
ures. Perhaps the most striking feature of Kissinger's public service was his eagerness to address large questions. Kissinger shared with men like Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon an affinity for the grandiose. Each of them was determined to leave a large mark on American life. But large designs do not necessarily make for an unblemished record.

Kissinger, as Isaacson depicts him, was at his best in dealing with the Middle East, China, and the Soviet Union. The Nixon-Kissinger actions here will be remembered as vital achievements in the winning of the Cold War, comparable to the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, John F. Kennedy's resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis, his Test Ban Treaty, and Ronald Reagan's later embrace of Gorbachev, perestroika, and glasnost. Likewise, Kissinger will win high marks for his shuttle diplomacy during and after the Yom Kippur War. His efforts to strike a balance between Israel and Egypt will be celebrated as ultimately leading to the Camp David Accords and greater stability in the Middle East.

Yet, as Isaacson shows, Kissinger also bears (along with Nixon) a heavy burden of guilt and shame for the massive loss of life and the substantial suffering inflicted on Southeast Asia. The two men's conviction that U.S. prestige required a slow, negotiated withdrawal from Vietnam—which in turn led to attacks upon Cambodia that brought internal instability and millions of deaths to that benighted country—was a flawed judgment.

It deserves to be remembered as among the worst decisions made by American statesmen in this century. And it was an extension of the deeper failing that will plague Kissinger's reputation forever. His affinity for realism—his readiness to sacrifice moral considerations for what he considered the national interest—should remind us that America's greatness as a nation rests partly on our antagonism to the more disastrous aspects of traditional international power politics.

In the final analysis Kissinger's record—and the heated response to it by the public and the press—seem a microcosm of America's 20th-century struggle with itself over realism and idealism. His use of balance-of-power diplomacy to advance the national interest takes its place in this country's century-long transformation into an orthodox nation-state practicing power politics. By contrast, complaints about Kissinger's unethical or illegal foreign policy reflect America's ongoing belief in, and hope for, a world governed by right rather than might. Ultimately, biographers and historians will debate and study Kissinger for what he tells us not only about U.S. diplomacy but also about the national anguish over what makes sense in our conduct of foreign affairs.

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Criticizing the Critics

A HISTORY OF MODERN CRITICISM, 1750–1950: Volume 8; French, Italian, and Spanish Criticism, 1900–1950. By René Wellek. Yale. 367 pp. \$42.50

A history of literary criticism? Why would anyone want to read such a thing? One possible answer is that literary criticism is comment on literature as an

image of human life, a fiction of possible lives. There is no reason to believe that the lives that have been lived exhaust the possibilities of living. The future may contain lives you or I could not imagine. So we have literature—as we have painting, sculpture, music, film, and dance—to sustain us in the conviction that life is, or may be, more various than anyone has known it to be.

Literary critics are concerned with such possibilities, such fictions. They bring to their talk about poems, novels, and stories many different interests. A work of literature may be read with many concerns in mind—religious, social, political, historical, or aesthetic. You might read *Pride and Prejudice* to understand what the lives of young, genteel, unaffluent English women in the early years of the 19th century were like, why the question of marriage was so urgent, how it comes about that one young woman differs so much from her sisters, her mother, and her father—or you might read it to see what the English novel in the early 19th century was up to and good at. Then again you might read it to marvel at the inventive power of a writer named Jane Austen, or, alternatively, to consider the creative capacity of the English language in particular or of language in general. Or you might simply read it for entertainment, diversion, to pass the time that would have passed anyway but not as pleasantly. Such is literary criticism. But why, having talked about literature, would anyone want to talk about the criticism of it—or to write a history of that criticism?

Because literary criticism is part of the history of ideas, of what the mind has made. You are interested in the ideas people have had and continue to have. Ideas, in this case, about literature. Why not? Literary criticism is at least as interesting as philosophy, if only because it deals with imagined lives in some relation to chaos and order, to possibility and fate, to conditions and the ingenuity called upon to overcome them. Literature is other lives, so far as they can be imagined and understood. To write the history of literary criticism is to write the history of certain ideas that have arisen from the experience not of writing literature but of reading it. That is where René Wellek comes in. He is interested in the ideas critics have had who have read many works of literature and tried to make sense of their experience as readers.

But Wellek, I am pleased to note, is not a detached observer. He has an axe to grind. As a young man in Prague, he took part in a

particular movement of literary theory and criticism which considered literature as an aesthetic activity, one that entails a formally distinctive use of language. The problem was how to show those formal attributes in practice and to distinguish the literary or poetic use of language from other, more mundane employments of it. A difficult proceeding. Impelled by his formalist conviction, Wellek proposed to trace the history of literary criticism as it has been practiced during the past 200 years in many countries and many languages. The present volume concludes his long travail. For ease of reference and to note the scale of his undertaking, I list the earlier volumes: (1) *The Later Eighteenth Century*, (2) *The Romantic Age*, (3) *The Age of Transition*, (4) *The Later Nineteenth Century*, (5) *English Criticism, 1900–1950*, (6) *American Criticism, 1900–1950*, and (7) *German, Russian, and Eastern European Criticism, 1900–1950*.

