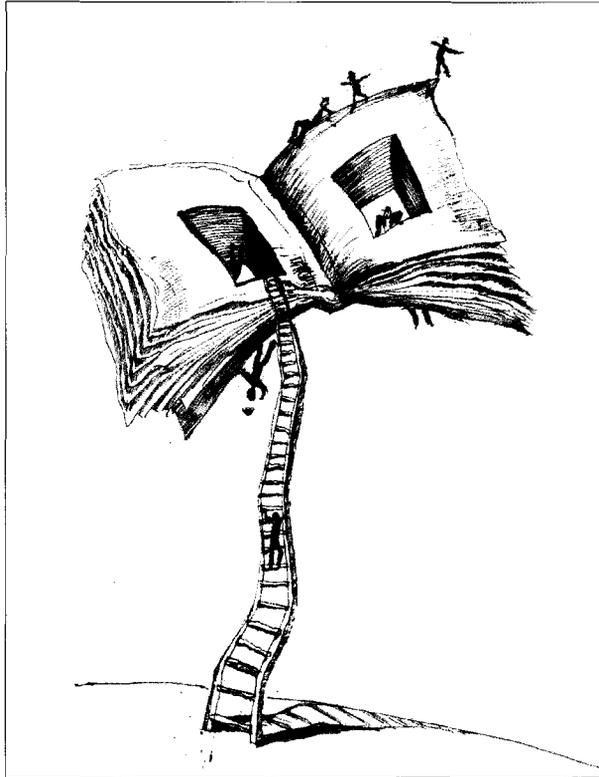


Coleridge and the Battle of Waterloo

Critical Theory Among the English

by George Watson



There is a story told about the late Roland Barthes. Once, in his Paris seminar on critical theory, a British visitor bravely remarked that something he had just said sounded rather like a point made by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*. An embarrassed silence followed. Then Barthes, in his ponderous voice, spoke: “One can never be sure what is not to be found in the writings of the Anglo-Saxons.”

The story is illustrative. If the British have no great reputation as theorists in the present age, whether in continental Europe or the United States, it is because there is a damning feeling that, having dedicated themselves to empiricism with Locke’s *Essay* of 1690, if not earlier, they are naturally hostile to theory. It is a view contradictory in itself, since empiricism was plainly a theory, good or bad; Locke and his successors argued against a lively opposition; and whatever the merits of that long argument, it does not suggest theoretical incuriosity. On the other hand, there is a healthy suspicion that English theorists may occasionally have got there first, and that an insular civilization is puzzlingly unsynchronized with its neighbors. It is

George Watson, who is a Fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge, is the author of The Literary Critics, The Certainty of Literature, and British Literature since 1945, and general editor of the New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature.

neither old-fashioned nor new-fashioned—just odd. As Frank Kermode has recently remarked, William Empson in his *Structure of Complex Words* (1951) anticipated Deconstruction by a whole generation.

That is a suspicion worth encouraging: it is often, though not always, right. English criticism began with theory, it is easily forgotten, its first notable work, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apologie for Poetrie*, being composed as early as the 1580’s. That makes literary theory a lot older in England than literary history. If the earliest notable work of literary history in the language was Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* (1779-81)—the earliest, at all events, still read for its original purpose—then theory in England is two centuries older than literary history. Coleridge’s *Biographia*, too, is plainly a work of theory, which makes the alleged modernity of critical theory hard to fathom. In the days when I haunted theoretical classes in Paris, some 30 years ago and more, and critical conferences in the United States and elsewhere, it was always assumed that literary history was a traditional activity and critical theory the latest thing, and as a literary historian I was expected to stand before it humble and amazed, uncomplainingly accepting the title of a traditionalist. The trouble was that I knew too much literary history to do any such thing.

