

PROSPECT AND RETROSPECT *

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Speaking on such a festive occasion, feeling as I do gratitude to those who spoke so warmly about me and my work, I could easily be tempted to indulge in reminiscences which, at my age, will inevitably sound nostalgic, regretful, even sentimental. I don't want to think of myself, however as dead and buried. An old friend of mine who occasionally visits this library from out of town wrote to me that he had "the shock of my life in seeing books of yours exhibited in the Sterling Library. I thought you might have died — and with no obituary, on account of the newspaper strike." He was reassured when he looked closer. I myself want to think of this occasion as a stimulus to finishing my big project of *A History of Modern Criticism*. Two more volumes are to come: the fifth, devoted entirely to English and American criticism in the first half of this century; the sixth and last, to the continent of Europe. The fifth is far advanced. Some of you will have seen the articles on individual critics scattered over several periodicals which will be used in an updated and revised form: on A. C. Bradley, on Virginia Woolf, on Ezra Pound, on T. S. Eliot, on I. A. Richards, on F. R. Leavis, to list those devoted to English critics, and on Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, Edmund Wilson, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, and William K. Wimsatt, to which I shall add a speech reflecting and defending the methods of my *History* and a general essay on "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra" recently published in *Critical Inquiry*. An essay on Allen Tate written three years ago has been lying about with a German publisher of a two-volume collection of papers on all the main figures of English and American literary theory from Sir Phillip Sidney to Northrop Frye.

* A Speech on the Occasion of the Celebration of the Seventy-fifth Birthday of René Wellek, Delivered at the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, on September 28, 1978.

The sixth volume is far less advanced, but I have written articles on Benedetto Croce, on the Classical Tradition in France, on Charles Dubos, on Albert Thibaudet, on Friedrich Gundolf and his erstwhile pupil Max Kommerell, on the three great Romance scholars who wrote in German, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, and Erich Auerbach, on Emil Staiger, on the Russian Formalists, on Modern Czech Criticism, and on the so-called Prague School. Many gaps have to be filled. I have, for instance, nothing written yet on Spanish criticism. Thus my study and writing are planned for several years ahead. I also have other commitments and plans. For years I have promised to bring out a new revised edition of my first book *Immanuel Kant in England*, which was published by the Princeton University Press in 1931 but was printed in Prague. It contains many misprints as it was set by printers ignorant of English. My own English was then still deficient and there are errors in the transcripts from manuscripts I had trouble in deciphering. Since then I have also turned up a fair amount of new information which I hope to incorporate. I am also less confident of the strongly Hegelian interpretation of Kant to which I was then committed. Most of the book I have retyped in a revised version, but I am still stymied by the chapter on Coleridge. The new edition of Coleridge from the Princeton University Press, both of the *Notebooks* and of the collected writings, is far from complete. I will not see its completion in my lifetime, I fear. Without the full text of the *Notebooks* and without access to the so-called *Magnum Opus* still unprinted, a completely satisfactory account of Coleridge's relations to Kant cannot be given. I cannot be confident that I shall accomplish everything I plan. There is always the proviso: God willing.

When I look back on my work I see today how clearly it reflects the changes in literary scholarship and criticism which occurred during the fifty-four years of my writing life. When in 1922 I came to the Czech University in Prague to study Germanic philology, I was confronted with the then prevalent type of philological and historical scholarship, mainly inherited from the German tradition with its roots in Romanticism, implying a glorification of the dim Teutonic and Slavic past and of the Middle Ages. The Professor of Germanic philology, Josef Janko (1869-1947), lectured on Gothic vocalism in the first semester and on Gothic consonantism in the second. I came from a *Gymnasium* where I had learned to parse and translate Latin and some Greek but had not the foggiest idea about phonetics. I could not distinguish a dental from a labial. The Professor of German literature, Arnost Kraus (1859-1943), gave a

seminar on the *Minnesänger*, patiently going through every poet, in the Manesse Manuscript, telling the biography of every poet, the stanzaic form and the analogues of every poem. Reading the *Nibelungenlied* in Middle High German, he was much concerned with the exact route the company took down the Danube to their doom at Etzel's court. In another seminar Professor Kraus distributed letters he had collected from castles and archives in Bohemia, written by more or less well-known German and Austrian writers and had us edit them: we had to transcribe them from the original, which he entrusted to us freely, ascertain the addressee, the date, explain allusions, and so on. I got a fine letter of Christoph Martin Wieland, the eighteenth-century rococo poet, and one by August von Platen, the early nineteenth-century classicist. It was good exercise: it let you loose in the library.

