“Critic”/“Reader”

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Some distinctions between critic and reader may be worth testing on the understanding that, for purposes of focus, these two terms are being used with fictive stringency, that they are being hypothesized.

It may be that the reciprocal relations of the “critic” and of the “reader” to the text are not only different but, in certain respects, antithetical. The critic is an epistemologist. This is to say that the distances between himself and the text are of themselves fertile and problematical. Insofar as these distances are made explicit and subject to investigation, they generate intermediate texts, or what are currently known as “metatexts.” The separation between the critic and “his” text—in what sense is it “his”?—is reflexive. It makes sensible, it dramatizes its own inhibitory or translational status. “Inhibition” and “translation” are the cardinal and kindred categories of the critic’s distancing. There are obstacles and opacities to be overcome or to be sharply delineated in the space between himself and the text. There are, conversely, translations to be made of his text into analogous or parodistic modes of statement (used neutrally, “parodistic” is a legimate notion, comprising as it does the whole range of critical restatements and interpretative parallels from punitive dismissal to mimetic enchantment). Inhibition and translation are cognate because it is the obstacle “in front of” the text which compels circumvention and transfer (“translation”), which prevents the critic’s total, exhaustive restatement and repetition of the original text. Such tautologous repetition, on the other hand, is one of the cardinal instances of “reading.”

The critic argues his distance from and towards the text. To “criticize” means to perceive at a distance, at the order of remove most appropriate to clarity, to placement (F. R. Leavis’s term), to communicable intelligibility. The motion of criticism is one of “stepping back from” in exactly the sense in which one steps back from a painting on a wall in order to perceive it better. But the good critic makes this motion conscious to himself and to his public. He details his recessional steps so as to make the resultant distance, the elucidative measure, the prescriptive perspective—distance entails “angle” of vision—explicit, responsible, and, therefore, open to argument. It is
this activation of distance between critic and object (the “text” from
which he is stepping back and which may, of course, be a painting, a
musical composition, a piece of architecture) that makes all serious
criticism epistemological. Criticism demands that we ask of and with
it: “How does perception traverse the chosen distance?” “How was
this particular distance chosen?” Examples of what is meant here are
so ready as to trivialize the implicit issue. But for the sake of initial
argument, consider the contrastive topographies, the contrastive
mappings and measurements of a historicist nineteenth-century critic
on the one hand, and of a New Critic—whose sight lines are those of
the synchronic close-up, of Mallarmé’s distance abolie—on the other.

Because it purports adequation to its object, and clarity, because the
distance established when the critic “steps back” invites analysis,
apologia, and didactic transmission to others—there are, since an-
tiquity, received methodologies and “schools” of criticism, manuals of
the art, journals in which it is exercised—criticism is simultaneously
epistemological and legislative. The point is a central one, and the
uses of critique in the Kantian idiom make it succinctly. We have said
that the critic steps back from the object of perception in order to “get
closer to it” (focus, clarity, intelligibility are factors of direct access, of
nearness to the relevant phenomenon). He establishes and argues
distance in order to penetrate. He widens or narrows the aperture of
vision so as to obtain a lucid grasp. This motion—we step back to come
nearer, we narrow our eyes to see more fully—entails judgment. Why
should this be? Because action (the critic’s motion) is not, cannot be indif-
ferent.

The point I am putting forward is not the suspect commonplace
whereby there are supposed to be no value-free, no rigorously neutral
perceptions—“suspect” because it is, at least, arguable that one’s per-
ception of the correct solution of an equation is not, except in some
quasi-mystical sense, a value judgment. No, what is meant here is
something different. The critic is an activist of apprehension. His
demarcation, his “pacing” of the elucidative distance between himself
and the “text-object” is operative, instrumental, functional. Opera-
tion, instrumentality, or function are not, cannot be indifferent. In-
difference does not act. Whether “disinterestedness” does act is one of
the questions ahead. The dynamic distancing of the critic is explicitly
intentional. All critics in action are intentionalists whose modus
operandi performs, emphatically, Husserl’s model of cognition (“to
perceive” at all is “to intend”). The critic “grasps.” He experiences and
articulates a prise de conscience. His perception is ein Vernehmen (“an
interpretative taking”). Etymologies are only naively demonstrative;
but in these three banal instances, the radical of acquisition, of sei-
zure, is obvious and illuminating. No grasp is indifferent; it assesses the worth of its object.

This allows a first rephrasing of our initial antinomy: if critics are Husserlians, “readers” are Heideggerians (but it is just this which needs to be shown).

It hardly needs saying that refusal, negative intentionality, rebuke, even ridicule are valuations in the full sense. The critic who turns away, who “overlooks” a given object, is exercising judgment. He empties, he chooses to make inert the potentially vitalized space between perception and perceived. The history of criticism is replete with lifeless, atrophied spaces, even as museums are stocked with “invisible” pictures. Each invisibility comports an accident or a history of negation. It takes positive inaction to establish, let alone sustain, a vacuum, a zone of unseeing. This inaction also is legislative. Whence a provisional truism: criticism is ordering sight. The act of critical viewing takes place in, it delimits and externalizes for argument, an intentional distance from the object. The good critic is one whose stepping back, whose “making of space,” is accountable. The good critic establishes his focal distance in a way which we too can measure, whose angles of incidence we can calibrate. His distance is one which we in turn can pace for ourselves. The underlying scheme of accountable motion is, very likely, geometrical, just as Husserl’s scheme of the intentionality and intentional logic of cognition is geometrical. But when we say “ordering sight,” when we say “placement,” when we say critique, we say “judgment.” We very nearly say, having for such assertion a mass of epistemological authority, that all clear seeing is judgment, that every perceptive motion is legislative—because it is act and motion. Can this truism be faulted or, at least, qualified in nontrivial ways? Are there orders of insight which do not “grasp”? To ask this is to suggest a second way of starting this paper, of testing its conjecture of difference.

Ordering sight (“criticism”) objectifies. To make this plain may help to remove the spurious problem of “critical objectivity.” There never has been, there never can be any objective criticism in the proper sense of the term simply because, as we have seen, indifference, nonintentionality, cannot be a property of action. To adduce the patent relativity and instability of “taste,” to cite the historicity of every aesthetic ranking, is a boringly self-evident move. What needs to be understood is the rationale, the integral structure of the arbitrariness of all acts of criticism. No two distancings can be perfectly identical: a photograph can be reproduced, a facsimile can be made of an original, but the particular photographic act—the “taking” of the picture—cannot be tautologically repeated. A given critical gymnastic—the style of “the
stepping back” from the given object—can methodize itself. It can seek to transmit its practice through didactic exemplification. We saw that there are schools and manuals of criticism. But no critical reprise, however scholastic, however servile—e.g., neo-Aristotelianism in the declining Renaissance, the feuilleton assembly lines after Sainte-Beuve, the mimes of Parisian semiotics today—is homologous with, is equivalent to the distancing which it seeks to perpetuate. Each and every act of criticism is an intentional specification. It is teleological in respect of the particular case—“this painting,” “that piece of music,” “this text.” And the category of the teleological, of that which is focused by an act of choosing volition, cannot be “objective.” It cannot be impartial or take a stance outside itself.

Ecstasy, the capacity or need to stand “outside oneself,” is a theological potential. It may be that the contrast between the teleological and the theological is a third way of phrasing the cut between “critic” and “reader.”

Active apprehension and the valuation, the normative placement of the object apprehended which it entails, have no claim to the status of independent facticity. Critical findings are historical facts. They may be psychological facts, though the notion of “psychological” remains obscure and probably unsatisfactory in this context (as I. A. Richards came to admit). What is certain is that no critical judgment has “factuality” in any logical, let alone experimentally verifiable, sense. The quest for a verifiable or falsifiable factuality in critical propositions has been a compendious chapter in the history of the art: in Aristotle, in Kant, in Taine, in the earlier Richards. But it remains a chapter of fertile error, of borrowed metaphors. No critical ruling can be refuted. Action knows reaction and counteraction, not refutation. Preference is undecidable. Balzac’s suggestion that Mrs. Radcliffe was an abler novelist than Stendhal, Tolstoy’s considered conclusion that the major tragedies of Shakespeare are “beneath criticism,” the closely argued verdict of a generation of art critics in reference to Rosa Bonheur’s superiority to Cézanne—these are not “eccentricities” or “lapses.” There can be no eccentricities where there is no stable center, no “lapse” where there is no axiomatic paradigm from which to fall. On the contrary: such prescriptive viewings are typological; they are highly instructive, insofar as they make salient the essence of arbitrariness and of free will in every act of ordering vision.

