

RENE' WELLEK *

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In the following pages, *Theory of Literature*, Third ed. (New York : Harcourt Brace and Co., 1962), is quoted as *TL*; *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1963), as *CC*; *Essays on Czech Literature* (The Hague : Mouton, 1963), as *ECL*.

This portrait— it should be said frankly from the very outset— will be very imprecise, and while it will try to delineate certain features of the figure, will leave others in the shade. This is mainly due to the fault of the writer who does not have the tools (not even the linguistic ones) to follow Wellek into the highly varied areas of his experience and knowledge. There is, however, another less manifest reason for the indeterminateness of this portrait. While reading Wellek's numerous writings and the many that speak about him (and also reading among the writings of Wellek some perfect "intellectual portraits" of philosophers and critics) the author of these pages has felt, more than on other occasions, the enormous difficulties that one encounters in tracing an intellectual portrait of a personage of our times who has lived at the center of a rich interlacing of cultural experiences, of relations with often very different environments, of ideological and emotional commitments, friendships, loyalties, polemics in the midst of profound tensions. And he has perceived that in order to fill the lacunae it is not enough to have approached his "subject," who have spoken with him, to have seen him living among his students and colleagues, to have felt cordial admiration and sympathy for him.

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(Nine pages on the Italian reaction to Wellek are left out.)

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Let us try to briefly delineate an "intellectual history" of René Wellek. He was born in Vienna on August 22, 1903, of parents who were not Austrian. His father Bronislav came from Prague; though an official in the Austrian administration, he felt himself to be strongly tied to his original fatherland and culture (among other things, he wrote the first biography of the composer Smetana and translated poems of Vrchlicky and of Machar into German), and he returned to Prague with his family in 1918 after the fall of the Empire. If from the side of his father the motif of attachment to national culture (accompanied by liberal and humanitarian sentiments), typical of much cultured bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, prevailed, from the side of his mother, the motif of cosmopolitanism, corresponding more than to ideological choice, to the experiences of many members of the European aristocratic classes, seemed to prevail. The daughter of a noble Prussian (of Polish origin) and of a Swiss lady of Schaffhausen, René Wellek's mother was born in Rome in 1881. In Wellek's family the Protestant religion predominated, in conformity with the sentiments of his mother and grandmother (a fact of noteworthy importance, the family being Czech.)

After finishing his studies in a Prague *gymnasium*, the young Wellek entered the Caroline University of Prague, registering in courses of English and Germanic philology. Prague was culturally very much alive as a city and the Caroline University included among its professors some figures of considerable importance. There was the great critic F. X. Salda, professor of Western literatures, who had done much to renovate the study of Czechoslovak literature, going through its tradition with a modern taste, rearranging many values and contributing to encourage the new literature of the early twentieth century.¹ The germanist Otokar Fischer was there, author of books on Kleist, Nietzsche and Heine (besides being a good translator, poet and man of the theater). He was very much interested in psychological problems (and also, among the first in Europe, in psychoanalysis) and was concerned with the reflections which the convolutions and ambiguities of the psyche have on literature even on the formal aspects of literature.² Vilém Mathesius was there, professor of English and a brilliant linguist, founder a few years later of the Linguistic Circle of Prague. The young Wellek, attracted by the most "modern" among his teachers, already from that

1. Wellek writes extensively on Salda in *ECL*, pp. 179-87. 2. Wellek has written on Fischer and his works in Czech periodicals and, on the occasion of his death, in a profile for the *Slavonic Review*, XVII (1938), pp. 215-18.

time felt an instinctive aversion for those studies of a positivistic nature, cultivated in the more retrogressive academic sectors of the University. He also showed marked interest for the technical, linguistic and stylistic study of the literary work (following the powerful, inspiring example of Mathesius) and for the study of philosophical problems (the Kantian and Herbartian tradition was prevalent in Prague, but Masaryk had introduced some of the themes of Anglo-Saxon philosophy). He made two trips to England for research and study in 1924 and 1925, and, in June 1926, he received his doctorate, writing a thesis on *Thomas Carlyle and Romanticism*. In the meantime, he had already begun to contribute to Czech literary journals, with articles and reviews on Shakespeare, Byron, Shelley, Vrchlicky, Heine, Tennyson, and on the *History of English Literature* by Legouis and Cazamian.