For a time I also attended the seminar of Professor August Sauer, then the great light of the German University. I remember having to write a report on a proclamation supposedly written by Napoleon from Elba concocted by the German pamphleteer and romantic Josef Görres, and being commended that my paper was so thorough and exhaustive that "no grass can grow after Wellek." It was an ambiguous compliment, and even then my attitude toward this kind of scholarship was ambiguous, as it has remained all my life.

I found rather what I wanted in a younger Professor of German literature, Otakar Fischer (1883-1938), who had written books on Heinrich von Kleist and Nietzsche. He was a brilliant lecturer mainly concerned with the psychology of his favorite figures in German literature: his book on Heine, unfortunately buried in the Czech language, grew out of a seminar I attended. In 1908 he had been one of the first (or possibly the very first) literary scholar who had used psychoanalysis for the interpretation of a literary work: the dreams in Gottfried Keller's novel *Der grüne Heinrich*.

In 1924 Fischer founded the new review *Kritika* together with F. X. Salda (1867-1937), and there I published my very first article, severely criticizing the Czech translation of *Romeo and Juliet*: a bold move for a young man as the translator, J. V. Sládek, was a revered poet and his translations from Shakespeare considered masterpieces. Salda was the dominant figure in Czech literary criticism since the 1890's who had fought the battles for Symbolism and all forms of modernism and who had preserved the allegiance of even the youngest avant-garde poets by his sympathy for everything new and revolutionary. During the

First World War he had been appointed Professor of Western Literatures at the University (though a freelance journalist), and he still lectured on French literature, reluctantly, casually, even grumpily, obviously considering his duties at the University distractions from his writing. Though I admired his early writings I was disappointed by his performance in the lecture room and soon gave up visiting him in his apartment as he was surrounded by a coterie of young men and pontificated in an overbearing manner I found repellent.

Then there was Václav Tille (1867-1937), Professor of Comparative Literature, a subject then flourishing in the Slavic countries, which was conceived largely as comparative folklore, thematology, *Stoffgeschichte*. Tille had written successful fairy-tales himself and considered all oral literature to be descended from upper-class literature. He had an amazing memory for themes and plots and was also a dreaded theater critic who would retell the story of a play to make it sound utterly ridiculous and absurd. He was a witty man, basically nihilistic in his views of scholarship and criticism. Still, I sympathized with his elaborate refutation of the determinism of Hippolyte Taine and his general skepticism about causal explanation in literary studies.

Finally there was Vilém Mathesius (1882-1945), the Professor of English who later became the founder and President of the Prague Linguistic Circle. He had been an early proponent of descriptive linguistics, of which I knew nothing at that time. But I knew his solid handbooks on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English literature and attended his lectures and seminars in which he expounded the history of older English literature soberly, descriptively. His literary taste was determined by his admiration for Shaw and H. G. Wells; the tradition of the realistic English novel as his general outlook was empirical, concerned with the cultural and ethical values of the British Protestant tradition he thought would be good for his nation.

When I look back on these teachers of mine I consider myself lucky to have come to the University of Prague in a time of its flowering, when the old scholarship was changing under the impact of new tastes and the new criticism. The University of Prague, situated in the capital, allowed the collaboration of scholarship and criticism which I still feel to be the ideal solution. But I must confess that I withheld full allegiance from every one of my teachers. I was quite willing to do historical and philological research but felt strongly its limitations.

I admired Otokar Fischer immensely but drew back from his psychological and psychoanalytical concerns. I could not become a follower of F. X. Salda as I did not share his, what seemed to me uncritical search for novelty. I was quite uninterested in Tille's concern for oral literature. I could not share the view of English literature propounded or implied by Mathesius. I cared then only for Shakespeare, the Romantic and Victorian poets, and after my first visit to England in 1924 for Donne and the metaphysicals. In St. Paul's Cathedral I had seen the tomb of John Donne wrapped in his shroud and picked up an anthology of seventeenth century English poetry compiled by J. H. Massingham which impressed me deeply. I was prepared by the then newly revived interest in German and Czech Baroque poetry.

