The Play and Place of Criticism

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I
The Play and Place of Criticism

It is clear enough, and generally acknowledged, that in recent years, with the growth of skepticism about the powers of criticism, the poem has been increasingly returned to its creator in ways that critical fashions of not long ago would hardly have led us to expect. Perhaps, however, this was a predictable reaction to those years in which literary criticism and the object on which it was exclusively to focus received more than their due of attention and justification. Hence the proliferation of phenomenological studies of poets, of studies of poets as myth-makers—a focusing on "vision" that has come to make up a serious critical and theoretical revision. It is as if we would no longer be content with middlemen in our desire to come as close as we can to the source of inspired vision, to the stone of Heraclea.

In the midst of this new swing, I must try to keep the wheel from turning too far in the descent in criticism's fortunes, to keep the critic's warning voice still with us as we return to the creator, who not only precedes him but in fact makes his existence possible. I must, in short, defend the play of criticism even as I acknowledge that criticism must know its place.

Let me take as my text and my definition of the critic's role, as it is juxtaposed to the poet's, this brilliantly concise statement by Leo Spitzer,

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1 A shorter version of Part I of this essay was delivered to the College Section of the NCTE at the 1963 meeting and published in *College English* XXV (March, 1964), 405-12, with the title "The Poet and His Work—and the Role of Criticism," under the general subject for the session, "The Poet's Voice and the Critic's Voice in the Teaching of Literature."
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who here dignifies the critic with the name of "philologist": Poetry, he tells us,

consists of words, with their meaning preserved, which, through the magic of the poet who works within a "prosodic" whole, arrive at a sense-beyond-sense; and . . . it is the task of the philologist to point out the manner in which the transfiguration just mentioned has been achieved. The irrationality of the poem need not lose anything at the hands of a discreet linguistic critic; on the contrary, he will work in accord with the poet (although with no regard to his approval), insofar as he will patiently and analytically retrace the way from the rational to the irrational: a distance which the poet may have covered in one bold leap.²

In this statement are all the issues concerning how the critic can try to raise his voice in unison with the poet's. Spitzer is here answering Karl Shapiro who, in his "A Farewell to Criticism" (Poetry, 1948), makes the language of poetry so totally sui generis that it comes to be made up of "not-words," utterly different from the same words used in prose. These not-words, according to Shapiro, "in their retreat from meaning, arrive at a prosodic sense-beyond-sense." Hence the impossibility of the very enterprise of criticism and the need for Shapiro’s blithe farewell to it, in the interest of the uniqueness of each poem’s language system.³ From this position we can see the force of Spitzer’s counterstatement: it insists upon "words, with their meaning preserved," rather than "not-words" in a "retreat from meaning," as the materials of poetry; and it insists upon the tracing of the immediate "transfiguration" in the "prosodic" whole from words with their meaning preserved to the "sense-beyond-sense" as a feasible function of criticism instead of denying any proper function for criticism at all. Seeing the intimate relation between the materials of the poem and the surrounding world which provides them, Spitzer refuses to engage in the mystique that cuts them off as "not-words." He does acknowledge, with Shapiro, that the prosodic whole of the poem ends in a sense-beyond-sense; but he denies that it begins this way, claiming rather that the prosodic whole exercises a transfiguring force that allows what goes in as words with their meaning preserved to come out as sense-beyond-sense. So Spitzer may be claiming a mystique of his own, but—since it is a movement "from the rational to the irrational"—it is one which the critic is permitted to make it his business to trace.

