

Preface

Theory is a little like champagne. It can easily intoxicate, especially in large, companionable groups, and the best is often felt to be imported. Unless you are lucky enough to be French, you swallow it only if it comes from somewhere else.

On the champagne principle the English have seldom allowed much merit to their own theory, and they can even deny that there is – or ever was – any such thing. This is the first study of English critical theory, and it is meant to end an age of denial. I believe that the English – or more strictly the twentieth-century poets and critics, wherever they were born, who lived and worked in London and its neighbouring universities – stand at the source and fountain-head of modern theory, that it is they who created and defined the issues that have moved the century. Modern critical theory is English. True, the first of them – Yeats, Pound and Eliot – were born somewhere else, namely in Ireland and the United States. But they chose to leave home; like Marx and Freud they chose England to come to; and their successors – Richards, Empson and Lewis among them – who were British, constitute in diverse and highly individual ways the first school of critical theory in modern academe.

That was once internationally accepted. When Marshall McLuhan came to Cambridge from Manitoba, aged twenty-three, he wrote home in 1934 that the place had ‘an intellectual variety that not even my wildest hopes had prefigured.’ Though Richards’s atheism repelled him, he warmly embraced Eliot’s views about Christianity and industrialism. In fact they were his own, and applying for a teaching post a few years later in America he proclaimed himself the only man there thoroughly grounded in the technique of Richards, Empson and Leavis. So Cambridge was supremely a happening place for critical theory, and the world knew that it was. Wonderful to be there, it was hardly less wonderful to have been.

Long before the century began, in any case, England was theory-land in a distinctive sense. Sir Philip Sidney, Dryden and Johnson had made it a land of poet-critics. The tradition was fully realised in Coleridge, who put creative process at the heart of theory. How do poets conceive; how does conception grow into art? In England the enquiry starts early. In his first critical essay, the 1664 preface to *The Rival Ladies*, Dryden recalled a time when his play was no more than ‘a confused mass of thoughts tumbling over one another in the dark,’ as he put it, when ‘the fancy was yet in its first work, moving the sleeping images of things towards the light.’ That is to see one’s own creativity as a test-case, illuminating poetry as an act maturing over time. The tradition was widely acknowledged, as I.A. Richards’s book on Coleridge showed, and it was in Cambridge that theory-men congregated in the years between two world wars. That may be allowed to explain and even justify why that place, where I have taught for over thirty years, stands at the heart of the enterprise.

With the rise of a Franco-American school of critical theory in the 1960s, however, those origins were briskly forgotten – much as domestic champagne, at the best parties, yields place to imported. My motive here could be made to sound patriotic, but I am above all concerned with accuracy, though not above patriotism. The first duty is to get it right. There is something perverse, after all, about the English denial of a long philosophical tradition since Tudor humanism and the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century – and, for that matter, of a theoretical tradition that began so promisingly with Sidney, who died on a Dutch battlefield in 1586.

The denial is puzzling. It does not seem to involve any considered rejection of what English critics once said: it is neglect pure and simple. To reject, after all, you would have to pay attention, and the mood has long been inattentive. There is a marked disinclination to read. An Englishman who bravely told Roland Barthes, at a Paris seminar in the 1960s, that something he had just said sounded a little like Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* was shocked and amazed to hear him reply: 'One can never be sure what is not to be found in the writings of Anglo-Saxons.'

The remark was perhaps more profound than it was meant to be, and might even have been the motto of this book. English theory is surprising, and you never know what you might not find in it. It suggests, too, that Barthes had never read the *Biographia*, had no intention of reading it, and in all likelihood had never heard of it. By the 1960s the English tradition was no longer thought to be alive and breathing. All that, though impossible to justify, needs to be explained. As a puppy darts at anything that moves, however trivial, so do theorists love the excitement of sheer motion. In America it is called making waves, and by the 1960s *La Nouvelle Critique* was undeniably making them. Doubts in those days about whether it was as new as it claimed, or as unique, or of much intrinsic interest, were not supposed to be raised, at least in public. Originality is said to be the suppression of sources. Hence the age of denial.

English theory has often suffered neglect, too, through the sheer fertility of its invention, and it can be denied, paradoxically, not because it did too little but because it did (or tried to do) too many things. Grand Theory, by contrast, in the Paris style, offered a Faustian contract with knowledge, like a tele-evangelist calling for an act of faith, and you sold your soul for a total vision and an all-seeing view. It was not about specific issues like creativity, metaphor, story or metre, still less about useful-looking inventions like Basic English. Why be content with the key to one door, asked the new Mephistopheles, when there is a master-key that might some day open all the doors that there are?