So let the word go forth. The literary history of vernacular

literatures is a highly recent activity of the Western mind. It is late 18th century. Literary theory, by contrast, is ancient. It has been there since Plato and Aristotle, even if its life over two thousand years is less than continuous. Though more literate than numerate, I cannot accept that 200 years is longer than 2,000; and in light of all that, Roland Barthes' disinclination to read Coleridge takes on a new and sinister aspect. It was not just ignorance, one suspects, but willful ignorance. There have been theorists in recent years who have refused to read the masterpieces of past ages because they were afraid, and with reason, that their own self-image of modernity would be tarnished if they did.

And yet there is something idiosyncratic about British theory, and the real charge is not insularity. An island is wide open to commerce and ideas, after all; for centuries it was easier to travel by sea than by land. Sir Philip Sidney borrowed many of his ideas from Italian humanists of his own century; Coleridge, who was the first English man of letters to know German and to feel the impact of German philosophy, probably read Kant as early as 1798-99, when he spent nine months in Germany, mainly at Göttingen, less than 20 years after Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1781. That is likely to be earlier than any study of Kant by a French man of letters.

The *Biographia Literaria* is a very German book, in its metaphysics, and most of it was written in the summer of 1815, at the time of the Battle of Waterloo, when an Anglo-German army under Wellington and Blücher overthrew Napoleon. It may not be wholly fanciful to see a connection. Coleridge loathed Napoleon. In his tenth chapter, he called him a culture and his rule a consummate despotism, and he plainly associated that despotism with the bloodthirsty ideals of Jacobinism and the French reign of terror. But then by 1815 he was a Tory eager to understate his own youthful revolutionary enthusiasms, and the *Biographia* is a rootedly conservative book, dark with fears of a revived Jacobinism. "The poison-tree is not dead, though the sap may for a season have subsided to its roots." His mind by then was darkly haunted by the dire effects of abstract speculation and arrogant nationalism.

So critical theory can be conservative: a fact seldom mentioned in our times; and it is perhaps not wholly coincidental that the summer that saw the death of revolutionary France at Waterloo unwittingly saw the death of critical theory. Coleridge's *Biographia* started nothing in its century, at home or abroad. To his deep regret, it failed; it was, so to speak, his Waterloo. It took two years even to publish, because of printing accidents; and when it appeared in 1817, it was neglected by the reviews and failed to sell. Even Wordsworth, its hero, disliked it and claimed not to have read it through, and there is evidence that the Victorians did not admire it. In a letter of December 1843, John Ruskin revealed that he did not know of its existence. So the book marks the beginning of a silent century of critical theory; and more died at Waterloo, it might be said, than the Grand Army of Napoleon.

What was it? The question cannot be easily answered, and no answer is likely to concern English criticism alone. Critical theory had been a continuous activity in 18th-century France and England, among the *philosophes* and elsewhere. But it had been an amateur tradition of drawing-room conversation, where the critical theories of Addison, Diderot, or Sir Joshua Reynolds were discussed over tea cups and glasses of claret. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* shows that happening. It

was emphatically not an academic tradition, anywhere in Europe.

Coleridge, too, it is easy to forget, was an amateur. He had left Cambridge without a degree, as a young revolutionary, and was never to settle long into any profession except journalism. He had already witnessed Napoleon's first defeat, in 1814, when he began to write the *Biographia*, and by then he may have associated Enlightenment ideas of critical theory with the discredited ideas of the French Revolution. But his book deals more largely with the new German school, with Kant, Schlegel, and Schelling—professional philosophers and critics whom he rightly saw as the new masters of critical debate. They were not men of the drawing-room but of the lecture-platform and the learned journal, and they had philosophized criticism in a way that made the Enlightenment tradition suddenly look facile and glib.

