

Naked Criticism

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I want to discuss two things: the relationship of the writer to the past, and the idea that a literary work is an object. The two topics are related, as I hope to show, but distinct enough to treat successively. Out of these two topics, I intend to evolve a statement of the kind of criticism I think is most appropriate in approaching contemporary literature.

I'll begin with a well-known quote from Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent":

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.

At first glance, this is a more or less true statement. But when you stop to think of it, it becomes uncomfortable, as if the corpses of the Great Poets were chilling the air around us. Eliot had an excessive love of the past. His famous statement that he was a royalist in politics, a classicist in literature, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion was an expression of this love. These values are neither good nor bad in themselves, but when they are used to set a standard for living writers, whose very element is change, movement, contingency, the result is distortion.

Eliot's truth in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" is only a half-truth, and therefore a falsehood. He says that today's poets "must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past," but mentions nothing about judging yesterday's poets by the standards of the present. In a sense, the present has no standards, according to Eliot's essay; he admits that the new can and should exist, but says that it exists only by virtue of conformity with the old. "And we do not say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges of conformity." The past for Eliot is a ponderous iceberg, and the present is its small tip; he doesn't even mention the future. But this isn't our experience of time. The future affects us as much as the past does. The future affects us precisely by not existing, by coming toward us as that which doesn't yet exist. Eliot wants everything to have existed already. He makes it sound as if we are dragging along heavy sacks of tradition. But even if tradition lives in us, even if we are its accumulation, its weight is countered by the weightlessness of the future. The present, the new, is the intersection of these two; that is its excitement. It is not simply that we modify the past at the same time that it shapes us, as Eliot says; that is true, but that is only part of the story, and to create the impression that it is the whole story is to make it false. Eliot has an organic sense of time, but it is truncated, incomplete, distorted, like a body with some limbs missing and others inflated out of proportion. He grants the new a grudging, weak existence, as if it were born with a hole in its heart. In my view,

the new is new not only because it emerges from the past, but even more because it emerges from the future. The future is the opening of the past; and both give birth to the new: the past as its anchor or limit, the future as its open field, its realm of possibility.

I like to think that Eliot would have agreed with this, since it's nothing more than an extension of his premises. But he probably wouldn't have acknowledged his agreement, since he had such an inordinate, perhaps unnatural, stake in the past, as *The Waste Land* shows. Of course, at one time the literature of the past was new, was the act of a person in a concrete environment, in his own present. The great literature of the past, in fact, shows us the presence of the past. As Allen Tate puts it, "I take the somewhat naive view that the literature of the past began somewhere a few minutes ago and that the literature of the present begins, say, with Homer." But this is no reason to judge the poets of the present by placing them beside the poets of the past, as Eliot would have us do. It is exactly that kind of juxtaposition that transforms the poets of the past into corpses. We have no need to be reminded of our mortality in this way. The literature of the present is sufficient in itself to remind us of our mortality, by giving us poets who change, grow stale, take risks, make mistakes or discoveries and, above all, die. That is, they die unexpectedly, and their dying is an act they must suffer, not a fact of history. The literature of the present reminds us of our mortality precisely by being cut off from the past. The excitement of the present is that it isn't tradition yet, or better, that tradition isn't *it* yet. History still has to catch up with the present. We can feel its breath on our necks, but when we turn around it's gone. We know that history *can* exist because it doesn't exist. We are cut off from it because we are creating it. The excitement of contemporary literature is that it shows us, more than the past ever can, that the past is alive. Only when poets *can* die is their death a reality; those already dead can't die. The excitement of the present, of the contemporary, is that it enslaves us again, not to the forms of the past, but to the contingencies of the present and the future, to the contingencies of work, risk, discovery, error, the body, the earth, death, to all the contingencies that once filled out the past, but since have disappeared from between its words and poems like the interstices of a net.

How does this apply to criticism? If you're a critic, the excitement of the contemporary is that the person you are criticizing can die. This is another way of saying that he's alive, he's not already dead, and he resists, if he's good, your categories; he grows, he changes, and you, the critic, have to do the same. Of course, this happens to the tradition too. The tradition changes with each new generation of critics, but they're seldom aware of that change. They look *through* the change, as if through a window, at what they regard as a fixed landscape, the History of Literature. Eliot's greatest insight is that this landscape isn't fixed. But it is characteristic of Eliot that he could accept change in the past, where it is in a sense safe, and not accept it in the present. The literature of the present places change squarely in front of the critic, as something he must wrestle with, resist, give in to, accept, if he ever is to see what it is that changes. The tradition can afford to be buried or circumscribed, because it has patience and time; it

can take centuries to ripen, as it did for Donne and the metaphysical poets. But the literature of the present, if it is good, must be protean, must change when the critic touches it, not because criticism is its traditional enemy, but because to be is to have been, and to become is to grow and create, which is its proper business.