Grand Theory offered to do everything, but at the ultimate cost of showing there was nothing to do. It was grandly, sweepingly sceptical, and it often involved an easy assumption that literature was a single category with a single essence or character. Jean-Paul Sartre called one of his essays *What is Literature?* Not a characteristically English question, since it sounds like one posed by a beginner. No thoughtful being is likely to ask it for long. In 1953,

in an essay on Tolstoy, Isaiah Berlin proposed a memorable metaphor drawn from the ancient Greeks: ‘The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.’ The theory men of England have been eminently foxy, and know many things. Knowledge is not all of one kind, nor is literature a single and discrete category bordered by lines like frontiers on a map. ‘Taste and see how good the Lord is,’ the Cambridge Platonist John Smith wrote, quoting the psalms. ‘To seek our divinity merely in books and writings is to seek the living among the dead.’ So knowledge far exceeds the bounds of language. Coleridge, who loved the Cambridge Platonists and praised ‘the immediate which dwells in ever man’ as an ultimate source of knowledge, thought their tradition of silent intuition owed less to Plato than to Plotinus, a pagan Greek of the third century A.D. who inspired Augustine and the Christian mystics. Whether biblical, Platonist or Plotinian, English theory was conscious for centuries of its ancient sources, and those who imagine that its fascination with the mysterious workings of creativity began with the Romantics only reveal an ignorance of its origins.

A sense of tradition, ancient and modern, was to make English theory highly sceptical of easy claims to originality, and England is not the sort of place where structuralism or semiotics can easily be passed off as the latest thing. John Locke mentioned semiotics in a famous essay of 1690, centuries before *La Nouvelle Critique* was born, and in 1934 Richards wrote a whole book about Coleridge as a semasiologist or theorist of meaning. But to acknowledge a source is to see how to surpass it. In a long autobiographical letter of March-April 1734 David Hume described his youthful dissatisfactions with ancient philosophy, ‘entirely hypothetical’ as it was, and dependent ‘more upon invention than experience.’ So philosophers, if they are wise, watch the world. As Wittgenstein would one day say: ‘Don’t think – look.’ You learn by doing and observing; and as Hume saw, it is experience above all that teaches. ‘This therefore I resolved to make my principal study, and the source from which I would derive every truth in criticism as well as in morality.’ That sounds like Berlin’s fox. The hedgehog, in its hypothetical way, imagines that somewhere there is a key that will unlock all the doors to knowledge and understanding. The fox knows better.

This book too is diverse in its sources. Some, as Hume would say, are hypothetical, some based on experience. Experience is an untidy thing, and recollection only shows how untidy. Robert Graves more than once offered me hospitality at his home in Majorca, to my delight, and often spoke of his friendship with W.H.R. Rivers shortly before his early death in 1922. I never met Eliot, though I once heard him lecture – in French, as it happens – was befriended by Richards and Empson in their later years, knew C.S. Lewis as an Oxford lecturer and then, in the last four years of his life, as a Cambridge colleague, listened to F.R. Leavis as a fellow-member of countless committees, enjoyed the company of Isaiah Berlin and Iris Murdoch over many years, knew Paul de Man as a colleague in a Swiss university, met E.P. Thompson on scattered occasions, and knew Raymond Williams for over thirty years. I never set eyes on Yeats or Pound – to begin at the beginning of the story – or,

to end at the end, on Wittgenstein. But then the book is not a memoir. It uses memory and hearsay to plug the gaps in printed sources and to enliven argument with the oddities of life.

Some years ago, in *The Literary Critics*, I was thought by some who reviewed it to be hostile to theory, perhaps because the book was avowedly confined to descriptive criticism. That meant no disrespect, though I am glad I have waited to say so, since the second half of the century has been even livelier in theories than the first. So this is a delayed sequel to *The Literary Critics*, and both books proceed critic by critic rather than school by school or theory by theory. They study individuals, not coteries. That is above all because critics are people and people are interesting.

As for hostility to theory, that is a charge that hardly needs to be answered at any length. I am neither friendly nor hostile, merely amused, enlightened and even (at times) excited. C.S. Lewis once remarked that for Sidney theory was more like a mistress than a schoolmistress, which sounds like a good idea, even in a book that promises to be sexless. At all events it is a possibility to be kept cheerfully in view.

Why, in any case, should any thoughtful mind be either for theory or against it? Theory needs to be as good as anything else, and like any other enquiry it justifies itself, or fails to justify itself, by what it does. That is not something to prejudge. If it works, it works; if not, it might suggest what could. 'Taste and see how good the Lord is.' No one is under any obligation to like a theory, or to be ashamed of disliking it. It makes its own way in the world.

No enquiry justifies itself only by saying true things, in any case, and bad arguments may advance debate no less than good ones. In fact without bad arguments, it seems likely, there would be no good ones. (It does not follow, needless to say, that all bad arguments are worth having.) That is true outside the humanities too, and those who imagine that the physical sciences have progressed from certain truth to certain truth can never have read a history of science.

And so with philosophy, theories of history and critical theory. No professional philosophers are Platonists nowadays, so far as I know, but nobody thinks that any reason to doubt that Plato was a great philosopher, even the greatest of philosophers. Understanding advances untidily on a broad front, convincing and failing to convince as it goes. Light, as Wittgenstein said, dawns gradually over the whole. It is in that sense that the theory-wars of the century are of a lively interest – much like the early dialogues of Plato or the conversations that Boswell reported in his life of Johnson. All that justifies attention. Nor is showing off necessarily to be regretted, as Boswell repeatedly demonstrates, and it is not to be denied that many famous theorists have been show-offs. It is an art that can be well done or ill done. But then those who need to agree with an author in order to admire him, or learn from him, would be well advised not to theorise at all.

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