The critic for Spitzer, then, is seen as a mediator between the unique

³ It is hardly necessary to mention that Shapiro has come a long—and I would say unfortunate—way from this position.
language of the poet and the common language of the rest of us. That is, he provides a mediate discourse that follows upon—indeed creeps after—the immediate phenomenon of transfiguration. Spitzer falls between two extreme views of the relation of poetic discourse to non-poetic discourse. At the one extreme, as a kind of inevitable consequence of Crocean purity, is Shapiro’s view of the poem’s organization of “not-words”; but at the other extreme is the refusal to see anything at all unique about the poem, to see it as an untransfigured collection of words with their meanings preserved. The latter view sees poetry itself as mediate, so that criticism, finding the poem comfortably available, can end up just another form of philosophic discourse about a somewhat more disordered form of discourse no different in kind from itself or from any other discourse. Spitzer seeks to keep the workings of the poetic context (the prosodic whole) immediate while allowing it to remain available to the mediating discourse of the critic; indeed he seeks to keep the poem itself open at the front end (words with their meaning preserved) even as the system qua system miraculously transfigures its materials so as to seal itself off in its sense-beyond-sense. And the critic struggles in his painfully analytic way to account for the poet’s linguistic leaps made by words that multiply their internal dimensions. But the critic can do it, according to Spitzer. A poet like St. John of the Cross, “content with the stock of words already given by the language, . . . multiplies, by repetition, variation, and syntactical disposition, the density of the web of semantic interrelations,” until “these words have become endowed with a mystical depth which makes them appear as new words (though they are, pace Mr. Shapiro, the old words)” (p. 169). And Spitzer the philologist must help show us how this phenomenon can occur, moving step by perceptive step to trace a movement that no steps could have managed.

Although the critic in this manner dogs the poet’s steps—imposing them even where the poet has leapt and not stepped—and will to this extent “work in accord with the poet,” still Spitzer tells us he will do so with no regard for the poet’s approval. The critic apparently can be true to the poem and not to the poet, indeed can be true to the poem by denying its parentage. Elsewhere Spitzer tells us a poem must have “vision” to be “poetic,” and he concerns himself with the peculiarity of a poet’s vision, the special way the poet conceives “a world radically different from our everyday and workaday world of ratiocination and practicality.” Indeed recent critics have become increasingly occupied with such visions and the poets they

4 Essays on English and American Literature, pp. 218–19, for quotations and discussion in this paragraph.
characterize. But is this not a way of turning to the poet from his work? to the poet as seer from his work as object? to the human prime-mover from his artifact, which is only metaphorically his child? Not so for Spitzer, who, in the manner of the contextualist critic, is finally concerned, not with the vision behind the work, but with the vision that is formed as the work, is defined by the new word that is the work, is identical with the work as a prosodic whole. For beyond the need for a poetic vision, as a mere raw material, is the need for the work to transform the merely "poetic" to the "artistic," that is, to transform the different vision of a world to a "work of art . . . characterized by its self-sufficiency and organic perfection which allow it to stand out as an independent whole." So if the poet has vision, as critics we must center our interest on how it speaks, not in the poem but as the poem. As a poet speaking, he speaks the immediacy of his subjective vision in the immediate objectivity that the poetic system encloses. And his is the only discourse that can unite immediacy with objectivity—though at an enormous discursive price. In view of this unique conjunction, we can hardly restrict the poem in its workings to what the man or his life can tell us in languages other than that of this poem. Only it can allow us total access to the vision—and its world—which he as poet creates, and thereby objectively structures, for himself and for us all.

This view of the poem and its vision as irreducible to its author and his vision leads to our viewing literary criticism as a distinct, analytic, and thus rationally ordered set of disciplines, irreducible to the disciplines governing the use of biographical and other historical data. And we would accordingly justify the need to find a separate place for criticism in the training of the teacher of literature, who would necessarily find himself incurring the profound obligations and pleasures of the critic's role as Spitzer conceives of it. But we must not inflate our expectations about what even the best criticism can accomplish, if its primary objective is to make its voice a high-fidelity account of the poet's. In terming criticism a rational pursuit, we may, like Spitzer, too easily assume that its orderly manner will not inhibit it as it tries to trace the baffling machinations of the fully activated poetic context.