At the risk of repetition: there can be no grammatical, no logical, no statistical cancellation or falsification of the assertion that Shakespeare was a mediocre playwright or Mozart a third-rate composer. Formally and substantively, these are perfectly coherent, intelligible “positionings” (prises de position) towards the relevant object. The fact—and
are we always quite certain that it is a general fact—that these particular postures are chosen or maintained by very few is of no importance. Epistemological spaces are not subject to the ballot. Time, moreover, shifts the statistical balance—essentially irrelevant as that balance may be—between the idiosyncratic and the commonplace. It is the fatality of today's avant-garde to house within itself tomorrow's postcards and art-school plaster casts. In turn, the prognostication that there will be a date at which the "general consensus" will judge Mozart to have been a third-rate composer is strictly unfalsifiable. But it is a prognostication without inherent interest. It says nothing of the critical act that has judged otherwise. Equally vacant are the demonstrable statements that painters, authors, musicians once held to be mindless charlatans are, now, sanctified (Van Gogh, Joyce, Wagner). Such data belong to the history of criticism. But the critical act, the deed of ordering sight and the space of intentional legislation which it generates, have no history. They are synchronic. Aristotle's placement of Euripides as "the most tragic" is fully available and instrumental today. This is to say that implicit distancing, the focus chosen—in this example, it is a focus directed preferentially at the density of relative pathos among the three principal tragedians—can be adopted, can be "paced out" at present. By the same token, Matthew Arnold on Keats or T. S. Eliot on Baudelaire will be functional tomorrow. Vision has historical, social, local (perhaps even physiological) context: but there is a precise sense in which it does not date. It can be rebuked, countered, censored, ridiculed, labeled as statistically null. But it cannot be superseded. To declare that Hanslick was "wrong" about Wagner, whatever "wrong" may signify in such an assertion, is not to supersede his finding.

Does this willful, always singular format of the critical act mean that every sighting is equally worthwhile? Are some valuations more authoritative than others? Or is irrefutability—one cannot conceivably prove that Balzac was mistaken in regard to Stendhal or that abstract art may not be a confidence trick—evidence that all judgment is inherently anarchic? I have never seen a convincing answer to this possibility. The answers given are purely contingent. They tell us what constitutes a "good critic." But "range," "style," innovative commitment, influence, etc., are merely attributes or post hoc ornaments. They are not primaries. They have no probative force. They are opinions on opinion. Perhaps the hoary dilemma can be rephrased.

The useful critic does two things. First, he makes the tenor of his arbitrariness transparent. The angle of his ordering vision is clearly manifest. There are as many rational, arguable spaces as there are
geometries. The critic may adopt a posture whose configuration—the word *figura* allows the right overlap between gesture and symbolic code—is mainly moralistic. He can step back from the object and ask: Of what benefit is it to man and society? Is it finally educative? Is it life-enhancing in its implicit or explicit proposals? (*Mutatis mutandis*, Platonism, Tolstoy’s position, or that of Leavis exemplify this aesthetic, or more properly speaking, “anti-aesthetic.”) The critic may function at distances and perspectives which are historicist, biographical in the old sense, psychoanalytic in the new, Marxist, or formalist. His mapping may be largely rhetorical (in a genuinely inventive vein, this would be something like Kenneth Burke’s “space” of ordering sight). He can be—more often than not, he is—eclectic and variable in his adjustments of focus and aperture. “Critical impressionism” is no less rigorous than “engagement” or “determinism” (i.e., Sainte-Beuve is no less rigorous a critic than Lukács or Derrida, if we attach to “rigorous” any clear connotations of proof or refutability). His is merely a different stylization of the critical exercise, a different “choreography” and, therefore, distancing between points. But whatever his stance of intentionality, the useful critic offers this stance for identification. He must render unmistakable its partiality (in *parti pris* we again find the key notion of “seizure”). *Partiality*, in this context, has two main meanings. Every geometry, every argued space of perception, is only one of a set of alternatives which may be formally unbounded (it may well be the case that *anything* can be said of *anything*). It is, therefore, incomplete, “partial.” Secondly, however catholic the critic’s temper, however embracing the largess of his receptivities, his every act of ordering sight is, can only be, “partial” in the sense of being biased. It stems from one particular angle. As there is no such thing as indifferent action, so there is no such thing as impartial (“objective”) criticism. Only immobility is unbiased. But in good criticism, bias is made visible, is made lucid to itself.

The honest critic does a second thing: he ranks (criticism is *ordering* sight). In the arbitrariness which is the epistemological condition of his métier, he includes the concept of “arbiter,” of *arbitrage* between values. The intentionality of his vision, the act of assuming a stance in front of one object rather than another, is by definition preferential and discriminatory. Whether explicitly, in the magisterial vein, or implicitly, via the functional trope of an “epiphany” (the object reveals and imposes itself upon the viewer), the critic’s placement is hierarchical. Euripides, rules Aristotle, “is the most tragic”; it follows necessarily that Aeschylus and Sophocles were less so. “Dante and Shakespeare divide western literature between them, there is no third,” says T. S. Eliot. His verdict is diacritical; it relegates all other
poets to a more slender status. The semantics of criticism are inescapably comparative. To perceive normatively is to compare. It is to assay contrastively, a praxis evident in the Arnoldian term touchstone.

Thus it is mere cant to profess that a critic ought not to enter the bourse, that he ought not to provide market quotations, leaving such concerns to the "reviewer." The critic, however eminent, however theoretic in bias, assigns and ascribes valuations every time he views and designates. He may do so with a complexity of motives and with a heuristic care far beyond those of ephemeral marking or fashion. He may, in other words, be an august broker rather than a harried jobber on the floor of the exchange (though the line is always fluid; where, for instance, would we draw it in the works of Hazlitt or of Edmund Wilson?). But no less than the reviewer, the critic is a marker. He marks down—in the 1950s and 1940s the term was "he dislodges"—Milton, and marks up Donne. He "rates" Hölderlin above, say, Mörike; he underwrites new issues, such as the modernist movement, as being more productive, as offering a higher yield to attention and sensibility than the late Romantics or Georgians. The instruments of criticism, teaches Coleridge, are "speculative instruments." Critical scrutiny values and compares. In "speculation" inhere perception as well as the forward gamble of conjecture.

And because his "job of work" (R. P. Blackmur's humbling phrase) is always derivative, because it is so often punitive and facile as compared to that of the artist, the good critic is one who will run speculative risks. He will declare his interests and lay himself open to loss. This loss can take various forms: the contempt of the artist whom he is criticizing, the indifference of the market to the values which he proposes, the ridicule or oblivion which later history will visit on his judgments. This declaration of interest and speculative commitment produces a listing (a series of "quotations" in a sense familiar to both the bourse and the life of letters). It produces "the great tradition," "the hundred best books," "the modern masters." In this ineluctable context, whose vulgarity can be compensated for, and then only in part, by the critic's nerve, by his readiness to invest even more in a sinking share if such investment represents his lucid conviction, the "classic" in literature is the "blue chip," "the gilt-edge," that has long been priced as such by the market. No real critic can or will seek to escape the crassness and fallibilities of choice.

The critic's listing establishes a "syllabus." The teleology of a syllabus is economic. It instructs us, even by virtue of omission, on what texts we should expend time and the resources of feeling, and what other texts would constitute waste. The notorious footnote in The Great Tradition, cautioning the reader that among all of Dickens's
novels only *Hard Times* repays adult interest, is a graphic example of this “economy of syllabus.” So are the reading lists handed out to generations of undergraduates, lists on which particular chapters are often cited with the manifest inference that the remainder of the book does not merit investment. The apologia for a syllabus is one of purgation: vital space is cleansed and conserved for the “enduring,” for the “authentic,” for the “classical.” Dead or noxious matter is set aside. Too many canvases, canvases hung too close, inhibit ordering sight. A museum is an ocular syllabus; hence its crowded basements or rummage rooms. The critic selects and “prices” so as to narrow our options towards excellence, so as to minimize waste motion.

The “reader” does not aim at a syllabus, but at a “canon.” This is a fourth stab at articulating the polarity which my argument is testing. “Canon,” of course, remains to be defined.