It is notable, however, that the silent century of critical theory that Coleridge unintentionally began in England was silent in France and Germany too. The German tradition had plenty of critical methodology in the 19th century, as in Dilthey, and some brilliant oddities like Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872); but a continuous tradition of critical theory is nowhere to be found, and the British silence is a European silence. The reasons can only be guessed at. One possibility is that the marriage Coleridge had tried to arrange between amateur criticism and professional philosophy in the new German style looked too awkward to work more than spasmodically. It lacked, inevitably, an audience and a market. The *Biographia* is not a book for the academy, and C.S. Lewis used to remark that if it were submitted as a doctoral thesis, he would have to fail it. No very profound admirer of the doctoral process, Lewis may have meant that whimsically, as a compliment; but it signalizes the important truth that it is a misshapen work and highly uneven in tone, sometimes anecdotal and sometimes scholastic and obscure, at once modest and self-justifying, timid and bold. Its own century, which was skeptical of self-revelation and baffled by German academic philosophy, simply could not take it in.

The silent century of critical theory ended first in Britain. In 1923, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards issued their collaborative work *The Meaning of Meaning*, to be followed in short order by Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) and *Practical Criticism* (1929), which were internationally influential and led to his appointment at Harvard in 1939. So England led the world in critical theory, for the first and last time, between the two world wars, and it was in England that critical theory became an academic activity, though it was at first confined to Cambridge. That is what led to the lack of synchrony between England and its European neighbors: continental indifference to British critical theory in the 1930's. When Saussure became fashionable among French critics in the 1950's and later, some 40 years and more after his death, it was assumed that structuralism was something the British had failed to notice. In fact he had already been dismissed by Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*, a whole generation earlier; and by the 1950's, his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916) had long since been absorbed into the linguistic theories of the English-speaking world. It was neglected, by then, not because it was avant-garde but because it was old hat. Our understanding of modern critical theory has never recovered from a failure to understand that simple fact; critical theory was suddenly supposed to be a French thing, and soon after a French-American thing; and it now survives better in the United States than in

France. When ideas die, a wit once remarked, they go to America. With the new age of international conferences on critical theory, nobody thought Sir Philip Sidney had anything much to do with the matter, or even Coleridge or I.A. Richards. I suggest it is time we did.

As Roland Barthes said, one never knows what is not to be found in the writings of the Anglo-Saxons. Consider, for example, a book by a learned Dutch theorist, Douwe Fokkema, *Theories of Literature in the Twentieth Century* (1977), where I am politely attacked for having suggested that one can know what terms like romanticism and tragedy mean without being able to define them. That is a claim I made in *The Study of Literature* (1969), a book that regrettably appeared in the same year as Wittgenstein's posthumous masterpiece *On Certainty*, which I was consequently unable to use. Wittgenstein, being Viennese Jewish, hardly counts as an Anglo-Saxon, even if he spent most of his adult life in England. But his point, in the notes on certainty he scribbled in Cambridge shortly before his death in April 1951, was that all thinking beings possess certain knowledge and need it, since even their uncertainties depend on certainties; that one understands words less by verbal definition than by use; and that in any contested case, it is the instance that takes priority over definitions. "What would get judged by what here?" as his famous challenge in *On Certainty* put it. To give a blindingly simple literary instance: if a proffered definition of tragedy were to exclude *King Lear* or admit *As You Like It*, one would not reallocate the plays but scrap the definition. *Lear* is known with certainty to be a tragedy without any definition; you judge definitions against instances, not the other way around.

The point is already in Coleridge, an author Wittgenstein is not known to have admired. "On the immediate which dwells in every man," he wrote in the *Biographia*, "all the certainty of our knowledge depends." That is a very Wittgensteinian point, using his word "certainty" to similar purpose. You cannot even begin to think without being certain of something. When you learn the two-times table at school, for example, or are told in infancy it is wrong to tell lies, you see with instant certainty that it is so. It is less an act of discovery than of recognition, like learning to walk. Science is no exception. Every experimental scientist, as a British scientist remarked some years ago, knows that he can use color-terms without first proving them to be right. That was Harold Jeffreys in *Scientific Inference* (1973). If the analytical chemist or botanist were to reject color-terms, Jeffreys argued, he could no longer report or use his own sensations. "But he knows quite well that color sensation is good enough for his purpose." In other words, scientists as well as critics assert, and rightly and with certainty assert, what they know they cannot prove: for example, that grass is green. So critics, and for that matter moral philosophers, are not different from scientists when they assert what they cannot prove. If we had to prove and agree on the foundations of knowledge of literature or morality, or of the physical sciences, we could not even begin to study such matters, still less progress in such studies. We are right, then, on occasion, to believe what we cannot define or prove.