Wellek spent 1927 in England, doing research in the British Museum on what was to become his Habilitation thesis: *Immanuel Kant in England*. In September of 1927 he left for the United States to become a Procter Fellow at the Princeton Graduate School. His aim was to specialize in English literature and to return to Prague as a professor of that subject. He therefore followed the courses of Thomas M. Parrott, Charles G. Osgood, R. K. Root, and Morris W. Croll. This latter man (who concerned himself with stylistics and metrics, had written a study on the prose of *Euphues* and a little later was to publish a very fine study on the style of English Baroque prose) made a most vivid impression on the young Czech. Still in 1960 Wellek recalled, with appealing irony, Croll's efforts to teach him the so-called musical theory of English metrics (today generally declining in popularity both with critics and with linguists): "When I was a student at Princeton thirty years ago, one of my teachers, Morris Croll, who was, incidentally, one of the finest students of stylistics... (especially seventeenth century prose style), in this country taught me musical metrics. But I was always restive..."³ On the cultural atmosphere of the studious and secluded Princeton there blew the gentle breezes of the New Humanism, the literary movement of Babbitt and More, who had retired to live in his neoplatonic hermitage precisely at Princeton. An aristocratic vision of culture was typical of the New Humanism, together with a violent polemic against all of the literary movements of the nineteenth century, from romanticism, to

3. R. Wellek, "Closing Statement," in *Style in Language*, edited by Th. A. Sebeok, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960, p. 414. Cf. also *TL*, pp. 224-26.

naturalism, determinism, and to scientific positivism. They had a classicistic—in Eliot's sense—and severely ethical conception of man and experienced a sense of revolt against the new industrial and democratic civilization, and a strong need to escape to a more serene and ordered world than the turbulent one in which they lived. The young Wellek, who had felt the touch of similar breezes in Prague (the Protestant and liberal tradition founded on a strictly ethical conception of education and self-control, but above all—in literature and in historical studies—a strong impatience with the pedantry and worship of facts typical of the positivists), showed some interest in the neohumanistic milieu.⁴

Since, for the moment, there was no opening for a professor of English at the University of Prague, Wellek decided to remain in the United States for two more years, as an instructor of German at Smith College (1928–29) and at Princeton (1929–30).⁵ Then in 1930, he returned to his homeland. He left behind himself a country rocked by a very grave social, economic and ideological crisis and a literary milieu that was stirred by deep polemics; the volume-manifesto of the neohumanists *Humanism and America*, edited by Norman Foerster and with essays by Foerster, Babbitt, More, T. S. Eliot, etc. came out precisely in the year 1930; and also the counter-volume, *The Critique of Humanism*, edited by C. Hartley Grattan, with essays by critics who adhered to Marxism or, at any rate, who were more interested in social problems, like Edmund Wilson and Lewis Mumford, appeared; and in that same year the volume of the “Southern Agrarians,” the first nucleus of the New Critics, *I'll Take My Stand*, was published.

After a new sojourn in London, Wellek returned to Prague in 1930, taking with him the manuscript of the book *Immanuel Kant in England* (published in 1931 by Princeton University Press), which permitted him to become Docent of the history of English literature at the University of Prague. During the preceding years, he had only sent to Prague journals a brief article on English

4. Later on, Wellek tried to indicate the bond that kept the various antipositivistic movements united (assigning to Croce a preeminent place, of chronological anteriority) in the Yale lecture of 1946: “The Revolt against Positivism in Recent European Literary Scholarship,” in *CC*, pp. 256–81 (to be completed for the American part with certain pages of the essay “American Literary Scholarship,” in *CC*, particularly pp. 304–305. in which Wellek advances certain criticisms of the New Humanism).