All of this adds up to a definition of the literature of the present. In this definition, I take the phrase "literature of the present" and the words "modern" and "contemporary" to be synonymous. I don't believe that we are in a post-modern period. We are always in the modern because we are always in the present. Still, "post-modern" may be a good phrase if it serves to remind us of how quickly the present slips into the past. And it certainly is true that our very consciousness of modernity, which is one of the things that defines the modern, began around the time of Eliot. As Lionel Trilling points out, Athens in the Golden Age didn't have such a consciousness, nor did Elizabethan England; for Matthew Arnold, "modern" meant a certain social ideal, not the actual accumulation of facts that existed around him. But even if that consciousness began around the time of Eliot, or a little before, it hasn't disappeared since. The difference between Arnold and Eliot is only one of about fifty years, but it's far greater than any gap between Eliot and us. The difference is between being submerged in history and being outside it. Here is my definition: we have created history precisely by being able to step outside it, and in doing so we have created the modern or contemporary, as a measure of the distance between us and history. In many ways this distance is first consciously implied in our literature by Eliot's use of history in *The Waste Land*. Before you can use something, there has to be a distance between you and it, a gap. The irony of *The Waste Land* is that the very act of trying to close that gap only served to open it up wider. And into the breach poured what we have come to call "modern."

This breach or gap was erected into a kind of universal space by others of Eliot's generation. Pound's "make it new," Joyce's creation of a new language, the surrealist's absolute rejection of the past, have all added up to a kind of "tradition of the new," as Harold Rosenberg calls it, a tradition that seems to have become perpetual. This gap that we carry with us, this rejection of history, is the modern. Of course, poets need the past—poets perhaps more than critics—and the very poets who rejected it also knew it. I'm thinking especially of Pound, who said "make it new," but who alluded to Homer, the Bible, Dante, the Provençal poets, Thomas Jefferson, Confucius, etc. But this is a strange list. *Whose* past is this? An American's? A European's? An Asian's? It's like the poet David Jones says: we have *a* past, but we do not have *our* past. This is what it means to have invented history, and this is the peculiar kind of rejection of history that Pound participated in. For the modern age—and this is a process that has been slowly accumulating for centuries—the past has widened its boundaries to include the past as such, the past as a field, the past as a discipline, a mine of texts, a general heterogeneous landscape over which we gaze, so that Confucius is equal to, say, Petrarch, because he exists in the same space, a space called History. This is very different from history being a river with us at its mouth. It requires a gap—

perhaps even a lack or need—and this gap is what I am calling the modern.

This special relationship that we have with history—a more complex and perhaps less satisfying one than Eliot acknowledges in his essay—is filled with ironies and paradoxes. One is that history becomes something we use precisely because we have rejected it. Another is that the more we reject history, the more we drive ourselves into what will eventually turn out to have been history: into the present, the immediate, the environment, the body, the objects around us, the language we speak, the space around us—ironically, into time, into the flux of time. By rejecting history, the modern immerses itself all the more in change and contingency. Criticism needs to understand this. Criticism needs to acknowledge the fact that the poet is an actual person in an actual situation, that his poem is a gesture of his physical body, and that his body gathers in materials from the objects and the people around him, from the earth itself. One of the greatest errors that criticism has made is to assume, as the New Criticism did, that the literary text exists in a vacuum, severed from the person and from time. This is like robbing a wave of its crest.

The idea that a text exists in a vacuum is related to the modern rejection of history. Certainly the New Critics despised the historical approach to literature, which they thought treated texts as mere data of history. They may have been correct, but their cure was if anything worse than the disease. It was to regard the work of literature as an object in a vacuum. This is what I want to talk about now. To regard the work as an object is to sever it from its context. I believe that the poem or novel always exists in a context, and that this context is not merely the heavy sack of history, and not merely a library, but a context which is open to the future, which is contingent and mortal: it is above all the body of the poet. To deny the work this context is to deny it its freedom of movement, and therefore to transform it into a static object, a corpse. The assumption that literature is an object is odious to me, but I must admit that it is the dominant attitude in our universities. Here is a marginal comment that one of my teaching assistants wrote on a student's paper: "Are you saying that the appreciation of a poem lies in a shared experience?—it may—but it is open to doubt—criticism is objective—literature is not a *subject* of study but an *object* of study—see, e.g., Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*." This attitude is almost universal among modern schools of criticism. John Crowe Ransom puts it this way: "The first law to be prescribed to criticism, if we may assume such authority, is that it shall be objective, shall cite the nature of the object rather than its effects upon the subject." Ransom makes criticism sound like a medical or psychiatric examination, performed by a disinterested doctor. Ironically, the ideal of the disinterested doctor who treats his patient "objectively" has been discarded today by many psychiatrists. Criticism could take a lesson from psychiatry. Traditionally, the critic *has* been like a doctor, whose viewpoint is normative because he is "objective." And the writer has been his patient, "subjective," whose speech, like that of a schizophrenic, must be explained or translated. The critic, like a doctor, is privy to professional and even scientific information (biographical and historical data, theories about the structure of literature) of which the writer, like a patient, is