Dr. Fokkema in his *Theories of Literature* objects to this unashamedly antidefinitional view, quoting from my *Study of Literature*, on the ground that it would "make us speechless, and the results of our investigations impervious to criticism." But surely it is the other way around. It is the uni-

versal demand for definition, or the denial of what Coleridge called "the immediate which dwells in every man," that leaves the critic speechless in the sense of being incapable of assertion. Unfortunately, it leaves him capable of talking without asserting; and that has become all too possible in an age of radical skepticism recently erected by critical theory, as anyone who has ever attended a deconstructionist lecture must know. One can say, and at enormous length, that there is nothing to be said. That was the desperate point of Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974), or *The Knell*, meaning the death-knell of Western civilization; and those who deny Coleridge's point, or Wittgenstein's, about the immediacy of knowledge are less often rendered speechless than vacuous; it is those who accept it, by contrast, who do real work. "*Travaillons sans raisonner*," says Voltaire at the close of *Candide* (1759), showing that you do not need to be an Anglo-Saxon to take the point: let us work without asking why. The critic, like the scientist and the moralist, can only work at all because he begins with certainties which he does not need to prove.

Coleridge returned to the point often. In the first chapter of the *Biographia*, for example, he praised his old schoolmaster for having shown him as a boy that poetry (no less than science) is a cognitive activity:

I learnt from him that poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own as severe as that of science; and more difficult because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive, causes.

This is as profound a remark as any ever made about poetry, but it is regrettably concise and needs to be expanded. If the logic of a poem is as severe as that of a scientific proposition, it is nonetheless severe in a wholly distinct sense—"a logic of its own"; distinct, in that it is more subtle, complex, and "fugitive," as Coleridge puts it, meaning fleeting and indefinable; partly, no doubt, because it does not characteristically deal in technical terms that are subject to verbal definition. It is not an objection to the truth of a poem, accordingly, to conclude that one cannot say what it is, just as it is not an objection to our knowledge of color or of palatal taste—knowing how to tell coffee from tea, for example, and blindfolded—that one cannot give a defining account of what one knows. Truth is wider than account-giving, in fact, and we all know more than we can say. To be unable to answer questions like "How do you know the poem means that?" or "How do you know it is good?" is not conclusive to the charge that one does not know. Dame Maggie Smith, when asked (as she often is) about the art of acting, declines to answer, replying "It is just something I do." But nobody thinks it follows from her refusal or inability to answer that she does not know how to act.

Coleridge's profound recognition of silent knowledge and its significance could be pressed further. Prunella Scales, to quote another actress, has told how she occasionally allows herself to be persuaded to give an address on the art of acting, and finds for several evenings that she cannot do it. Or consider the following instance. I know English better than French, which I speak only as a foreigner. But because I learned French late, I would be better at giving an account of its grammatical rules than those of English. On the other hand, my English is right, and reliably right, and my French is not; if asked whether a sentence is possible in English, for example, I can reply with cer-

tainty, whereas with a French sentence I could offer only a tentative and unreliable opinion. In that case, it is clear, an ability to define is not evidence of knowledge, relatively speaking, but of ignorance. Any dependence on grammatical rules is likely to be evidence of inadequate knowledge; any dependence on the rules of acting, or even an excessive consciousness of such rules, is likely to spoil a performance; anyone who needs a definition of tragedy to be sure that *King Lear* is one could have only a poor sense of plays in general and of Shakespeare in particular. Such reliance on rules is always evidence of a lack of acquaintance; and to rely on the literary definitions of others, like Northrop Frye's in his *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), is to put oneself back at the elementary rule-learning stage of acquiring a foreign language. It is no doubt knowledge, of a sort. But it is the nursery-slope of knowledge.