5. “Comparative Literature Today,” in *Comparative Literature*, XVII (1965), p. 326.

universities and another, also brief, on the differences between American and Czechoslovak universities. But now, he came back into full touch with the culture of his own country. At the University, as a teacher of English, he presided over the instruction of that language; he published many articles on English and American literature in reviews and newspapers (on the medieval poem *The Pearl*, on the poetic theories of Wordsworth and Coleridge, on Blake, Oscar Wilde, Yeats, T. S. Eliot, on Joyce and on many contemporary novels;) he also translated into Czech novels of Conrad and D. H. Lawrence. But above all, and this was his most important intellectual adventure, he came into direct contact with the Linguistic Circle of Prague, founded by Mathesius in 1926, which was in full bloom at that time. Roman Jakobson had brought the ideas of the Russian formalists to Prague; Jan Mukarovsky had amply developed them in the domain of literary theory, conceived by him to be a part of the general theory of signs (semiotics), and had also faced the problem of the relations between literature and society and of literary history as being a working area which should be kept strictly distinct from criticism. Wellek followed all of those discussions with interest but greeted Mukarovsky's theories with some reservations,⁶ and when he contributed to the *Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague* (VI [1936], pp. 173-91) an essay dedicated precisely to the problem of literary history ("The Theory of Literary History") he tried to take a median position between the extreme demands of the formalists and the historiographical ideas of the historical tradition.

In 1935, after spending five years in Prague, Wellek moved to London, as a lecturer of Czech language and literature at the School of Slavonic Studies of the University of London. His studies on Czech literature or on the relations between Czech and English literature mainly date back to this period. His conference at the School on February 25, 1936, "The Cultural Situation in Czechoslovakia" (in *Slavonic Review*, XIV [1935-36], pp. 622-38), is important in offering an overall view of the culture of his country (the organization of schools, the formation of cultural *élites*, the diffusion of mass culture, etc.). He

6. An echo of these perplexities in *ECL*, p. 190; *TL*, pp. 200 and 339; *CC*, pp. 48-49, 279-80. As is known, Mukarovsky later embraced Marxism (eliciting harsh comments from Wellek; Cf. *ECL*, pp. 195-97). On the entire question of the Prague Circle Wellek has written a long article, "The Literary Theory and Aesthetics of the Prague School," in *Michigan Slavic Contributions* (ed. L. Matejka), Ann Arbor, 1969, recently published.

intended to remain in London for a few years to conduct research for his book *The Rise of English Literary History*, which was in preparation (a note on the subject: from a theoretical discussion on the possibility of writing a literary history, Wellek passes to an examination of the literary histories already written, beginning with seventeenth century England). Wellek's contacts with Prague periodicals continued to be very frequent, and in addition to the article on the *Travaux* he published essays and reviews, generally on English topics, in various journals of his city.

In England, Cambridge was the most lively center of literary discussions. I. A. Richards (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, 1924; *Coleridge on Imagination*, 1934) had already left Cambridge, however, and after a series of trips and a sojourn in China, he was about to establish himself in the other Cambridge, across the Atlantic. His young disciple, William Empson (*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 1930; *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 1935) had also fallen victim to the *mal d' Orient*, and desired a change of air. Both, at any rate, had left profound marks on the Cambridge literary scene. And both, because of the importance they attributed to poetic language and to verbal analysis, had the power of attracting the interest of Wellek, who was fresh from the linguistic experiences of Prague. However, he could accept neither the experimental psychology of Richards nor the enthusiasm for Marxism and psychoanalysis which permeated Empson's second book. Moreover, there were F. R. Leavis (*New Bearings in English Poetry*, 1932; *Revaluation*, 1936) and the whole group gathered around the review *Scrutiny*, founded by Leavis in 1932. The new poetic taste elaborated by Eliot and the technique of verbal analysis developed by Richards were combined in the criticism of Leavis and gave excellent results, allying themselves with a strong ethical sense of Arnoldian provenience.