ignorant. Of course, the writer points out that the critic couldn't exist without him, just as the psychiatrist couldn't exist without crazy people. This is true, but the opposite is true also. The fact is that critic and writer both exist in a social context—as doctor and patient do—and each has learned to manipulate this context to his own advantage, the critic by being objective, scientific, authoritarian, by passing judgment on writers with the yardstick of literary tradition, and the writer by being subjective, committed, “original,” by regarding critics as old-fashioned, unnecessary or parasitic. The shame of this social equation is that each side is driven further into its own incompleteness in order to justify itself. The critic becomes more and more distant, more and more disinterested, and writes only for other critics; the writer courts cleverness and newness purely for their own sake, or rather, for the sake of subverting and insulting critics. This is part of the cultural history of our century, and a very important part. It is no coincidence that the age of criticism is also the age of the tradition of the new, that Eliot began writing his essays at the same time that the dadaists were disrupting literary banquets and shouting “merde” into the faces of critics. And if we accept the analogy with psychiatry, it is no accident that many writers in this century, beginning with the dadaists, have courted insanity as a desirable or even liberated state of the soul.

The source of this situation lies in the attitude that literary works are objects in a vacuum. And behind this attitude lies the split of subject and object which has been the blindness of our culture for centuries. For the critic to place himself outside the work and handle it like a laboratory specimen is to make the contingent necessary, to cut it off from its source in the body, the earth and time, to freeze it and kill it in order to see how it works. As William Empson once pointed out, it's like pulling a flower up by its roots in order to study its structure. Empson accepted this drawback of criticism, but I can't. The structure of a flower is intimately involved with growth; to cut it off from its growth, to sever it from the earth by regarding it as an object in a vacuum, is to cut it off from itself. And the description of the structure will then be missing the one element, growth, which pulls all the other elements together and enables them to make sense. It's like freezing a dance in order to see how it works. To extend Yeats' famous statement, not only can't we tell the dancer from the dance, but we can't tell either from the context of earth, gravity and time which is drawn up into the dancer's body as the edge which it always breaks out of. If we attempt to separate these things in order to know them, we make them into something different from what they are, and so defeat our purpose.

I realize that these are questions which have repeatedly been debated in this century, but it seems to me that the answer has always been the same: we must accept the limitations of analysis which breaks the work down into its component elements, and leave it to the reader to weave them together again in the act of reading. There is some truth to this, but not enough. Can we cut a body up into pieces, then sew it back together and expect it to walk around as if nothing had happened? I believe that a literary work is not an object, but an intersection of subject and object, as the human body itself is. The poem is not words on a

page, but those words as they are activated by human speech, an act of the body. As Coleridge said, words are living things. This is literally true, and the poets have been trying to point it out all century. Wallace Stevens, in "Poetry Is a Destructive Force," puts it this way:

The lion sleeps in the sun.
Its nose is on its paws.
It can kill a man.

If you say, that's only a metaphor, that business of poems being living creatures isn't literally true, then I say you haven't been listening to what the poets have been trying to tell us, and you haven't understood this new kind of thinking, a thinking with the body as well as the mind, that breaks down the distinction between metaphor and metamorphosis, between literal and figurative. "It is a thing to have," Steven says, "A lion, an ox in his breast,/ To feel it breathing there." If this is true, then what we call critical distance is not only wrong, but impossible. It's like a nightmare in which we try to escape a noise that turns out to be our own heartbeat.

To say a poem is alive doesn't mean that there's no difference between art and life, or, to put it another way, that a poem doesn't have form. It means, rather, that the form is never closed, just as the human body itself isn't. The poem must always be in touch with its sources in time and place, because it is the summary of those sources, their crest and their gesture out of themselves. If we cut the human body off from air, food, water, etc., it will die; the body is not an already accomplished object, but a continual series of transformations, an act caught in the net of form, an act that wells up out of its environment. The same is true of a poem or novel. Even if a poem consciously creates an "artifice of eternity," as Yeats put it, that artifice itself has its source in time, the earth and the body—as Yeats knew. There is no such a thing as pure poetry because there is no such thing as permanence, if permanence is envisioned as something closed, cut off from time. The artifice of eternity that art makes is a permanence united with time, a permanence that changes.