It is remarkable that anyone who argues in that way is likely to be thought in a state of silent desperation. Dr. Fokkema has suggested that I am left speechless: that there is nothing, if you believe that, to be said. I hope these words are living proof that this is not so. I am not left with nothing to say; and if a great actress like Maggie Smith prefers to say nothing about acting, that is not because she knows nothing. It is more likely to be because she knows too much, and knows how subtle and fugitive it is.

The word "intuition" is commonly invoked here, usually with the implication that it renders all uses of language superfluous. In other words, it is imagined that the critic is faced with the stark choice of offering definitions or saying nothing. But that is a misunderstanding. Coleridge, when he spoke of the immediacy of knowledge, meant something intuitive, but visitors like Carlyle to his home at Highgate were far from thinking him speechless. Nor did they think he was failing to assert anything. His admirers, similarly, of whom I am one, are not usually thought of as taciturn. Wittgenstein is not usually thought of as someone with nothing to say, and he was a highly antidefinitional philosopher. A belief is silent knowledge, or intuition, does not require one to believe that all knowledge is silent; there may still be plenty to be said. If the logic of a poem is subtle, complex, and fugitive, then there are subtleties to be unraveled and complexities to be disentangled. That is what criticism does; and one can believe it worth doing without believing that it does everything.

One thought, one grace, one wonder at the least Which into words no virtue can digest, as Marlowe once put it, placing the words (not very plausibly) into the mouth of Tamburlaine. He was citing the ancient principle of the grace beyond the reach of art. Like the taste of coffee, that poetic grace or excellence is known to be there even though it eludes definition; and it is because it eludes definition that so much needs to be said about it. If the matter were simple enough to be definable, one would define and pass on, which is how dull people respond to dull questions. The real critic looks, lingers, and listens, knowing that the laws of criticism are of modest scope and interest—no more than "leading strings for infants," as A.E. Housman put it in his 1911 Cambridge inaugural, "crutches for cripples and . . . straitwaistcoats for maniacs." Literature, as he knew, is beyond all laws.

That point, too, was made by Coleridge, and in the year before Waterloo. "On the Principles of Genial Criticism" (1814) makes a case for critical objectivity with lapidary simplicity, instancing not a poem, for once, but an antique statue, the Apollo Belvedere in the Vatican. The Apollo is "not beautiful

because it pleases," Coleridge argues, "it pleases us because it is beautiful." That puts the case in a nutshell. A work of art is known to be excellent, not just thought to be so—it pleases because it is beautiful, and not the other way around—and critical judgment is a kind of knowledge and not a mere response or matter of opinion.

The commonest objections to that view are not persuasive. That judgments can be wrong is no objection, since it is of the nature of objective inquiries that judgments can be right or wrong. That one can offer no sufficient grounds is no objection, since it is common, as the scientific use of color-terms illustrates, to be unable to give sufficient grounds for knowledge. That critics disagree is no objection, since experts often disagree about highly objective questions like the shape of the earth or the population of China. That other cultures would think otherwise is no objection, since there are cultures that think the earth flat rather than round, it is said, and yet round is what it is. Any knowledge, after all, requires a background of experience: the bafflement of a Hottentot before a work of classical sculpture like the Apollo Belvedere is no more significant than my ignorance of whatever arts he may possess. I should be baffled in a chemistry laboratory, for that matter, but that is no reason to doubt that chemistry is an objective inquiry. Knowledge needs knowledge, and you would no more take poetic advice from someone who has not read poems than advice about coffee from someone who is drinking his first cup. The playwright Emyln Williams used to tell how, as an Oxford freshman, he was asked about the college coffee by a fellow undergraduate after lunch. "I don't know," he replied, "I've only had tea before."