Spitzer, it will be remembered, saw that the critic must "patiently and analytically retrace the way from the rational to the irrational: a distance which the poet may have covered in one bold leap"—thus from sense (the old words with their meaning preserved) to the sense-beyond-sense of the transfigured new word. What precisely is irrational about the operation of
poems, if *irrational* is really the proper word? Clearly what Spitzer must mean is that the multiple and simultaneous ways in which words—their sounds, their meanings, their extension into metaphor, archetype, character, and action—interact within the poetic context defy the rational operations of our critical discourse, which after all owes the same obligations to the semantic, syntactic, and logical operations of language as all other non-poetic discourse does. But to claim that poetry has ways that resist any exhaustive explanation by more orderly discourse is not really to argue that poetry itself is either rational or irrational in its nature but that it is of another order to which the terms *rational* and *irrational* really do not apply, may even be irrelevant. As the system becomes fully empowered, as it explodes into life, all elements that began as mere references swell with the burden of associations absorbed from its neighbors. Or should I change the metaphor and mix alchemy with recent politics by saying that each element becomes gilt with the associations of all?

Language can be manipulated in our best poems in ways that do serious violence to the ways in which we are accustomed to find semantics, syntax, and logic operating. And yet, as the word *manipulated* suggests, it is language whose behavior is finally controlled and directed—perhaps more completely and efficiently so than in any other form of discourse. But it is an order of control utterly alien to what we expect to find except in poetry. It is language in rebellion against the ways in which we normally use it as a counter for things; it is language that subverts its normal auxiliary function of denying its own terminal existence in order, instrumentally, to lead us to the world; it is language that proclaims itself as substance and its own world of multiplying meanings as sovereign. If we find that the law of non-

5 I wish there were time on this occasion to observe more precisely this kind of operation in the poetic context. But examples of this sort of movement in language cannot be traced in a moment. My entire study of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare's Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (Princeton, 1964) stems from just these miraculous manipulations of language. (See the following essay on the subject in this volume.) The *Sonnets,* of course, are full of them. To cite at random, one cannot try to justify the full sense of "image" in Sonnet 3 ("Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest") or the juxtaposition of "used" and "lives" in Sonnet 4 ("Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend") or the rumination over the stately ruin that is "mortal" in Sonnet 64 ("When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced") or the bitter "wise world" compounded of "vile world" and "vilest worms" in Sonnet 71 ("No longer mourn for me when I am dead") or the multiplication of those eloquent demonstrative pronouns in Sonnet 74 ("But be contented. When that fell arrest") or the magnificent "hugely politic" as the culmination of the anti-political imagery of Sonnet 124 ("If my dear love were but the child of state") without being astounded with all that seems to happen at a stroke. The way in which
contradiction does not appear to apply to this sovereign world of language, the fault is not with that world but with our too rational insistence upon being propositional about it, with our insistence upon measuring a unique discourse with the yardsticks of our common discourse, which we assume is the only kind going. And if we are sensitive enough to find that a discourse eludes these measuring instruments, we charge it with behaving "irrationally," although its behavior is proper, indeed is perfectly proper, to its poetic order as the behavior of our discourse probably never is to its non-poetic order.

But how, then, should the critic treat the meaning of this poetic context, provided he can think of the word meaning without automatically reducing it to the sort of meaning yielded by non-poetic discourse? He may see that, just as the language has interrelations within it that function in terms of a unique system of controls, so its world reflects unique interrelations among those tensions, even contradictions, that characterize our experience at its most immediate, felt level. This level we may term the existential in its unique fullness that denies those generalizing concepts and propositions that our limited discourse forces us to impose upon it. In its dynamics the existential must resist the fixity that all discourse requires as a condition for its very being. Only the poetic context can claim the dynamics, the multiple and contradictory tensions within its own interrelations, that match those of the existential level of our reality. Yet it also has those elements of order and control—its own elements, responsive to its own needs—that can fix this fluid existential level for the perception of us all, though without thinning its density. The poetic context can, however, claim freedom from any more generally imposed elements of order and thus from the frozen discourse of logically marshalled propositions which, however much they may intend to speak of the unique person in the uniqueness of his existence, can finally speak only a generic tongue addressed to universal instances, not to instantaneous ones. All this is to echo the earlier notion that only poetry can be a discourse that unites the immediate with the objective, that matches the immediacy of subjective experience with the objectivity of the fixed, formal precision that gives poetry its aesthetic.