Wellek referred to the work of Richards, Empson, and Leavis (evidently the most interesting critics in the English panorama for him) in an article for the review of the Prague Linguistic Circle, *Slovo a Slovesnost*, III [1937], pp. 108-21. But he also had more direct contacts with Leavis. When *Revaluation* was published, he wrote a brief article entitled "Literary Criticism and Philosophy," which appeared in *Scrutiny* together with Leavis' answer (cf. *Scrutiny*, V [1937], pp. 375-83). While acknowledging Leavis' many merits, Wellek accused him of using terms without rigorously defining them and of expressing

unsubstantiated judgments. Leavis answered (Cf. now *The Common Pursuit*, London, Penguin Books, 1966, pp. 211-22) making a distinction between criticism and philosophy. He evidently intuited the presence of a *fahrender Scholast*, the subtle logician, in the young Czech, and he proclaimed: "Dr. Wellek is a philosopher." He added that "words in poetry invite us, not to 'think about' and judge, but to 'feel into' them and 'become'—to realize a complex experience that is given in the words." In spite of this polemical exchange, Wellek was later invited to contribute to *Scrutiny* with some reviews. One must not forget, however, that among the English critics who attracted Wellek's attention, next to those of Cambridge, there was the Oxford critic F. W. Bateson, author in 1934 of an important book, *English Poetry and the English Language*. Bateson's conception of a literary history marked by linguistic rather than social changes, and his reevaluation of Baroque English poetry must have appeared to Wellek in some respects closer (even if independent) to some of the experiences of the Russian and Czech critics.

The years of sojourn in England were also those in which Wellek felt himself to be most directly involved in political life. While Hitler fanned the flames on the question of the Sudeten, and German propaganda aired dusty nationalistic and racial myths, Wellek wrote an article for the journal *German Life and Letters*, II (October 1937), pp. 14-24, on "German and Czechs in Bohemia" now in *ECL*, pp. 71-80; cf. also the review to K. Bittner, "Deutsche und Tschechen," in *Slavonic Review* XVI [1937-38], pp. 481-84), in which he defended the peaceful and liberal policy of his country toward its racial minorities. There are other studies connected with the political atmosphere, of a literary though unusual, character for Wellek, such as the extensive one on "Bohemia in English Literature" (1937, now in *ECL*, pp. 81-147) in which he patiently reconstructs the image of Bohemia entertained by the English through the centuries.

The Munich episode (September 1938) was a serious blow for Wellek. Chamberlain's concession filled him with indignation. The myth of Masaryk had been brutally broken into pieces. "I could not think of returning to Prague," he says, "nor of staying in England after the Munich capitulation. In June of 1939, I emigrated permanently to the United States."

In America Wellek established himself, first as a lecturer and then as professor of English, at the University of Iowa, where Norman Foerster, the

neohumanist scholar, was the director of the School of Letters. Among his colleagues, there was a congenial friend, Austin Warren. A scholar of English and American literature, author of several fine essays (afterwards gathered in the volume *Rage for Order*, 1948), Warren had been one of Babbitt's students and had met More at Princeton, but had then moved to a position that was very close to T. S. Eliot's and to that of the New Critics (very much on the rise in those years and already established in some important universities). One of the advantages of being at the University of Iowa was that of having at one's disposal a good journal, the *Philological Quarterly*, which was published there; Wellek wrote many articles and reviews for it. The war was shaking the world and deeply upsetting consciences. But the School of Letters of the University of Iowa was an oasis of peace and study, "a real intellectual community."⁷ As Wellek recounts:

The conflict between literary history and criticism was very acute and even bitter at Iowa. I still remember vividly how I and Austin Warren met a highly respected member of the department, a good historical scholar, and tried to suggest to him that, in writing about Milton and the English essay in the seventeenth century, he had also written some criticism. He turned red in his face and told us that it was the worst insult any body ever had given him. I was, by conviction and in the academic constellation of the place and time, classed as a critic and I collaborated, under Norman Foerster's editorship, in a volume, *Literary Scholarship*, published in 1941 by the University of North Carolina Press,.....Mr. Warren (author of the chapter on "Literary Criticism") and myself were somewhat dissatisfied with the volume. We felt that we sailed under false colors. We could not endorse the neo-humanistic creed of the editor, though we shared most of his objections to current academic practices and enjoyed teaching the humanities courses which he devised. Homer, the Bible, Greek tragedy, Shakespeare, and Milton were taught to freshmen and sophomores in compulsory courses long before the present vogue of far-ranging world literature courses. I myself taught a course in the European novel, which started with Stendhal and Balzac and reached Proust and Mann via Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.....