I had made one attempt to break away from Prague. In 1923 I visited Heidelberg, heard a lecture of Friedrich Gundolf and called on him. I had read *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* and his book on *Goethe* and thought that here literary scholarship was freed from pedantry and allowed bold judgments and generalizations. I shared the new enthusiasm for Hölderlin, on whom Gundolf had written perceptively. But in Heidelberg I was repelled by the atmosphere of awestruck adoration surrounding him: I realized that the unspoken demand for total allegiance and even abject subservience to the ethos and views of the George circle was foreign to my nature. I returned to Prague and shifted from German literature to English. I became the assistant to Mathesius and wrote a thesis under his direction on "Carlyle and Romanticism," mainly on his German contacts, a topic chosen defiantly to run counter to Mathesius' own predilections. I received a D. Phil. in June 1926 and spent then several months in England preparing a monograph on my new project, Andrew Marvell, whom I wanted to interpret in relation to Baroque French and Latin poetry. At that time there was little written on Marvell aside from the splendid essay by T. S. Eliot and a thin biography by Augustin Birrell. It was a great blow when I found out, at Oxford, that a new critical edition was coming out and that a large book, in French, by Pierre Legouis was in preparation. I had to postpone my plan indefinitely, as it turned out. I thus welcomed a fellowship to the United States: to Princeton University. I set foot on the soil of this country for the first time in September 1927. At Princeton I attended four seminars as if I were a graduate student (though I held a postdoctoral fellowship). For the first time in my life I had instruction in English, had to write regular papers and do prescribed

reading. I was suddenly thrown back into the type of scholarship I wanted to break away from in Prague. At Princeton at that time there was no instruction in modern literature or American literature. I was severely discouraged from taking work with G. M. Harper, the biographer of Wordsworth. Of the five teachers I had, Thomas Marc Parrott taught a seminar on *Hamlet* where we did nothing but make a line-by-line comparison of the two Quartos with the Folio. Charles Grosvenor Osgood taught a seminar on Spenser mainly concerned with sources and background. My first assignment was "Spenser's Irish Rivers," which required looking into old maps of Ireland. Robert Kilburn Root had us read Alexander Pope and with his ironic and sarcastic wit, managed to convey something of his ethos, and J. E. Brown, a younger man who died very early, expounded the ideas of Dr. Johnson with sympathy. A fellow student praised a fourth seminar I took then in addition to the usual load of three. Morris W. Croll propagated Croce's aesthetics and interpreted English lyrical poetry. He was then writing a paper on English Baroque prose. A reprint says that I persuaded him to call it Baroque (he had called it "Attic" before). But Croll had read Wölfflin and did not need me to know about Baroque. From Root and Brown I learned something about eighteenth-century criticism. From reading around I imbibed something of the critical atmosphere of the time. I read H. L. Mencken and the early Van Wyck Brooks criticizing the American business civilization. I read the American New Humanists, then much in the limelight. Later I met Paul Elmer More, who lived in Princeton; he lent me copies of the Cambridge Platonists. I heard Irving Babbitt lecture at Harvard before I returned to Czechoslovakia in June 1930. At Princeton I was impressed by eighteenth-century Neoclassicism and the new antiromantic polemics of the New Humanists, but again I cannot say that I was converted. I realize now that I was lucky in returning to escape the Depression years and I thus remained unaffected by the prevailing Marxism of that time. I had read some Marxist criticism in Prague but remained indifferent, possibly because in Czechoslovakia it was identified with the Communist party, rightly considered a tool of Stalin.

When I returned to Prague I had the manuscript of my book *Immanuel Kant: in England* more or less in shape. In my two and a half years at Princeton, at Smith, and then again at Princeton, I had developed an increasing interest in philosophy: mainly the standard British authors and the Germans, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. In Prague in my student years I had avoided

the professors of philosophy, who seemed to me uninteresting expounders of positivism. As an instructor in Princeton (1929-30) I attended a seminar on Hegel's *Logic* taught by a young Dutchman, Veltman, and Professor Ledger Wood. My thesis on Carlyle had led me to Coleridge and Coleridge led to Kant and Schelling. In the Widener Library in the summer of 1928 I discovered many totally neglected books, articles, and references to Kant in the 1770's and the early decades of the nineteenth century. Stopping over in London on my way back to Prague I read the manuscript of Coleridge's *Logic* in the British Museum and discovered, to my dismay, that it was nothing but a compilation of passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason* interspersed with passages from Moses Mendelssohn and pious reflections by Coleridge himself. My chapter on Coleridge made me the exponent of a view of Coleridge's borrowings and his position in a history of philosophy which was and perhaps is still resented.

Back in Prague I submitted *Immanuel Kant in England* as a second thesis (*Habilitation*) which was necessary to be admitted as *Docent* to lecture at the University on English literature. My topic was completely alien to Mathesius, but it testifies to his open-mindedness that he accepted it, though he required me in addition to write a paper on a medieval topic. It was then that I composed a little treatise on *The Pearl* (1933), my only excursion into medieval studies, which confronted me with problems of symbolism and theological and autobiographical interpretation which I dismissed or solved in a way which, I am told, is still convincing.