I have said that ordering sight “objectifies.” I have tried to show that such objectification in criticism has nothing to do with the phantasm of “objectivity”—which would be pure stasis, a zero point. What then is meant by “objectification,” by the assertion that it is of the nature of criticism to see that which it sees as an object? It means simply that the *telos*, the thing aimed at by the act of ordering perception, is a datum, a *donné*. It is “out there,” at a distance, at an angle, in a perspective which criticism determines with a view to intelligibility and estimate. This “givenness” of the object or text as it presents itself for circumscription, elucidation, and judgment, this “out thereness,” is a definitional platitude. How can there be sight if there is not something “out there” to be seen, to be stopped, as it were, in front of? But if it is a platitude, it is one of considerable epistemological and ethical consequence.

The fundamental postulate of the critical act is one of realism. The critic cannot operate in a solipsistic, in a rigorously Fichtean, scheme. He cannot collapse subject and object. Were he to do so, there would be no distance at which, “across which,” to exercise ordering sight. Glued to the canvas, the eye would be blind. One can go further: the critical postulate is one of materialism (and it is just this which underlies the discomforts of Platonism when attempting to deal with poetry and the arts). The painting, the piece of music, the text have a material status. They are significant substances. In respect of material artifacts in the “naive” sense—pictures on wood or canvas, statues hewn of stone or cast in bronze—this primal materialism or substantiality has never been problematic. The art critic finds no handicap in including in the coordinates of evaluative reflex such dimensions as pigments, fabric, texture, and so on. It is, moreover, only this epistemological materialism which validates the whole concept, so com-
PELLING in Western sentiment and in the art market, of some radical difference between the original and even the most faithful of copies or reproductions. Contrastively, we shall see that in the epistemology of "reading," the copy, the act of copying, may prove to be equivalent to that of creation.

In the case of a language object (a text), the postulate of materiality may seem elusive. And, certainly, the analogies so often drawn between literature on the one hand and painting or sculpture on the other, are insipid or inexact. It is only in esoteric or historically decidable instances that the literal substance of the text—epigraphy, watermark, impression—has any immediate critical bearing. Critical grasp does not consider whether its object is quarto or folio size, and the valuation of a text is indifferent as to its first edition or the most mechanical of reproductions. Nevertheless, the language object is an object, a datum "out there." This means that the cardinal qualifiers of objective existence do apply to it. The verbal material has been "produced"; it is, properly, a fabrication. It can, indeed it must, be located in immanence.

The "reader" is answerable to the possibility of "transcendence" rather than of immanence. This is, possibly, a fifth way of stating the disjunction which this essay aims at.

The immanent character of the objects of criticism can be categorized variously. The customary rubric is historical. The text was produced, encoded, and made public by this or that author in this or that place and time. It embodies—embodiment signifying at this point, and provisionally, not a synonym for but rather a contrary to incarnation—a particular selection from the totality of the linguistic raw material and constraints available to the given author. Recent emphasis by Marxist, sociological, or semiotic critics on the economic structures of all "textuality"—texts are manufactured, they compete for attention in the market, they are objects of merchandizing, consumption, and accumulation—only dramatizes an obvious constant. So does the modish notion of écriture. However exalted by intent of style and address, a text is indeed an artifact, a "piece" of language materially cognate with any other piece of language. Thus, when the structuralist-semiotic critic tells us that the poem is part of a seamless continuum with each and every semantic, scriptive act—the bill of lading, the piece of advertisement copy, the most mundane of notations—all of which are, like itself, écriture, he is only rephrasing (and trivializing) the postulate of materialism implicit in perceptual objectivation.

He reiterates this same postulate, this time more cogently, when he reminds us that ordering sight (criticism) can be understood as a
branch of a more general "theory of information." When matter matters, it informs. Hence the critic's legitimate interest in "how the thing is put together," in the anatomy of its composition and history of its manufacture. The art critic seeks to bring to light the initial sketch, the parts of the canvas painted over in successive manipulations. The literary critic and the critic-musicologist ponder drafts and cancellations. The inherent commitment is that made to temporal, historical substance (to immanence). The postulate is that of the objective reality of compositional process. The critic is a "geneticist" (where it may be that the "reader" is an "ontologist." This would be a sixth antinomy). In a way which tends to go unnoticed, this compositional perspective is also an assumption of contingency. The art object, the piece of music, the text "out there," with its historical genesis, might not have been; or it might have been altogether otherwise. It "happens to be"—which does not mean, to be sure, that its phenomenal emergence in this or that location, at this or that date, in one or another milieu, ought not to be investigated and, so far as is possible, explained. But there is not in the production of artifacts, as the objectivization of the critic's ordering sight perceives them, any formal or substantive imperative of inevitability. There is, even at the "sublime" reach, a realization of occasion, an occasionality in the strict sense of the term.

So far, I have tried to make arguable and, in consequence, nontrivial, two main propositions. The critic functions at a certain distance. The determination (and honest explication) of this distance, the space in and through which his purposive action is executed, are the integral facts of his ordering, legislative sight. Secondly, I have said that he is distant from and "distant to" an object, a substance which he finds and situates "out there." He focuses on, he sights and appraises "something" which is a particular, contingent presence. In this classical scenario, there is no fusion between perceiver and perceived. The critic after Aristotle is a realist in just that formally elusive but pragmatically unwavering sense in which Kant is a realist when he states in the Critique of Pure Reason (sec. 3): "Our exposition establishes the reality, that is, the objective validity, of space in respect of whatever can be represented to us outwardly as object." Common sense is the working hypothesis, the underwriter of cognitive distance. It authorizes the conviction that the painting will not disappear when the viewer turns away from it, that there is a run-of-the-mill sense in which its existence, if not its cultural status, is independent of notice.

We have seen that there are many and diverse ways in which the critic can assume his stance, and that these ways generate many and diverse "spaces" or conventions of vision (even as there are many
geometries in which the "same" objects can be diversely situated and described). But whereas, in the case of alternative geometric mappings, such location and description remain formally neutral and, as topology teaches us, interchangeable, the intentionality of the critic's vision, the purposiveness of his act, entail very different relations to the object. The point is an obvious one, but needs to be made carefully. Different critical postures (methodologies, analytical presuppositions, metavocabularies) pertain to practice, to "how ordering sight" is initiated and performed. Relations, as they are realized within and across the chosen distance, pertain to motive, to "why it is" that the critic does his essentially derivative, parasitic "job of work." Modern physics tells us that we cannot separate the concept of a "space" from that which takes place in it. And there is a strong sense in which the "how" and the "why" of the act of criticism are also conjoined. Nevertheless, the objectivization that comes of the realistic epistemology of criticism is a more general, a more diffuse category than motive. And it is only if we look more closely at motive that we can define more exactly in what way art or literature becomes an object not only "of" but "for" criticism.

Patently, there can be as many sorts of motivation as there are critics. There are, however, compendious and usefully vague chapter headings under which the different purposive relations enacted by critical practice can be registered. These would, roughly and readily, include political relations, exemplary-didactic relations, relations whose motor force is primarily philosophically investigative, relations which I would call "dramatically reproductive," ceremonially propagandistic relations, relations of irony or chastisement. Given the summary scope of this discussion, these and kindred types of critical relation, of the intentionality of different ways of seeing, can only be stenographed—and the citation of names is an unavoidable shorthand.

"Political" is too loose a tag altogether; but one would take it as enveiopling those orderings and assessments of the critical object according to its positive or disabling agency in a larger public scheme. Plato would posit this scheme to be the state; for Tolstoy it would be the enforcement of personal and communal altruism; in Lukács's model the scheme is "history"; in that of Sartre, the realization of "freedom." But note that there is, within certain flexible limits, independence as between method and motive: a Platonic purpose can be generated by a New Critical exegesis; "structuralism" can be either of the "right" or of the "left"; Sartre modulates from a historicist to a largely psychoanalytic angle of decipherment. The "exemplary-didactic" relation overlaps at numerous points with the "political"; but
it shows a more pronounced "scholastic" edge. I have in mind the Aristotelian program for the induction and transmission to the audience of states of cognitive and emotive pose (a "politics of feeling"); Schiller's doctrine of the aesthetic as the principal vehicle of the nurture of civic sensibility; Matthew Arnold's view of high literature as a "criticism of life" from whose radiant ambience and energies a society acquires moral and executive style.