7. Austin Warren, Preface to *Rage for Order*, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

Theory of Literature was thus born as an attempt to reach a synthesis between the literary conceptions that Wellek had brought with him from Europe and the American ones elaborated in the circles of the New Critics, of which Austin Warren acted as bearer. Notwithstanding common aims, the differences between the two existed and were perceptible.⁸ They did not try to conceal them and specified in the preface which of the two was principally responsible for the individual chapters. But it is clear that of the two, Wellek held the predominant position, as is also indicated by the order in which the two names appear on the title page; one might infer that the conceptual structure, the very ordering of the chapters (with the distinction between "extrinsic methods" and "intrinsic study" of literature that caused so many discussions), were his. The last chapter of the book (already published separately in 1947), on "The Study of Literature in the Graduate School," contained an analysis of the serious defects in the programs and methods of study of literature in the United States and a number of suggestions for reform. It is a sign not only of the success of the book, but also of its profound harmony with the preoccupations and conceptions that were victoriously spreading in America, that in the second edition (1956) the authors judged that they could now omit it, "partly because some of the reforms suggested there have been accomplished in many places."⁹

In the summer of 1946, Wellek moved from the University of Iowa to the far more prestigious Yale University. From 1947 to 1959 he was Chairman of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, but also, at the same time, director of the comparative literature program. In 1952, he was nominated Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature; in 1960 he became chairman of the

8. The third chapter, written by Warren, has a strong "Eliotic" tone, which seems to distinguish it from the rest of the book. And it is not by chance that the eighth chapter, on the relationships between psychology and literature, was written by Warren (although it may contain much information obtained, almost certainly, by Wellek). To have proof of the differences between the two critics, it is necessary only to compare two of their essays on the same subject: R. Wellek, "The Criticism of T. S. Eliot," in *Sewanee Review*, LXXIV [1956], pp. 398-443; A. Warren, "Eliot's Literary Criticism," in *Sewanee Review*, LXXIV [1966], pp. 272-92; that of Wellek is an attempt to systematize Eliot's ideas and to carefully evaluate his work as a critic; Warren's article is a fragmentary discussion (also written in different moments between 1940 and 1966), fully conformable to the thought of its author ("I can no longer quote, from his criticism, without dubiety whether I am paraphrasing him or expressing my own views.") with the explicit denial of any systematization.

Department of Comparative Literature, newly founded as an independent unit, and this is the position he still holds today. To describe his activity at Yale, still extremely intense, would be a long undertaking. It is enough to mention Wellek's activity as a professor of research, the many comparative literature theses prepared under his direction, his formation and selection of many young scholars, the always increasing influence exercised on the organisation of studies at Yale and other universities, the ever more frequent visits to various places in the United States and Europe for courses, conferences, and congresses, the work of direction and consultation engaged in for many authoritative periodicals (*Comparative Literature*, *Philological Quarterly*, *PMLA*, *Studies in English Literature*, *The Slavic Review*, etc.), the part he had in the organisation of the "American Comparative Literature Association" (of which Wellek served as President from 1961 to 1964). The general educational climate, in the meantime, had decidedly changed; many of the ideals propounded by Wellek had begun to be realized (if anything, there were new and different dangers): "In my own experience of the American academic scene, the contrast between the Princeton of 1927-28, where even eminent scholars seemed hardly aware of the issues of criticism, and Yale of 1962, where criticism and its problems are our daily bread and tribulation, is striking" ("Philosophy and Postwar American Criticism," in *CC*, p. 317).

During this whole period, the best energies of Wellek as a scholar were dedicated to the composition of his imposing *History of Modern Criticism*, which has now reached the completion of the fourth of the five or six contemplated volumes. Again there occurs a shift of interest from "theory" to "history". The plan of the *History* is ambitious (the tracing of the history of criticism between 1750 and 1950, in Germany, France, England, Italy, Russia, the United States and Spanish-speaking countries) and is carried forward with great energy.

The evolution of Wellek's intellectual history seems to obey the influence of two contrasting forces, that of attachment to his own roots (Czechoslovakia) and that of attraction toward cultural traditions of other countries (cosmopolitanism). Let us attempt to follow the two trails.

Czechoslovakia for Wellek is first of all a place of private memories, life experienced, friendships, etc. And I will not attempt to penetrate into this

