Once I had decided to produce a volume of collected essays, I enjoyed the prospect of writing some shorter pieces which I had fallen into the habit of putting aside for my book-length projects. Thus almost half these essays have been written in the last two or three years; none was published before 1956, and only a few appeared before 1960. Further, I have not always been able to resist some reworking of older pieces. More than the scattered remnants of my history, then, this volume for the most part constitutes the most recent and considered statement of my critical position. This fact makes it easier for me to make the claim, all too conventional in books like this, that here is no random collection of essays but rather an organized grouping of them in accordance with a central plan. This claim receives support also from what I sadly acknowledged in an earlier Preface to be “my innate single-mindedness,” so that “the more I work the more I find my various projects turning out to be aspects or developments of one project which I like to think of as a single body of theoretical and applied criticism.” I fear, therefore, that no essay I would produce could be in any serious sense random or even occasional, though I have sometimes lamented this fact.

Consistent in these essays is the intimate relation of theoretical to applied criticism, of the “place” of criticism to the “play” of criticism. It is this relation which firmly unites the two sections of the book. The theoretical and the applied seemed so interchangeable to me at times that I was uncertain about whether to include some pieces in one or the other section, although the surrounding pieces usually helped me make up my mind. Running through both the theoretical and applied criticism is the doctrine which I earlier termed contextualism. Readers familiar with my work know that I refer to the context of the work rather than to the context of a social-historical moment or the context of a writer’s body of work, of
his "vision." At the same time they know that I do not mean to enclose the
work within purely formalist considerations, that I am concerned largely—if
not primarily—with the existential reflections of contextual relations.

The contextualist theme that organizes this body of essays necessarily
leads to my recurrent concern with the limited possibilities of criticism as an
open, non-poetic discourse that seeks to capture a closed poetic system. The
necessity of critical modesty and the temptations of critical arrogance come
to form a second unifying theme. It is thus a consequence of my aesthetic
that I must organize this volume about the dual and opposed notions of the
"play" and the "place" of criticism. And these in turn lead to what I hope is
a healthy restraint upon temptations to critical dogmatics, a continuing
argument for the critic’s empirical as well as his theoretical impulse. His
theory may put him firmly in his "place" but, insofar as it is possible, not by
precluding the freedom of his "play."

The empirical impulse must keep the critic a player always, in the
several senses of that splendid word player. During the years across which
these essays span, I have learned that the task of the critic, as he matures and
learns his task and from his task, is to play freely—but with his own
theoretical assumptions as well as with the work to which he addresses
himself. He must finally respect both his position and the current work, but
only with the awareness that his position should be an incomplete, ulti­
mately inconsistent, developing thing to be left open at the farther end for
the impact of the new experience. At the same time he must have the com­
panion awareness that what he calls "the work" is no more than his vision
of the work, subject to change with his own change and with his assump­
tion of new assumptions—which is to say, his assumption of new roles to
play.

Thus this volume should become a medley of themes and counter-
themes: the reader should find not only statements of a position and
applications of it, but retreats from it, at moments even mockery of it in the
awareness of other tentative roles to be played—both theoretical self-
indulgence and theoretical self-criticism. I must hope that this attempt to
express and explore my own freedom does not too seriously inhibit those
theoretical contributions I for much of the time mean to make. It is the risk
any critic must take to avoid the greater risk of dogma, of theoretical
self-enclosure. And if I have doubts about wanting the poem to be an open
system, I have no doubts about the desirable openness of the critical act.

But I must confess a single sense in which the critical mind revealed in
these essays means to be less than wholly open or unlimitedly playful. For there is a single assumption without which I could pretend to no consistency of theoretical objective. The reader will note that the method, and even the recurrent metaphors and allusions, behind all I do in criticism or say about criticism in this volume springs from the notion that the literary work is, or at its best wants to be, a closed form, a tale forever retold, circular as well as progressive: its own urn. The tradition of literary aesthetics that took its various paths only after beginning with this assumption had little reason until lately to discover and to examine critically what it had been assuming. But the recent defenders of literary openness, romantically embattled and self-consciously undisciplined, have insisted on an alternative kind of voice for literature, the instinctual voice that had been automatically bypassed in the search for the refinements of form. In their anti-aesthetic, anti-critical posturings for the anti-poem, in their movements at once toward total speech and toward total silence, in their desire to replace art with life, the word with the naked act, the rebels against the major Western tradition in poetics may undo all that underlies the concerns of this book and the long line of books that stand behind it. I, too, am assuming, then, what most aesthetics in the West have since Aristotle assumed about the desirability of closedness, of integrity, without probing the claim at its foundation. To attempt a justification of what has seemed so obvious for so long, to meet head-on its recently arisen alternative, its restless, chaos-seeking, brawling antagonist, is beyond my interest as it is beyond my daring. The new day of the anti-poet, dedicated to an anti-aesthetic, is for me in my complacency just the latest disguise for Old Night.

Since these essays span ten years and a score of occasions, the personal debts I have incurred along the way are too numerous to list. There are all those who have shared in my development; there are the chairmen of symposia and the editors of journals who have created the occasions for which pieces were written; there are the colleagues who have patiently and helpfully read individual essays in manuscript. These and others form a group whose size is a humbling reminder of how profoundly the scholar's is a collaborative task. But my wife Joan must be mentioned and thanked singly as the one constant collaborator on every manuscript, on every occasion.

M. K.

Newport Beach, California
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