Some day, no doubt, literary studies will return to the wisdom of Coleridge and see how it helps. But his Waterloo of criticism has proved costly, and the silent century that broke a tradition of critical theory has left the literary world ignorant and theoretically credulous, over-ready to confuse knowledge with definition and easily persuaded that in literature there is nothing to be certainly known. There is a lot to be known, and Coleridge is one of those who can show how much. As Roland Barthes remarked in his Paris seminar, one can never be sure what is not to be found in the writings of the Anglo-Saxons. c

LIBERAL ARTS

PASSING THE BUCK

According to a recent edition of the *European*, doctors in Europe may soon escape the imbroglio of "mercy-killing": "The row over euthanasia may have reached a compromise in a report by the Royal Dutch Medical Association (RDMA) which calls for mercy killing candidates to end their own lives rather than rely on doctors to do it for them."

Postmodernism, Theory, and the End of the Humanities

by E. Christian Kopff



For more than a decade now, Christopher Norris has been writing clear and informed discussions of where deconstruction and other versions of critical theory in the humanities are headed. The clarity of his accounts has been a public service, since few of the philosophers and literary and cultural theorists he discusses write clearly. Stanley Corngold actually praised “Sartre’s deliberate antibourgeois refusal to write well . . . that has proven congenial to [Yale’s Paul] De Man.” They could write well if they wanted to, but that would mean giving in to the false standards of Western civilization, the capitalist, colonialist, totalizing oppressor that has given them tenure. For years Norris defended the leading writers of Critical Theory from accusations that their deconstructions of logocentric (or phallogocentric) texts from Plato to Husserl were trapping reader and text and the humanities as a whole in a Skinner box of language from which there was no escape and into which ethics and politics appeared only to be revealed as an illusion created by a specter which called itself the Will to Truth, but was in fact Nietzsche’s Will to Power. As the years went by and as each generation, lasting about two or three years in this rapidly changing world, advanced by deconstructing the hidden premises of the previous generation, it became clearer and clearer that “that way madness lies.” In a series of recent books, of which the latest is *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (1994), Norris has denounced the latest manoeuvres of the “Deconstructive Turn” to which he devoted so many informative books. Like Daddy Warbucks in *Mad* magazine’s parody of

Little Orphan Annie, our hero may have shown up “just after the nick of time.”

Theory triumphed in the humanities. Position after position, even entire departments, like Duke’s English faculty, went over to the new way of thinking. Deconstruction and feminism turned their back on philological method and archival research. Even the nod proffered these scholarly tools by the neo-Marxist New Historicism was largely, well, theoretical. The effect on the humanities in America’s colleges and universities has been impressive. In the last 20 years, majors in English and Classics have declined by about 30 percent. (History has lost 45 percent of its majors over that period.) Classics majors once scored an average of 50 points higher on the Graduate Record Exams than English majors, but no longer. (Classics’ numbers declined; English’s numbers have remained the same.) When positions in the humanities become available, deans often give them to departments in the physical or biological sciences, or to trendy social science departments, such as Ethnic Studies or Women’s Studies.

This lemming march to destruction affected not only the numbers of majors (after all, we are still teaching nonmajors English Composition and Greek Mythology), but also the moral basis of the humanities. In every society we make sense of our lives by telling not only our own story, but the story or stories of our group, our nation, our culture. The Postmodernists denounced this cultural necessity as indoctrination into an oppressive and illusory “Meta-Narrative.” They insisted that language has no relation to any sort of real world, where we live and move and have our being. We are all trapped in the fun-house of language, which shapes what we think or can think.

E. Christian Kopff is a professor of Greek and Latin at the University of Colorado in Boulder.