By "investigative" in the philosophical vein, one would understand the modes of criticism whose purpose is the explication of an art object or text in terms of its specific nature, operant substance, and phenomenal status. Here the proceedings of the critic belong fairly to the more general class of aesthetics. To divorce the critical motive from the philosophical-theoretic one in, say, Kant, Croce, Walter Benjamin, or Burke, would be to urge an empty nomenclature. What I mean by "dramatically reproductive" relations in criticism are those in which the critic's delineation and judgment of the object are achieved by a kind of mimesis, performative encapsulation, or parallel presentment of that object. The critic's own text is a "retelling of the thing" with an evaluative appendage. It is the "summary +" of the plot, the description of the painting or the verbal equivocation—taking this word in its worrying sense—of the piece of music. (When Schumann, on the contrary, offered an explicative critique of a composition by replaying it in toto he was, I think, exemplifying the cardinal distinction between "critic" and "reader.") In dramatically reproductive criticism, illustration, quotation, are of the essence. The critic quotes strategically so as to make his point, so as to achieve persuasive economy. His critique is a summation towards judicial ends; quotations are the exhibits it offers in evidence. If philosophical criticism is a branch of aesthetics, performative or mimetic criticism is one of the multiple forms of applied rhetoric. At a guess, one would say that this form comprises nine-tenths of the craft. It stretches from the iceberg mass of daily reviewing—the "art critic," "the book critic," "the music critic" in the media—all the way to such undoubted pinnacles of judicial reenactment and summation as Samuel Johnson's discourse on Shakespeare or T. S. Eliot's on Dante. But it may be that Eliot on Dante is inspired criticism, whereas Mandelstam on Dante is "reading."

Very often this almost ubiquitous order of criticism will have praise as its motive. The aim of the act of ordering sight is to advance the fortunes, to strengthen the impact of a given piece of work or movement. In its hectoring innocence, the communist term agitprop strikes the appropriate note. It would characterize Zola's polemics on behalf of Manet, Ezra Pound for modernism, G. Wilson Knight in propaga-
tion of Byron's moral fineness. Each of these viewers is, in the given case, a virtuoso of celebration. The contrastive category is that of a critical distancing calculated (“motivated”) to diminish, to strip bare, even to eradicate the object—i.e., to bring about its removal from the syllabus, from the public gallery to the basement. This is Apollo's musical critique of Marsyas, Pope's vivisection of Grub Street and his editorial competitors such as Theobald, or Leavis in pursuit of Auden. Though antithetical in purpose, festive advocacy and chastisement are both a part of the general class of “presentational” or performative critical practice.

Even a thumbnail sketch of these different orders of critical motive raises an obvious question: Can anything useful be said of a phenomenology so various that it includes Aristotle's Poetics, Hegel's lessons on the philosophy of art, Baudelaire on Wagner, or I. A. Richards on Coleridge at one end, and the pandemonium of daily academic-journalistic market quotations at the other? The inchoate plurality is undeniable. But so, I believe, is the presence of certain “primals” and constants. These derive from the epistemology of objectivization.

Distancing objectifies; or to use a term which is in vogue but which is accurate: it reifies (es verdänglicht). The object of the critical act, be the motives for this act diagnostic or mimetic, laudatory or punitive, is seen as and thus made a “thing.” Criticism resorts perpetually to the notion of “living art,” of “vitality,” of the “life-force” in music or poetry. It has, since the Poetics, made of the “organic” both an explicative criterion and an ideal. But these invocations of vitalism are instrumental fictions. For purposes of ordering perception, of placement and verdict, the critical object is reified. One does not anatomize and label living tissue; or, note again the demonstration by Schumann of the antithesis between a musicological presentation, however instinct with approval and analytic authority on the one hand, and the replaying of the piece on the other. Secondly, we have seen that the distance between critic and object is activated by motive. Now whatever the order of intention, the relation established is, in the first place, derivative. The critic, whether he comes to dissect or to mime, to praise or to negate, relates to “that which is there before him”—in which self-evident proposition “before” carries both its locative and its temporal meanings. The object existed in time before the critic came upon it, even if this precedence is only one of a few hours as in the case of the journalist-reviewer. Therefore, the ground of being, the raison d'être of even the most formidable and far-reaching of critical arguments is the precedent status of the art object or text. The Sophoclean versions of Oedipus are prior to the Poetics; the Lyrical
Ballads come before those brilliances of Coleridge’s “practical criticism” in which so much of the modern technique of vision is rooted; Marvell’s poems long antedate T. S. Eliot’s insights. All criticism is posterior, and this sequent status is not only temporal but existential. The work of art, the text, the musical composition exists not only prior to the ordering sight of the critic; it can exist without it. No critic is, either formally or in fact, the cause of that which he perceives and relates to.

This existential posteriority, this dependence of the perceptual and normative act on the prior and autonomous nature of the object, signifies that all criticism is, ontologically, parasitic. The Platonic paradigm makes graphic the degree of derivation. The carpenter imitates the Idea of the table. The painter mimes this mimesis whose literal form he can neither execute nor judge properly. The critic of the painting expatiates at fourth hand on the mimicry of a shadow. But even in any less caustic model of the orders of executive action and perception, the dependent, ancillary, occasional—because “occasioned from outside”—nature of all critical vision and utterance is manifest. The critic is not the maker. That such a platitude requires emphasis and may even take on polemic resonance is a symptom of the absurdities and reversals of value prominent in today’s academy and in the current condition of letters. Sainte-Beuve was morosely right in saying that no one was raising statues to critics; but he may have been a bad prophet.

The reification of the object of criticism and the necessarily (not accidentally, not remediable) parasitic nature of the critic’s response to this object, determine a fundamental instability in the whole enterprise. Simultaneously criticism judges (even where adjudication is one of hyperbolic acclaim) and knows itself to be a secondhand, an epiphenomenal act. From this asymmetry comes the absolutely central fact that all criticism is, in a certain sense, “adversative to” its object. This needs to be spelled out clearly. Even where its program is one of epiphany, of disclosure through placement and praise, even where it seems itself to be the devoted outrider and herald to the work of art, criticism stands not only “outside” and “after” its cause: it stands “against” it. It is, to use Kenneth Burke’s pivotal designation, a counterstatement to it.

And precisely because it knows itself to be simultaneously magisterial and parasitic, prescriptive and dependent, normative and occasional, criticism harbors inside itself strong solicitations to autonomy. The more lucid it is about its own existential secondhandedness, the more unavoidably will criticism be under pressure of the impulse towards integral status. Implicit in all criticism, not by virtue of his-
torical accident or culpable vanity, but as an ineluctable condition of its being, is the instinct for autonomy. Consciously or not, criticism labors to transcend relation. Criticism contains, at its methodological and intentional core, the potentiality, paradoxical, even absurd in regard to logic, of existing “beyond” its object. It experiences a constant temptation to make of its object not the necessary and sufficient cause of its own existence, but a mere starting point and receding suggestion. Thus it exhibits a precise drive towards usurpation: it would work away from its own existential derivativeness and take on the ontological primacy of its cause.

This is the etiology and underlying explanation of the present-day character and hypertrophy of criticism, particularly in reference to literature. The current scene is little short of ludicrous. In the academy and the media, the critic has a prepotent, monumentalized station. Critical methodologies, with spurious claims to theoretical profundity and performative rigor, are multiplied and offered to secondary and tertiary investigation (there are critics of criticism, journals of “dia”- and “meta”-criticism in which critics dispute the merits of each other’s jargon; there are universiy qualifications in criticism). In a mode of narcissist terrorism, criticism now proposes to “deconstruct” and to “disseminate” the text, to make of the text the labile, ultimately contingent source of its own prepotent display. Such display is sustained by the construction of metalanguages of autistic violence and obscurity. The resultant terror and mist envelop the text object to the point of deliberate effacement. The act of criticism has “ingested” its object (Ben Jonson’s term for parasitic consumption) and now stands autonomous. There are, indeed, specific historical and sociological grounds for this cancerous and inflationary condition. There are local, temporal reasons why criticism today occupies a status unequalled since the Alexandrian scholiasts and grammatologists (there being in both periods a concomitant enfeeblement of literature). But the potentiality of this inversion of values as between the critic and the prior object is implicit in all criticism. It has been there from the start. The implication is a necessary and dynamic entailment of the fact that criticism is competitive with the object of its ordering sight, that the critic is not, as the cliché would have it, a failed artist, but a “counterstater” and rival to the work.