When I arrived in Prague, the Linguistic Circle had been founded during my absence. I joined it immediately and took part in its sessions. I attended a Conference on Phonology in December 1930 and met then or before Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, and the other members of that splendid group. As the new *Docent* I had to give an inaugural lecture: it was on "Empiricism and Idealism in English Literature," strongly siding with the idealist and Platonic tradition in English poetry. In the Prague years I came more and more under the influence of my older colleagues at the Circle and of their models, the Russian formalists. But again I withheld full allegiance. In a review of the Czech translation of Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* in 1934 I voiced many misgivings about the extremes of his mechanistic formalism, and in a paper on Jakobson's and Mukarovsky's history of Czech versification I questioned their views of literary

evolution. I argued for modifications of their formalism in the direction of a judgmental criticism and an interest in philosophical implications. I had read Roman Ingarden's *Das literarische Kunstwerk* (1931) and had met Ingarden at the International Congress of Philosophy in Prague in 1934.

In 1935 I was again uprooted. As prospects for a professorship at Prague were distant, I accepted an offer to become lecturer in Czech language and literature at the School of Slavonic Studies of London University. The job was paid by the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Education, and I kept my foothold at the University of Prague as the presumptive successor to Mathesius. In London I formulated my theoretical conceptions in a paper entitled "The Theory of Literary History," published in English in the sixth volume of *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* in 1936. I mention this because the paper was reproduced with little change in the volume *Literary Scholarship*, edited by Norman Foerster, in 1941 and again as the last chapter of *Theory of Literature*. I held these views and formulated them before I returned to the United States and before I knew anything about the American New Criticism.

In England I soon learned something about I. A. Richards, whose behavioristic psychology could not appeal to me, coming as I did from the Prague school and the phenomenology of Ingarden, a student of Husserl. In Cambridge in the summer of 1936 I met F. R. Leavis and some of his friends, Lionel Knights and Henri Fluchère. I sympathized with Leavis' anti-academic attitude and soon began to contribute to *Scrutiny*. I wrote also a long critical account of I. A. Richards, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis for the Czech periodical of the Prague circle (*Slovo a slovenost*). In a long letter I tried, incautiously, to persuade Leavis that in his newly published book *Revaluation* he had misinterpreted the philosophy of Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley. He printed the letter in *Scrutiny* and wrote an answer, "Philosophy and Criticism" (1937), in which he took me to task as a philosopher who did not understand that criticism is not concerned with ideas but with concrete sensitive readings. This piece has pursued me all my life: it is reprinted, without my original letter, in Leavis' *Common Pursuit* and is widely quoted. I became a straw man to knock down, though I actually agree with Leavis' general distinction between philosophy and criticism, even though I continue to object to the antitheoretical bias of much English criticism and of Leavis in particular.

In addition to my duties as lecturer in Czech, which induced me to study the Czech National Revival, English travelers in Bohemia, and the influ-

ence of Byron on the Czech romantic poet K. H. Mácha, I pursued a scheme that had emerged naturally from my preoccupation with the theory of literary history. I worked for several years in the Museum on a history of literary historiography in England. When, after the invasion of Prague by Hitler on March 15, 1939, I had to give up any thought of returning to Prague, I decided to emigrate to the United States. I secured a position in the English department of the University of Iowa through the good offices of Professor Thomas Marc Parrot. I took with me the manuscript of a book, *The Rise of English Literary History*, eventually published in 1941. Before going out to Iowa I spent six weeks in the Sterling Library in the summer of 1939, trying to finish my book. Here I met the late James Marshall Osborn and through him Maynard Mack and Louis L. Martz.

I knew only one person at Iowa and nothing of the University. I even had to look up its exact location on a map in the British Museum. But I was grateful to get a foothold in this country, which was the only one that offered a refuge from the approaching war. At Iowa I was immediately plunged into the conflict between historical scholarship and criticism. As I was appointed by Norman Foerster, the Director of the School of Letters, a staunch New Humanist, I was lined up on the side of criticism against historical scholarship. I still remember an encounter with one of the literary historians, who reacted furiously to a suggestion that he had also written some criticism. "This is the worst insult anybody ever paid me," he said, flushing deeply. Foerster that very year had brought Austin Warren from Boston University: with a few younger men we made up the "critical faction," and we composed a collective volume, *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods* (1941), to which Austin Warren contributed the chapter on criticism and I the chapter on literary history. The forties brought about the establishment of criticism as an academic subject in American universities. The text book *Understanding Poetry* by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (1938) was the main pedagogical breakthrough. R. P. Warren taught twice at Iowa as a visiting professor. At the newly founded English institute meeting at Columbia University I met Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, and W. K. Wimsatt in 1940 and 1941. I was deeply impressed by the New Criticism, but again I remained an outsider who had come with different preconceptions. Austin Warren and I felt that we had sailed under false colors when contributed to a book edited by Norman Foerster. We formed the project of writing a book on *Theory of*