these movements are earned is hardly logical, though they are indeed earned. And the meanings finally arrived at can hardly be reduced to what biography or conventions can tell us any more than they can be reduced to what a dictionary can tell us, no matter how sound its historical principles. But neither, alas, can they even be reduced totally to what the language of a critic can tell us as he tries to keep up with all that happens to words as the context newly refines and defines itself.
nature. Other discourse, necessarily and purposefully mediate, must restrict itself only to the mediating rational framework imposed upon experience to rob it of its baffling immediacy that teases us and our discourse out of thought. But what, then, of the critic with his mediate discourse and his immediate poetic object—immediate precisely because it resists both translation and abstraction? Unless he wishes to compete with the poem by writing a poem of his own—which is probably a way only of producing second-rate criticism as well as second-rate poetry—how is he to frame his dialect even to approach his object? 

Perhaps the following oversimplified diagram will help frame his problem, even if it only shows his plight as the more desperate. (The philosopher and the poet both move straight across from left to right, so that the arrows apply only to the critic's movements.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Mode of Language Used</th>
<th>Level of Experience Illuminated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>philosopher</td>
<td>propositional discourse</td>
<td>generic, conceptual, mediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critic</td>
<td>contextual poetic discourse</td>
<td>unique, existential, immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poet</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

At least this diagram indicates what the critic may most want to do, though his materials prevent him from doing so. The critic, borrowing something from each, somehow is to work his way back and forth between the language used by the poet and that used by the philosopher and between the experiences each is to illuminate. Granted that the philosopher also may wish to illuminate the unique, existential level of experience; but his language, influenced as it is by its logical obligations, reduces whatever aspects of the existential he means to treat to the commonly universal level.

Throughout this essay I am of course assuming an ideal poem, that is, the perfection of the poetic context in its workings—a perfection that in fact rarely if ever occurs. To the extent that it does not occur, the critic's judgmental function requires him to point out as deficiencies in the poem those places where its unique language system fails, where it opens too easily and immediately to his common language, and ours. To the extent that the critic must struggle—as, in this essay, I have him struggling—with a unique language system in the totality of its operations, using only his own inadequate language, he is acknowledging the aesthetic perfection of the poem, so that his struggles carry an implied evaluation of the highest sort.
permitted—indeed invented—by the coherent organization of his propositional structure. What is being claimed, then, is that the pre-analytic level at which we most immediately exist can be fixed or objectified only in the self-complicating dynamics of the poetic context, and that any attempt to objectify it in a more common language, responsive to more general demands, will—as it trims away the many diverting dimensions of poetic discourse—lose the mysterious uniqueness at the heart of our existence. The critic must be aware of these dangers—and disheartened by them since his own language is so limited in its dimensions. He alone takes upon himself the futile, self-defeating task of using propositional discourse in order to reveal its limitations, to shame it before the poetic, exposing its utter inadequacy to the experience it claims to talk about. Still propositional discourse is all he has to use to grasp the uniqueness of contextual discourse, even as the latter is the only discourse that can grasp the uniquely existential. The critic must try to grasp the contextual within the terms of the propositional while trying to avoid the generic, conceptual world of experience to which this discourse, as propositional, must lead. Finally, of course, he can no more manage this feat than the philosopher can, so that the arrow toward the right of my diagram—suggesting that the critic can move, with his limited discourse, through the poetic context to the uniquely existential in experience—is misleading about his accomplishments even if it properly represents his ambition. He too finds himself, with all mediators, in the conceptual and generic. But there is always his primary act of faith toward the object as unique and the experience it illuminates as unique, even if his necessary obligation to his language makes the gesture somewhat quixotic. So the procedure is muddy and self-defeating; but it does proceed—doggedly and with a clumsy pragmatism that is his response to what is theoretically denied him. What he produces must, within its own orderly framework, be rationally clearer than the poem in order to justify its existence as criticism; yet it must be muddier than the conceptual order in order to justify the existence of poetry.