Undoubtedly, moreover, it is the case that a fair amount of criticism takes on autonomy by force of expression. The relevant sections in Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria are “literature” in a sense not drastically removed from that which we attach to the poetry they analyze and judge. Criticism can outlast its object by virtue of material hazard: many of the paintings and statues viewed and judged by Vasari have
now disappeared. Or criticism may do so because the stature of the critic is, pragmatically, greater than that of the author. Who but the specialist now reads the minor poets about whom Samuel Johnson found memorable points to make? But such supersedures should be accidental, involuntary, arising from factors outside the critic’s purpose and control. “Planned supersession”—the critic’s determination to fix his voraciousness on minor or enfeebled objects such as an inferior Balzac novella, the rhapsodies of Lautréamont, a kitsch film—is a methodologically and ethically vitiated turn. Subconsciously, perhaps, it seeks compensation, even vengeance for its own parasitism on the object which is, eternally, its precedent and cause of being. Such vengeance can be effective. We are surrounded, currently, by minor or spurious texts which criticism has exploitatively aggrandized, and by major art and texts which criticism has diminished or obscured. We direct students to T. S. Eliot’s criticism on Dante; we do not direct them to reading the Commedia divina. “Criticism” and “reading” grow apart.

Now, unquestionably, parasitism is necessary to life. The bird pecking clean the hide and wounds of the rhinoceros is performing a delicate, vital piece of work. The critic is necessary to the life of art and letters. But it is because he is, in significant respects, of an identical species with his host, with his carrier and raison d’être, that this symbiosis breeds ambivalence and usurpation. The solicitation to betrayal, through an act of sight which “screens” instead of elucidating, through narcissism of theory and idiom, through masked or outright misprision (the critic can bear false witness and be hanging judge in a tribunal of his own devising), is always present. It is of the essence of the critical relation. It is, probably, for this reason that great criticism relates to its cause in an intimacy of peculiar sadness.

Roughly half a dozen contrastive pairings have come up in relation to the initial polarization: “critic” as against “reader.” They include the dissociation between an epistemological and an ontological base (a Husserlian bias on the one hand, a Heideggerian one on the other). We saw that there may be a significant difference between the establishment of a “syllabus” and the acceptance of a “canon,” between objectivizations of the text whose presuppositions are realistic-immanent, and those which draw on a category of transcendence. The teleological motion of criticism, its purposive economies, may differ from the theological tenor of the guarantor or “third party” implicated in the act of “reading.” Operative in and through these contrarities is the intimation of an essential distinction between the judicial authority of the critic, his normative placement of the text or art object at and from an argued distance, and the “dynamic passivity” or
sufferance of the “reader” who is, where “reading” achieves its plenitude, the “one being read.”

These suggestions concerning the “reader” are admittedly vague and portentous. It is easy to say something about criticism worth looking at and/or disagreeing with. It is difficult to say anything useful about “reading” in the sense in which this paper seeks to articulate the term. Criticism is discursive and breeds discourse. “Reading” yields no primary impulse towards self-communication. The “reader” who discourses is, in a certain manner, in breach of privilege. The surest testimonials we have to major acts of reading tend to be oblique; they tend to be tangential in exactly the sense in which Walter Benjamin, himself a master reader, argues that great translation is tangential to the vulgate meaning of the original. Reading is done rather than spoken about (one of the very few convincing narrations of the act of reading, of une lecture bien faite et plénière, that I know of, is to be found in Péguy’s Dialogue de l’histoire et de l’âme païenne, another in Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs; but both of these are narrations, not analyses, not attempts at methodological abstraction “from outside”). The antinomies, the play of irreconcilable difference, no less than the mystery of interrelation, lie between Narcissus and Echo. Again, this is to invoke the metaphoric. Nevertheless, the diacritical “cuts” I have listed may, in part at least, be worth arguing more closely.

To the “reader,” in which designation I include whosoever’s apprehension of a text, of art, of music, of formed motion is not, is not primarily, that of the critic’s legislative sighting, the “otherness” met with is not “a thing out there,” is not, first and foremost, an “object.” Now it is perfectly true that criticism also has queried, imaged, metaphorized the “nonobjective” phenomenological status of the poem, the painting, the piece of music. Criticism too will often ascribe to the matter of its speculative and judicial concerns a singular epistemological nature, a kind of “third realm” in Popper’s suggestive terminology. Certain schools of criticism have been more than willing to grant that “great art” has, by virtue of its inspirational genesis, unrepeatability, formal inexhaustibility, and energies of impact, a substantive mode other than that of, say, natural or manufactured objects. But for the critic this extraterritoriality remains a preliminary concession to be made in respect of aesthetic and psychological unknowns (“unknowns,” as it were, yet to be discovered). It is a concession which does not inhibit the exercise of delineation and of judgment.

The “reader,” by contrast, inhabits the provisional—in which manifold term he recognizes as relevant the notions of “gift,” of “that which serves vision,” and of that which “nourishes” indispensably. He
situates himself within, rather than traversing it with conventional concession and logical embarrassment, the supposition that the text, the work of art, the musical composition are data not in the "scientific" or realistically objectivized sense, but in the primary and archaic signification of "that which is given to us." That they are not "objects" even in a special "aesthetic" category, but "presences," "presentments" whose existential "thereness" (Heidegger's word) relates less to the organic, as it does in Aristotelian and Romantic poetics and theories of art, than it does to the "transubstantiational." The adjective, as well as the concept aimed at, are almost hopelessly pompous and awkward. But the evidence whereby meaning and experience can be attached to them is not negligible. What is implicit is the notion and expression of "real presence." The reader proceeds as if the text was the housing of forces and meanings, of meanings of meaning, whose lodging within the executive verbal form was one of "incarnation." He reads as if—a conditionality which defines the "provisional" temper of his pursuit—the singular presence of the life of meaning in the text and work of art was "a real presence" irreducible to analytic summation and resistant to judgment in the sense in which the critic can and must judge. But a presentness, a presence of what?

There are different "as ifs," different modes of provisionality, as there are different configurations and styles of focus in criticism. Authority for the intimation of a "real presence" can be sought from the Platonic or Romantic trope of "mantic inspiration." The art object is not an object in any normal sense because it springs out of a mystery of alien ingress, out of the daimon's rush into the momentary vacancy of man's reason and identity. Poiesis, the poet's, the singer's inventions, are imperatives from without. The products of true art have in them the live vestiges of transcendent intrusion. A variant on this trope is that of the sacramental as it obtains in the reading and exegesis of "revealed" texts (where "revelation" can, but need not be, transmitted by dictate as it is in the paradigmatic account of the rhapsode in Plato's Ion). The relevant presumption is that of an inherence, however esoteric, however eroded or possibly falsified by human transcription, of a "spirit" in, "behind," the letter. It is just this presumption which underwrites the concept of the "iconic," the belief that the icon is not so much a representation of the sacred person or scene as it is the immediate manifestation, the epiphany of that person or scene. In other words, the latter are "really present" to the beholder not by virtue of a voluntary imaginative concession or transposition on the beholder's part, but because they have taken dwelling in the icon. A third model of "inherence" is that provided by the application of an absolute philosophic ontology to aesthetics. It is that which justifies
Heidegger's ascription of a total *Dasein*, of a total "presentness of being," to the worn pair of boots in the Van Gogh painting. As Heidegger urges, the "real presence" of these boots on or "within" the canvas is of an order and intensity, of a phenomenological necessity, denied not only to this or that actual pair of boots but denied as well to the most rigorous chemical-functional analysis of "what it is that boots are made of and for" (a complete reversal of the Platonic scheme of thirdhand mimesis and of the naive realism operative in "criticism").

The enabling models which authorize a reader to assign iconic status to his text vary. But singly or together, they allow him to grasp concretely and to organize his experience of the text in accord with a class of assertions made by writers and artists themselves (assertions to which the "critic" can only concede a rhetorical validity). In this class, I would include Michelangelo's witness: "Se il mio rozzo martello i duri sassi forme d'uman aspetto or questo or quello, dal ministro, ch'l guida iscorge e tiello, prendendo il moto va con gli altrui passi." ("When my rough hammer transforms hard stone to this or that figure of human shape, it moves solely by the volition of Him who guides it; it follows solely in His path.") Or Tolstoy's testimony to Katkov, that Anna Karenina "had broken away from him," that the imagined persona had taken on autonomous will and being (*va con gli altrui passi*) outside of, indeed against the novelist's design and understanding. Or one might include the arcadian arrogance of Picasso's: "I never seek, I only find." In each of these and innumerable analogous cases, the apprehension undergone by the "begetter" and the reader is of a kind which entails perception and invites terror (both are active in "to apprehend").