I want to see criticism that, first of all, recognizes that the work is an act, and that its gestures and growth are as integral to it as the flow of a river is to the river. This means criticism that becomes absorbed in the work, like a William Carlos Williams poem absorbed in a sycamore tree, a cat or a wheelbarrow, and then works itself out of the work in the same way the work itself does, by creating a context, a space, a time, an earth, a body. There is a kind of criticism that can describe the complexities of a work without breaking it down into pieces, that can describe the particular grip of a work on space, time, things, the body, etc. This means criticism, like Heidegger's or Roland Barthes', that describes the inner coordinates of a work, its modes of perception, its way of touching things, the characteristic objects it chooses to handle. It means criticism that describes the work from its own point of view, and describes the liberation of the work into outside space, into the world itself, like the liberation of the interior of a good house into the landscape outside. And it also means criticism that can take a clue from what it deals with, criticism which, like the best poetry, thinks with its body

as well as with its mind. I think some of the best criticism is written by poets—Lorca, Valery, Rilke in the early part of the century, Richard Howard, John Haines, Robert Bly today. I think it's good that criticism and poetry come closer together, as they do, say, in Thoreau. This means that criticism will have to be as grounded in the contingent, in change, as literature itself is, rather than hover above the landscape of literature in some artificial ideal space. I like the way Harold Rosenberg puts it: "Art is constantly making itself; its definition is in the future. Criticism cannot therefore be a single developing theory; *it must be partisan and polemical in order to join art in asserting what art is to become.*" In some ways, this criticism would be more presumptuous than older criticism, since it would be more poetic itself, and, hopefully, more demanding (the idea that anyone can write criticism is as wrong as the idea that anyone can write poetry), but it would also be more humble, more willing to accept its own limitations. Faced with a particularly hermetic poem by W. S. Merwin, for example, criticism may have to acknowledge the poem's solitary nature, its refusal to disclose itself, rather than attempt to pry it open. Or perhaps this acknowledgment would be the starting point of criticism, so that the act of criticism itself would then be a description of what the poem sees with its own eyes, of how it clarifies the world when it looks out from the page.

The example of Merwin is not an arbitrary one. I'm calling the kind of criticism I want to see "naked" in a conscious analogy with contemporary poetry. The influential anthology *Naked Poetry* is subtitled "Recent American Poetry in Open Forms." In the preface, its editors talk about the exciting contemporary American poetry which has set out into "the wilderness of unopened life." I want to see criticism in open forms, which follows poetry into that wilderness and joins it in the task of searching and discovering. That's the most liberating criticism I could imagine. It means no more symbol hunting, no more myth hunting, no more searching for what one *already* knows; it means to come out on the other side of "meaning" in the traditional critical sense. It also means allowing the work to look at us now and then, instead of vice versa. I take this idea from Trilling, who took it from Auden. Modern literature, in a sense, reads us, and asks us questions we are reluctant to ask ourselves. Consequently, we aren't comfortable in its presence, and so we clothe ourselves in critical objectivity, in distance, in evasion; but a distortion results, a distortion of the particularly intimate relationship modern literature demands of us. In truth, there's a sense in which modern literature asks us to go naked, as it itself has been doing. This means that we don't drag the corpses of the dead forward to rot before the living—in fact it means that we treat the dead as the living creatures they once were, and consequently, read them in their own context, not in a vacuum, and not as a yardstick for that particular gap that rejects them, the modern. It means also that criticism must constantly revise itself, adapt, change—it must be off balance, exposed, like a naked body, in order to be open to change, contingency, new ideas, new modes of experience. It even means that criticism must recover some of its original innocence, if innocence means not a rejection of experience, but that peculiar combination of awe and respect that a child always feels, say, when confronted

with fire. The Spanish poet Jimenez had a lot to say about this, and I'll let him have the last word. This is his poem "At First She Came to Me Pure" (translated by Robert Bly), from which the phrase "naked poetry" comes:

At first she came to me pure,
dressed only in her innocence;
and I loved her as we love a child.

Then she began putting on
clothes she picked up somewhere;
and I hated her, without knowing it.

She gradually became a queen,
the jewelry was blinding . . .
What bitterness and rage!

She started going back toward nakedness.
And I smiled.

Soon she was back to the single shift
of her old innocence.
I believed in her a second time.

Then she took off the cloth
and was entirely naked . . .
Naked poetry, always mine,
that I have loved my whole life!