The critic must fail: he must end in a hopeless middle ground of a would-be existential philosophy even as he recognizes that very phrase as an oxymoron. He may have to sound like a philosopher obsessed with the unreconcilable contradictions in the human condition, with its irrationality, so that he would differ from the too rational philosophizer upon poetry only in that his paraphrases would be more tortuous, or more double-faced and resistant to system. Not that the world of the poem is really a chaotic,
would-be propositional world that—through a strange combination of poetic economy and rational waywardness—manages to make several incompatible assertions at once. It merely seems contradictory—is made to stand forth stripped of its true nature—when the critic, using the only discourse at his disposal, tries to talk rationally about it. The poem, as contextual, no more asserts contradictions than it asserts anything else. But through its very being the poem provokes its enraptured critic to use his language of limited rapture to talk about the poem as if it were making such assertions, although its meaning cannot be reduced to them, as the critic well knows. As with its vision, the only assertion the poem makes is the one that all its aspects work together to make as together they make the poem by becoming the poem. In its wholeness this assertion, again like the vision, cannot be caught in the critic’s language even as it catches him in the experience of itself. So, inadequate language or not, the critic is driven to try to catch for us all what it is that has caught him.

The contextualist view of poetry has always had to make the distinction we have seen in Spitzer between the old words, which the words of the poem were before this poem and which they seem to be in this poem until it works its systematic magic, and the new word which this poem becomes, with its system working to provide its unique definition. Accordingly, the contextualist has also had constantly to worry about how the mediating critic, with his old words, could hope to approach the new word that is the poem any more successfully than could any other non-poet. With this worry we are back to the post-Crocean cul de sac that we found with Shapiro leads to the temptation of purism: the declaration of the total inaccessibility of the poem to criticism. Of course, this is a more comforting view for poets than it is for critics, who must save what they can, turning from despair in their task even as they resist vainglorious pretensions for it.

So we may have to be less optimistic than Spitzer about the power of criticism, with its analytic, unilinear language creeping in its petty pace, to capture the multiple levels of simultaneity which the acrobatic poetic context displays. And these limitations of the power of criticism the critic and his readers must never forget: we must always remain aware of our need to turn again and again from the critic to the poet and his voice, since the critic’s total faithfulness—let me repeat—must be to them, provided by the poet’s voice we mean only the one that speaks in and through the work, as the work. The more remarkable the poetic context, the more marked the critic’s limitations, but also the more privileged his task and the less he can
resist it. Though he should know that a commonness of language dictates that only a difference of degree, sometimes barely measurable, separates the critical reductions of a crude message-hunter from his own attempts to wrestle with his terms to torture them toward a faithful rendering of the untranslatable, still he struggles to prove that failures can be partial and that proof of their partiality constitutes also a partial victory over the unavoidable incapacities of his materials. This gives him courage to be the pragmatist who can try to come closer rather than farther even as he sees the all-or-none in his situation: the theoretical impossibility of his forcing his discourse to be, like himself, more than the poem’s victim. But he is a better, a more victorious critic as he understands that, by choosing his role and knowing his place, he chooses to be the victim of that role and that place even as he is the victim of the poem. He restricts himself to the propositional dialect to which all but the poets must finally restrict themselves. Yet he must seek to bring into that coarse medium—and in it display to the rest of us—that elusive dialect of the language system whose unique capacities derive from its power to slip from the grasp of the common tongue.

In the end it seems that I am calling for a rhapsodic criticism; that is, for echoes of the poem and commentaries on the poem by the critic as rhapsode in the Greek manner. We must remember how, according to Plato, Ion the rhapsode suffered—without defense—at the hands of Socrates. Yet we ask the critic to be rhapsode, his voice at once his own and moving in response to the poet’s. Drawn into the poet’s fine frenzy through the pull of the stone of Heraclea referred to in my epigraph from Plato, the critic is caught between Homer’s irresistible and unreasoning frenzy and the ineluctable reasoning of the smirking Socrates. He cannot account for the former even as he is held accountable by the latter. So he feels inadequate to both.