The ascription, even where it remains only a provisional constant, of "real presence" to the text, means that the reader's engagement with the text is not "objectifying," that it cannot be a relationship of reification, of competition, and, by logical extension, of supersedure. The reader opens himself to the autonomous being of the text. The dialectic of encounter and of vulnerability (the text can bring drastic hurt) is one in which the ontological core of the text, its presentness of inward being, both reveals and makes itself hidden. This pulsing motion is a familiar one. As we come to know the text, the painting, the piece of music better, as we become more at home in its idiom, there is always more which seems to elude us. Echo draws us inward with a deepening intimation of understanding as yet unfulfilled. Phrased in this way, the observation is routinely psychological. But when the true source of this apparently contradictory pulse of disclosure and concealment is assigned to the text, to the work of art, the presumption is one of "real presence." In the iconic text, as this text "comes upon" the
reader, there is both "sense" and "force" (Sinn and Kraft are the two cardinal markers in Frege's theory of meaning, serving to suggest how it is that the sentence carries significations and immediately comprehensible directions much beyond those manifest in the individual, interchangeable word). Such essential excess of meaning characterizes the order of texts or art forms with which the reader engages. All serious aesthetics aims to elucidate what can be termed, to borrow a Marxist econometric vocabulary, the phenomenon of "surplus value," of the "forces" in and beyond "sense" generated by art.

Where the act of reading is sufficiently apprehensive of the ontological pulse in the text, of the concomitant motion of radiance and withdrawal, it will register both the purity and the irreducibility of the pertinent "force." Purity in this context means essential disinterestedness. The raison d'être of the painting or poem or musical composition being only being. I say "essential" because, of course, the notion invoked here is, again, a more or less fictive absolute. Even the highest art can involve impurities of motive, such as didacticism, social occasion, public or private record, and so on. But where there is the "presentness" which I have been implying, these mundanities of motive and performance will not, finally, determine the status and force of the work. Often, in fact, this autonomous force in the work will come to refute the voluntary program, the temporal meaning with which the artist invested his material. Though he proceeds from an altogether different orientation, Marx seized on precisely this internal dialectic when he noted that the effects, the agencies of survival in Balzac's novels were the ideological negation of those which the writer had purposed.

"Irreducibility" signifies "nonparaphrasability," the untranslatability of an iconic presence into any other form without loss and estrangement (where "sense" can be preserved, "force" cannot). As lived by the true reader, the text is irreducible to, inexhaustible by, even the most penetratively diagnostic, explicative of visions—be they linguistic, grammatological, semiotic, historicist, sociological, "deconstructive," or what you will. The text can be restated, as Schumann restates the piece of music. There is, in consequence, a sense in which much of "reading" is reiteration; but the reader's repetition (his "asking again") is not the critic's quotation. It aims not at illustrative excision from, but at complete reentry into the text. Whether such reentry can ever be wholly achieved, whether facsimile is ever total, is a dilemma which long exercised scribes and ministrants. The evident reason for the irreducibility of the iconic is that that which declares and conceals itself in the text or canvas or musical structure is of the order of being rather than of meaning, or, more accurately, that it has
force incarnate in but also in excess of sense. It "is" before it "means," and the meaning(s) we derive from it are a function of its disinterested autonomy of existence—an existence which does not address itself to any particular beholder but must be met with by him (the Angel was not looking for Jacob). It is this immediate infolding of meaning into force of being which makes of music the most "iconic," the most "really present" essent known to man. It follows that music is also that which most absolutely resists paraphrase or translation. But infolding and resistance of this kind characterize all living texts and art.

To summarize: the "reader's" contiguities to the text are ontological rather than epistemological, as are the "critic's." The reader does not encounter or aim at objectivization, but at implication in the possibility, in the "as if" of a real presence. He knows that the meanings which he obtains from his text are always partial, always ambiguously external, that they are, at best, a bonus of being. René Char puts it more concisely: "La vitalité du poète n'est pas une vitalité de l'au-delà mais un point diamanté actuel de présences transcendantes et d'orages pèlerins." Authentic reading momentarily fixes transcendence.

"Contiguities," as used above, need to be looked at. The critic keeps his distance. This retention is the condition of his ordering, magisterial focus. The reader attempts to negate the space between the text and himself. He would be penetrated by, immersed in its presentness. The reader strives for fusion with the text via internalization. And here we arrive at a first disjunction in the general category and dialectic of reading. Internalization is eminently feasible in respect of texts and of music; but only partly so in the case of art objects. At its primary and most radical level, the thorough act of reading, the full apprehension of the présences transcendantes in language and music, entails memorization. The act of learning by heart—an idiom of notable precision—is no technical auxiliary or carry-over from liturgical and pedagogical practice. It is of the essence of the reader's attempt to abolish or sublate that very distance which the critic stakes out. To memorize is, simultaneously, to enter into the text and to be entered into by the text (a process only partly realizable when one "photographs" a painting or statue mentally). This dual motion of ingress and reception is formally and substantively the analogue of the dual motion of projection and withdrawal in the text or musical composition itself. Commitment to memory is, in the first place, an individual phenomenon. It modifies the spaces and constructs of one's inner being, as does the entrance of a "high guest" (Hölderlin's simile) into one's house. Very recent work in biochemistry even suggests that such modification has its material counterpart, that the augment of mem-
ory leads to delicate ramifications of molecular fabric. But active remembrance is also a collective, a cultural agency. It initiates and preserves a communion of shared echo, of participatory reflex, pertinent to the notion of a canon.

An unremembered text or piece of music exists in a penumbra of anticipation as do the volumes currently untouched, where “currently” can mean centuries in the patient silences of the great libraries. But a text can only enter into the full life of the canon when it is woken by, housed within, the negated distance of precise memory. It follows that “total reading” has an inherent logic of dispensation, that it tends towards a condition in which the materiality of the text is no longer required. The icon has been wholly internalized. The executive recollection which makes it present in and to the reader no longer depends on external confirmation. Such orders of internality are no ideal fiction, though they may seem so in our present climate of institutionalized amnesia. In other epochs, societies, or traditions, the commitment to memory, the availability to total recall and reiteration, of massive bodies of texts—epic, ritual, liturgical, historical, taxonomic—was, or still is, routine, as it is routine, even among us, to numerous musicians who dispense with a score and apprehend internally, in the soundless clarity of mastered introspection, great stretches of polyphonic music. (I have seen undergraduates switch off the sound track in a beloved Bogart film and speak in unison long pieces of perfectly remembered dialogue.)

The negation of distance, of which memorization is the final logic, brings on an extreme contraction of focus. Sense and spirit crowd up, as it were, against the actual surface of the text. And here again, instructively, the parallel with the apprehension of art objects begins to break down. In the case of the canvas, statue, or building, we must, to a greater or lesser degree, step back in order to see. But it is in regard to texts precisely this contraction of focus which makes of the single word or short sentence the crucial units of reading, as they are of memorization. The practices of meditation and of commentary on the single word or verse, as they have been developed by exegetes of revealed, of legal, of “founding” texts—“founding” in the sense of being the documents of national identity, the epics and chronicles of inception—are not accidental or technical devices. Exegetical meditation on the minimal unit is the ultimate rationale of true reading. Reading and remembrance proceed word by word, a usage implicit in Walter Benjamin’s proposal that the genuine translator, the translator who works furthest from the critic’s paraphrase, is one who produces a word for word interlinear. With the Scholastics, the reader knows that “God lies in the detail.”
It is in this entirely practical sense, that the most evident records of iconic reading are exegetic: the letter-by-letter hermeneutics of the Kabbalists, the word-by-word commentaries of the Talmudists or Patristic readers, Karl Barth advancing sentence-by-sentence in Romans. But exactly the same contraction of perspective, with its attendant methodological extravagances and myopias, can be brought to bear on the secular poem, the philosophical text (Heidegger on Anaximander or Heraclitus), the legal statute. The difference is simply that the rabbinical exegete or Calvin on the Gospels can proceed without apology or rationalizing metaphor, "as if" the real presence were unambiguously operative in his text. He can, in short, make explicit the assumption, implicit in all true reading, that the warranty of meaning, that which finally underwrites the capacity of language to have sense and force beyond sense, is of a theological order. The honest realist-critic, on the contrary, operates by virtue of immanent and secular presuppositions. It is these which give him the authority to judge, to consign "inferior" works to nonremembrance (criticism is one of the means of forgetting).

