoted *Hard Times* to the top of the Dickens canon, he compelled a reconsideration of all Dickens's work. There will continue to be changes in the verdicts and in the language of criticism as the invisible hand writes on, but the critic still has a role to play in adding to the 'incessant commotion' that inspires it all.

¹⁹ 'A Conversation with Patrick White', *Southerly*, XXXIII (1973), p.141.

²⁰ Karin Hansson, *The Warped Universe: A Study of Imagery and Structure in Seven Novels by Patrick White* (1984), p.186n.

²¹ *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (Yale, 1968), p.908.