Robert Penn Warren put the matter with incomparable brilliance in his improved version of the fable of Orillo at the opening of his well-known essay “Pure and Impure Poetry”:

... the poem is like the monstrous Orillo in Boiardo’s Orlando Innamorato. When the sword lops off any member of the monster, that member is immediately rejoined to the body, and the monster is as formidable as ever. But the poem is even more formidable than the monster, for Orillo’s adversary finally gained a victory by an astonishing feat of dexterity: he slashed off both the monster’s arms and quick as a wink seized them and flung them into the river. The critic who vaingloriously trusts his method to account for the poem, to exhaust the poem, is trying to emulate this dexterity: he thinks that he, too, can
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win by throwing the lopped-off arms into the river. But he is doomed to failure. Neither fire nor water will suffice to prevent the rejoining of the mutilated members to the monstrous torso. There is only one way to conquer the monster: you must eat it, bones, blood, skin, pelt, and gristle. And even then the monster is not dead, for it lives in you, is assimilated into you, and you are different, and somewhat monstrous yourself, for having eaten it.

So the monster will always win, and the critic knows this. He does not want to win. He knows that he must always play stooge to the monster. All he wants to do is to give the monster a chance to exhibit again its miraculous power.

The critic is a critic in that his activity puts the poem to a most severe test: it must work to make him fail. Conversely, he must knowingly fail to make it work. To the extent that he is a good critic and a faithful reader, that failure will be a significant measure of its success.

II

Let me add a confession to undercut the modest note with which the critic tries to disarm both reader and poet. I begin it with a frank question: How, in view of so restrained a statement of the place of criticism, can the critic manage the freedom for the play that makes his activity an enlarging one for himself and his culture? The double injunction—criticism must freely play but criticism must know its place—has conflicting demands in its two parts. If we have seen the more modest side of the critic in attitudes like that represented by the Warren quotation as a summary of all I have said so far, we now must confront the boldness—even arrogance—that lurks just beneath the mask of humility that leads the critic to pose as tragic hero, one who fails in order to guarantee the work’s success. As the critic in one mood seeks his success in his small, purposeful, even sacrificial failure, so he can in another mood, as frustrated artist himself, become emboldened to seek in his criticism a free act that is his own triumph.

But is this not the very competing with the poet—the critic’s creation of a pseudo-poetry—that we saw his fealty to his beloved object expressly proscribe? Undoubtedly so. And our critic in his more self-effacing mood must consistently proscribe it. In this mood we saw him view poetry as the sole form of discourse that manages to enclose objective immediacy, the fusion and transformation of that subjective immediacy which is one’s unexpressed inward vision and that objective mediacy which is non-poetic discourse (including, alas, criticism properly restrained). As both objective and immediate, the poem becomes the sole form that is an altogether
realized act of freedom, the capturing—the stilling, the embodiment—of movement that still moves.\textsuperscript{7}

If, however, the critic can have his objective discourse only by foregoing immediacy for mediacy of discourse, he must choose to be bound by the limits of the poem that is his object even as he seeks to play freely within those bounds. But this is to make that adverb “freely” a deceit, contradicted at every moment by the bounds. The critic may declare his freedom by insisting on his play, but he will still marshal his justifying evidence from the poem as he goes. What this evidence will justly allow becomes, then, the boundary concept restricting the freedom of his play and keeping his activity in its place.

Nevertheless, the critic’s defensive position will cause him to muster, and in part yield to, his arrogance. As we have seen in Plato’s rhapsode trapped between Homer and Socrates, the critic must expect to be disliked by the poets for violating their systems with his discursive intrusions; and he must expect to be distrusted, if not scorned, by other systematic users of non-poetic discourse—scientific and philosophic—for struggling along with a bastard language not systematically propositional because of its borrowings from the poetic and not systematically poetic because of its dependence on propositional proprieties. Yet as middleman he must struggle along in just this way to serve the rest of us as the “rings” farther removed from the poetic source—that is, to serve culture in the historical march of its institutions and ideas. For to all these he must make discursively available a contextually-existentially unique system which, for all its words, is discursively as silent as a statue. Yet we need the grasp of all that it in its special way “says” in its propositional silence, although our own coarsely utilitarian habits of language put us in need of the critic’s help.