In both its strengths and potential infirmities, a word-by-word reading will tend to be philological. It is philology, the literal "love of the logos," which has been the natural instrument, the magnifying glass of the exegete. Likewise, musicology can dwell on each note or bar. Textual criticism is sharply "critical," but in a sense almost antithetical to that of the critic's criticism. Textual criticism is the broom in the house of remembrance, sweeping away accretion or factitiousness in order to make presentness more translucid. It does not judge its text, as the critic must; it labors to restore it to exact mystery. That there are profound mirrorings as between philology and music, that both are disciplines of access to elemental energies of being projected towards and concealed from the intellect, was a fact familiar to Plato and recalled by Nietzsche. Philology and music pertain to the spheres of "reading" rather than of "criticism" (how much music criticism is there even worth forgetting?).

The critic prescribes a syllabus; the reader is answerable to and internalizes a canon. In practice, to be sure, the two will overlap. The "syllabic" in a given culture will select and celebrate, will label as "classic," the "great books" around which a language and a society edify their codes of self-recognition. Such "great books" may indeed be a part of the reader's canon (where criticism also focuses on revealed texts, this will be most obviously the case). But strictly considered, the inclusion in the canon of "masterpieces" from the syllabus is accidental. Motivations towards the canonic are not, at their source, those of interested and prescriptive activity in the sense in which we
found these to be fundamental to the critical exercise of ordering sight. The aim of the canon, and aim is precisely the wrong word here, is not that of stylistic exemplarity, in the way in which, for instance, the rhetoric of Boileau and Racine may be seen to have served as official “weights and measures” for generations of French discourse. It is not nationally didactic in the sense in which much of Shakespeare has been for the Anglo-Saxon political community. In brief, the canon is not a catalogue of magisterially, circumstantially culled and monumentalized preminence. A canon is the individually internalized cluster or crystallization of remembered, exegetically reenacted texts or text fragments which results from (very often) unsought, unwilled encounter with and answerability to the “real presence.” The authentic canon is not, or is not in the first place, the product of reasoned intention.

Its crystallization in the reader’s inwardness results from a paradox of “dynamic passivity,” from the suspension of self which we experience when we pay utter attention to something, when we make acceptance and apprehension strenuous. This condition can produce a tensed openness which allows, which invites the text “to read us” as much as we read it. Canonic are the texts and fragments of texts—criticism must seek to view the whole; reading can dwell on the smallest component—whose entrance into the reader’s mind, and “mind” is in this context a wholly inadequate, restrictive designation, whose immediacy to the reader’s recall and re-vocation, come to alter the texture of consciousness. The reader revisits, comes back into awareness of the quick of his own augmented being through reference to, through silent colloquy with, through the citation of, texts and pieces of text. The archaic resort to sortes, the placing of a blind finger on some passage from a scriptural or poetic book, is an outward dramatization of this inward search for essential insight, for an understanding of one’s destiny. The canonic text enters into the reader, it takes its place within him by a process of penetration, of luminous insinuation whose occasion may have been entirely mundane and accidental—decisive encounters so often are—but not, or not primarily, willed. The “high guests” enter unbidden yet awaited.

There is nothing occult or mystical about this entrance, though psychology has not, until now, given a convincing analysis of its literal mechanism. The occurrence is banal to anyone whose mind and body—both are involved—have been seized upon by a melody, by a tune, by a verbal cadence which he did not choose by act of will, which has entered into him unawares. It is familiar to whoever has left a room—it need not be a museum gallery—only to discover that there is lodged in his inner eye (the pun on ego is not entirely trivial) some
detail of an object, of a painting, some configuration of tactile form or color, which he has no awareness of having fixed upon, of registering consciously. When fully accepted, when made welcome and vital by virtue of precise remembrance and study, such mastering entrants and trespassers take root. They mesh with the fabric of the self; texts become part of the texture of identity. Proust’s notation and uses of the “little theme” from Vinteuil’s sonata and of the yellow patch in Vermeer’s view of Delft are unsurpassed testimony to the origins and role of the canonic.

This particular set is instructive also in another sense. The Vermeer painting is, by critical consensus, a masterpiece; it figures eminently on the syllabus. The Vinteuil theme, on the other hand, is meant to evoke (so the scholars have found out) a particular motif in a bit of chamber music by Fauré. Even committed Proustians find it difficult to discern any particular excellence or memorability in the original, let alone that central genius of time-annulling beauty and meaning which the narrator attributes to it throughout the novel. Thus, one fundamental element in Proust’s canon is of a sort which we would also find in the critical syllabus, whereas the other is idiosyncratic and, by syllabic standards, insignificant, ephemeral, “third-rate.” But it is to the minor, a classification which it does not, in fact, recognize, that the canonic often pertains. The canon which is the echo chamber of our personal being, which is immediate to and consubstantial with those summonses of memory which give to our identity its individual weight and savor, is like a collage. The “classic” and the “syllabic” will figure in it, as the Mona Lisa postcard figures on a surrealist or constructivist assemblage. But so will texts, graphic motifs, musical passages which are hardly respectable by the standards of critical judgment. A syllabus is taught; a canon is lived.

Indeed, he is no true reader who has not tasted the drug of the esoteric, who has not discovered that the song of the Sirens, maddening because it ironizes the brevity of personal existence, the insufficiencies of personal memory, is the silent call of the unread book. One would almost say, though this is sophist hyperbole, of “any unread book.” Exegesis, philology are, in pure extremity, value blind. Virtuosities of inwardness have been expended on inventories in Leviticus; A. E. Housman’s readings, his vitalizing apprehensions, cut deepest in Manilius. The cheap tune haunts us. As Sartre recollects in Les Mots, the young person is “read by,” is woken and construed to identity by blood-and-thunder, by near-Valentines, or the memorable purple of travel and romance. (Hérédia’s brassy sonnets and the somewhat saccharine memoirs and letters of Renan crystallized my adolescence.)
In turn, this primary inwardness and hybrid character of the canon will inflect the act of reading towards privacy, even secrecy. The critic must declare; this is his public and legislative ordination. The reader will often hold his illuminations mute. Or he will experience a contradictory impetus. He seeks to keep to himself the visitations by and internalizations of those texts or iconic objects which have most intensely affected his being. Yet, possessed of and by his talisman, the reader will want to inform others, where both meanings of inform, that of communication and that of shaping, are relevant. In the antiquarian, in the archivist, in the bibliophile and collector of works of art, this radical ambiguity and even duplicity of motives is a familiar trait. The collector conceals his find in order to show it—a psychological reflex (lightly) analogous with what we have seen to be the pulsing dialectic of withdrawal and epiphany in art itself. It is from this divided stance that stem the “schools of reading,” the exegetical and hermeneutic disciplines, be they rabbinical, monastic, academic, or simply familial, whereby a “master” or first reader attempts to lay his disciples and collaborators open to the text. The opening of the text comes after the laying open of the reader. Literal repetition, transcription, commitment to memory often precede and will, at all times, be coterminous with exposition. The critic parallels mimetically or by paraphrase; he does not transcribe; he does not memorize the object of his judgment. The Kabbalist, the philologist, the musician, must do so. Thus, when he invites others into the “inner penetralium” of his sensibility—the phrase was St. Augustine’s before it was Keats’s—when he invites others to make vital the canon which is a constituent of his own being, the reader reads with them. In the master critic there is, inherently, the bias to read for us.

Other disjunctions follow. The robust critic is a futurist. Whatever the acuity of analysis and judgment which he brings to bear on a past work, his aim, the test of his own antennae, must be the importation into the syllabus of the “tradition of the new” (Harold Rosenberg’s telling expression). He deals, to take up the simile of the bourse once again, in “futures.” We have seen that it is in the measure of speculative risk, in the likelihood that some of his most costly investments will prove abortive, that lies the dignity of his craft. The true reader, on the contrary, is, almost unavoidably, a remembrancer. It is in the ontological “backwardness” of the canonic, in the fact that so many of the Eurydices on the reader’s pilgrimage (les orages pélérins) are in the shadows behind him, that lie the unworldliness, the dusty sorrows of his calling. This bent towards pastness is both individual and typological: much of the canon is given entrance to, is met with, in childhood or youth, when the inner spaces are as yet uncluttered and memory is
rapacious. The great reader, and he is rare, is precisely the one who remains fully vulnerable, fully hospitable to the light and menace of annunciation, in mature age. Much of the canonic is also historical. Therefore, it makes dangerous sense to the reader to intuit, to act on the prejudice, that there will be no texts produced in his lifetime or even thereafter to surpass, perhaps to match, those we attach to the anonymities of Homer or the Book of Job. The modern reader finds himself supposing, almost without examination, that certain "transcendentals" in the canon, such as Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, represent singularities, compactions of totality of a kind which Western culture, at least, will not regenerate. The critic's feeling on this must be one of rebellious doubt and contrary hope. When he visits the museum he must be present at the hanging of the new pictures.

The dualities which I have cited, and many others implicit in the argument, can best be subsumed under one fundamental antithesis. The critical act is a function of the ego in a condition of will. The critic wills his praxis. Even where his relation to the object of his focus is most affirmative, elucidative, and heralding, this is to say where it is of the most patent service to the object, this relation is, nevertheless, structurally and dynamically egotistical (using this term in a non-moralistic sense). The yield is, as we saw, a counterstatement, a standing "over and against" the text or art object which is the occasion of his proposition. The critic signs his perception no less than, often more emphatically than, the begetter of the original object. We saw also that there is in this ineluctable and legitimate egotism the constant potential of rivalry. Consciously or not, the critic competes with the text or art before him. Even celebration can, frequently does, come to eclipse its first cause. This, I suggested, is why the present-day inflation of the critic's status, vocabulary, didactic authority, idiom, media of dissemination, and self-esteem are not accidental by-products of the mandarinization of literature. The prepotence of criticism over original composition, the interposition of the critic's persona between the text and the general light, are betrayals existentially rooted in the critical act. The impulse towards solipsistic sovereignty, towards the finding that there is really little left "out there" worth serious criticism, or that what there is must be "deconstructed" by the critic and immersed in Medea's cauldron, is no byzantine paradox. It is a thrust latent in all criticism. Finally, irremediably, the critic is judge and master of the text.

The reader is servant to the text. The genuine teacher, textual editor, scribe are called to a clerisy of service. The text finds out its condign reader. Often he would resist its peremptory ingress, even as
the prophet seeks to shut his teeth against the imperatives of his calling (Jonah was a "reader"). The reader's acceptance of the canon comports a trusteeship, mute and private except in those practices of collaborative reiteration, commitment to memory, and heuristic commentary mentioned above. But whether singular or participatory, unspoken or communicated, the reader is "in service" to the text. Roy Campbell recounts how the back of his spirit and the back of his body were bent when the text of St. John of the Cross "leapt upon him" from fortunate ambush. He became, as every true reader must become, a shepherd to the being of the text, a doorkeeper at the always closed and always opened gates to meaning. This latter simile is, of course, a borrowing from Kafka's parable of the doorkeeper before the threshold of the Law. In its seeming self-contradiction of closure and aperture, this fable illustrates concretely the process of dialogue with a canonic text. We understand and we do not understand enough; we grasp and that which we grasp eludes us. Again, there is nothing occult about the actual process, though it is difficult to paraphrase. It is the experience of the actor when the part which he has enclosed in memory springs to autonomous, mastering life; it is the ordinary experience of the performing musician in reference to the external or internalized score. Perhaps one might put it this way: the critic's will acts. The reader's apprehension enacts.

But if there is nothing occult in this process, there is in its motivation and pursuit a contract with the transcendent. In the final analysis, the reader has subscribed to a contract of implicit presence. He must "enact as if" the letter is the vessel, however opaque, however fragmented, of the spirit. He must venture a Pascalian wager on the iconic potential of the work. The assumptions of such a contract have often been spelled out: by Novalis, when he urged that the "true meaning of the World" had been lost but was recapturable in filaments of numinous discourse; by Péguy, when he identified une lecture bien faite with the unfolding of the blossom on the silent bough; by Heidegger when he asserted that "the fate of Western man" could well hinge on the right emendation of and answerability to a fragment of Anaximander. Or to put it in shorthand: the reader must suppose and accept that Flaubert was not indulging in rhetoric or baseless metaphor when he cried out, in the pain of mortal sickness: "Why must I die while that tart Emma Bovary lives, and will continue to live?"

The contract with transcendence cannot be empirically validated. Its guarantor is theological, if this word is allowed its widest compass. As is "theological" the warranty which underwrites the validity of metaphor and analogy (an issue closely argued in Pierre Boutang's
key work, L'Ontologie du secret). This is the obvious weakness of the reader’s theoretical position. The critic owes no hostages to mystery. The reader does. There is a necessary sense for him in the translation chosen by Luther in Revelation when he termed the “Book of Life” to be an actual book. The reader must give almost literal weight to Mallarme’s conceit that the sum of being is Le Livre. This view can be felt to be at once exultant and a little mad—as so often are the practices of textual criticism, epigraphy, philology, heraldry, numismatics, and exegesis in its pure vein. Ecstatic, “deranged” if you will, servants of the canon stand or dance “beside themselves” because the text is now the sole and imperious lodger in the house of their being.

Of course, “critic” and “reader” as I have sketched them are near-fictions. Neither can be found at all readily in a pure state. There will be in even the most magisterial or narcissist of critics elements of disinterested acceptance, of apprehension beyond judgment. There have been in the most complete readers of whom we have record—an important qualification in view of the privacy of so much reading—critical reflexes, verdicts, impulses towards labeling. Even approximations to absolute types are rare. F. R. Leavis would stand near to the pole of unwavering criticism; Housman comes near to being the total reader (and neither of these two cases is altogether innocent of the pathological). In the ordinary run of things, “criticism” and “reading” interpenetrate and overlap. Nonetheless, it may be of some use to bear in mind the fiction of contrastive absolutes.

It is a platitude to observe the dishevelment in today’s cultivation of humane letters. The self-satisfactions, assembly-line output of trivia, philosophic vacancy, and histrionics which mark the academic profession of literature and its marriage to journalism are obvious. The debasement of the concept of “research” in literary studies verges on scandal. Implicit in this essay is the hypothesis that much in this condition derives from a confusion between “criticism” and the practices of exegetical reading from which the modern study of secular letters sprang. The notion that any but the most exceptional of human beings has anything critically new or reevaluative to say of Dante, or of Shakespeare, or of Kafka, is cant. It is worse cant to institutionalize the belief that such rare ordering sight will manifest itself in the university undergraduate or graduate student. The present edifice of literary-critical studies (gossip in jargon) is a derogation, inevitable in view of the fact that the great majority of texts had been properly edited previously, from the exact arts of philology, historical linguis-
tics, textual criticism, recension, and collation. Today's undergraduate "critic" and "researcher in sensibility" is a high-wire acrobat who has not learned to walk.

What we need (I have argued this elsewhere) are not "programs in the humanities," "schools of creative writing," "programs in creative criticism" (mirabile dictu, these exist). What we need are places, i.e., a table with some chairs around it, in which we can learn again how to read, how to read together. One aims at such a desideratum at the most literal levels. Elementary lexical and grammatical analyses, the parsing of sentences, the scansion of verse (prosody being the inseparable pulse and music of meaning), the ability to make out even the most rudimentary lineaments of those innervations and figures of rhetoric which, from Pindar to Joyce, have been the carriers of felt life—all these are now esoteric or lost skills. We need "houses of and for reading" in which there is enough silence for the sinews of memory to awake. If language, under the pressure of the wonder (the "surplus value") of multiple meaning, if the music of thought are to endure, it is not more "critics" we require but more and better "readers."

"Great readers," says Borges, who is himself one, are "rarer than great writers." The list would include Montaigne reading Seneca and rereading himself; Coleridge reading Jacobi and Schelling, a reading whose motion of acquiescence and metamorphic repossession Thomas McFarland has analyzed with a tact equaling that of any other study of the stress of influence; Péguy reading Corneille and Victor Hugo; Walter Benjamin reading Goethe's Elective Affinities; Heidegger reading Sophocles and Trakl (not Hölderlin whom he often reads willfully and with opportunism); Mandelstam reading Dante and Chénier; Alexandre Koyré reading Galileo; Nabokov reading (not translating) Pushkin; Jean Starobinski reading Rousseau; William Empson reading complex words; Gianfranco Contini reading the Provençal poets, Dante, and Montale; Pierre Boutang reading Plato's Philebus; Michael Dummett reading Frege, where depth and openness of reading are radically creative; D. Carne-Ross reading Góngora and Ariosto; Gershon Scholem reading the Kabbalists and reading Walter Benjamin. . . Servants to the text, scrupulous ecstasies, for in reference to the canon, scruple and ecstasy are one.

A list of great critics? It would, no doubt, be longer and of greater public luster. But is there need of such a list? Critics advertise.