Before the silent perfection of the poetic system, the critic, in his judgmental role, can grunt his own silent approval of the system. If he grunts his disapproval, he can manage to talk as well, to explain the incompleteness of the system, its control by other, extramural systems. But on the favorable side, beyond grunting his approval, he can—in hopes of leading us to “see” and then silently to grunt our own approval—point to the elusive internal relations that may until now have escaped our notice, can point to the magical and unpredictable accretions of meaning that have been set in motion.

\textsuperscript{7} The essay “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry,” below, is devoted to the exploration of this definition of poetry.
So the critic can grunt and, to substantiate his grunts of approval, he can point. But can he speak? Well, as Benedetto Croce’s negations have taught us, the critic can tell us all that the poem is not as he seeks to protect it from non-poetic systems. So he can speak negatively of what it is not and what it does not mean. But can he speak positively of what the poem is and means? Clearly, in spite of all that argues he cannot, he must speak to this purpose. And he must speak in a way that, cautious and distrustful of itself and its imprisonings, yet imposes discursive system, however tentatively, sporadically, sloppily. Otherwise, for all its superb functioning, the poem may have no more than aesthetic effects on us, may be prevented from shaping our vision of our world. Of course, the great poems have always managed to have more than aesthetic effects and to help shape the vision of their culture, but not so many as might have—and those not so profoundly and as immediately as they might have—if each had its critic, at once diffident and daring, at once imposing discursive categories and forcing these to vibrate to the poem’s destruction of categories. The critic, then, must make the thematic plunge as he forces his fidelity to the poem to give way in part to his responsibility to history and his ambition for himself. His difficulties, however they alert his caution, can end only by feeding his daring.

The presumptuous critic can insist that his tentative superimposition of structure upon the poem—a structure at once discursively responsible and existentially immediate, at once referential and free, sanctioned by the work and sanctioned by his play—is an act of freedom possible and even promising to the writer. Here is a notion that can foster either self-deception or recklessness in him. The blank page in his typewriter is not open to the totally free creation, the utter self-realization, of poet or storyteller. Rather the critic’s is a discourse that moves, however freely, in response to a story already told but silent—silent as Keats’ urn—concerning its meaning and the meaning of its beauty. So the critic’s discourse remains only variations on a theme, a “performance” of the poem, formed through the work, even as it dares, self-deceptively, for the occasion, pretend to be the poem’s one discursive equivalent.

How can we call this a free act, then? How can we properly restrain the critic without at the same time curbing the presumption he needs if he is to muster the daring that can tame the poem to the discursive limits to which the perception of the rest of us is measured? How can he play within his place? How balance his strangely incomplete creative freedom with his
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responsibility? In short, to what extent is his voice his own, to what extent his poet's? To what extent must his energies be spent, and his freedom drained away, by his worrying about matching the two voices, reducing his own to echo?

As soon, then, as we move beyond the properly pious acknowledgment of the primacy of the poem to the inevitable presumption of its critic, we are confronted by the antithetical pulls of his play and his place: on the one hand the free, self-indulgent practice of criticism as a masterful enterprise, and on the other the restricting considerations—prompted by literary theory—of its role or function, and necessarily of its limits. The critic's antithetical pulls, insofar as he must act in response to them both, make his a paradoxical, if not impossible, movement. His position, then, is no less difficult than I earlier claimed it to be in describing the proper modesty of his place; but its difficulty is now more honestly seen to have its roots in his arrogance as well as in his humility. And we must measure the full resonance of the critic by his self-assertion as well as by his submission: by his satisfying the mutually incompatible demands of play and place, act and theory, freedom and bondage. He must, in short, be responsive to his roles as both maestro and second fiddle. This volume may be seen as yet another futile attempt to join the two demands and the two roles, or at least—if I may close this essay in the modest vein—to demonstrate them, side by side, momentarily in peaceful coexistence.