In 1982 Wellek, now professor emeritus of literature at Yale, published *The Attack on Literature, and Other Essays*. I shall refer to two of those essays, "Literature, Fiction, and Literariness" and "Reflections on my *History of Modern Criticism*." In the first of these Wellek defended his understanding of literature. While he conceded that any kind of writing may be of interest to someone for some purpose, it is reasonable to claim for literature a particular form of existence and a corresponding privilege. Literature exists and may be recognized as "high imaginative fiction"—*fiction* in the sense of a world conceived rather than a world alluded to or annotated; *imaginative*, meaning that a writer, composing a work of literature, exerts the distinctively human capacity to imagine what otherwise does not exist; *high*, presumably in the sense of spiritually and morally serious rather than trivial or sordid. Literature, Wellek declared, is an aesthetic experience that "yields a state of contemplation, of intransitive attention that cannot be mistaken for anything else." Wellek means that while one reads the mind is content to pay full attention

to the object, say a novel, and to postpone, for the time being, going forward to any other experience or interest. Wellek's precursors here are Kant and Schiller. The aesthetic experience is, as they have taught us to say, disinterested; it is pure; it is not possessive or predatory.

But Wellek hasn't gone much further than this to say what precisely the mind is doing while it pays the work of art the tribute of intransitive attention. The clearest account of this "act of the mind," so far as my reading goes, is in Susanne K. Langer's *Feeling and Form* (1953), where works of art are deemed to be created "only for perception." Their elements, Langer maintains, have no other design upon us than to be perceived. If I am listening well to a symphony, I am paying such complete attention to its internal relations, experiencing its forms with such concentration of mind in their favor, that every other interest I have in my life is suspended.

Criticism comes into existence as debate about literature. Wellek wants to understand the history of criticism as one might hope to understand the history of any other ideas. Over the centuries, criticism has become an apparently endless argument about a few concepts, notably concepts of language, style, meaning, form, structure, and beauty. To understand the debate, we should hold it within brackets, to see criticism "as a relatively independent activity," not for the purpose of establishing "criticism for criticism's sake" but to keep our minds concentrated on the main issues. Wellek has been examining criticism, according to this understanding of it, for many years and making his own sense of it in these eight volumes.

His achievement is immense. Only a great linguist and a tough-minded scholar could have written this *History*. So much talk, so many distinctions, all those languages, those contexts. I hope his work will continue to be appreciated. But I can't be sure that it will be. Wellek brings the story of criticism to a con-

clusion, if not to an end, in 1950, just at the moment when criticism, in his view, started turning into something else. In 1953 Roland Barthes published *Writing Degree Zero* and announced that "the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present, has become the problematics of language." This is another story, as Wellek says, and he evidently does not propose to tell it. He says nothing about critical theory or practice in the past 30 years. Nor does he use its strange words like indeterminacy, *différance*, deconstruction, phallogocentric, and minority discourse.

So the *History* is likely to be consulted rather than read; or, if read, construed as a monument to humane letters and scholarship, a concatenation of once-proud hopes. Wellek's terms of reference are nearly gone. Take for instance his use of the word "aesthetic." In American colleges and universities it is becoming virtually impossible to gain a hearing for "aesthetic function," much less for its dominance in a work of literature. Only a few years ago, Wellek said that "we must concede the final inexplicability of a great work of art, the exception of genius." It would be hard to write a less fashionable sentence. It is widely deemed a scandal to talk of genius; and a scandal just as grave to speak of "a great work of art" without indicting its author. Wordsworth, it is now common to claim, should have written not about his feelings on the occasion of visiting Tintern Abbey but about the "wretched of the earth" who sheltered behind its walls. And so on. The motto for this indictment comes from Walter Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism." So an interest in literature and criticism, such as Wellek has been expressing for many arduous years, is now commonly—not universally—regarded as sleeping with the enemy.

No matter. Wellek believes, I assume, that great literature will continue to attract the intransitive attention he describes, and that the history of criticism will

continue to interest a sufficient number of readers. But this final volume doesn't make a strong case for criticism as a lively debate. Perhaps Wellek got tired and couldn't face the chore of dealing with the proliferation of critical theories as they have been made to serve every conceivable ideological cause. Who could cope with this exorbitance? There is another problem. Wellek knows, or thinks he knows, what literature is, what the literary character of language is. I judge that he has lost patience with the error of other critics. He can't be expected to dispute with adepts of deconstruction, feminism, postmodernism, queer theory, cultural studies, and a babel of other rhetorics. Wellek confines his attention to the standard sages. The big names in the present volume are Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Valéry, Benedetto Croce, and José Ortega y Gasset. But each of these is presented as a sloppy thinker, and the whole progress of modern criticism appears as a trek from one Cave of Error to the next. Even when he falls into enthusiasm, Wellek recovers his severity almost at once.

The labor of writing this *History* has evidently been appalling, and it shows. Wellek often drives himself to paraphrase a book he

finds uncongenial or indeed silly—Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, for instance. He does his best to be equable, but in the end confesses that "an outsider who is suspicious of vague and mystical concepts" cannot make much of Maritain. "It is a pity," he wearily reports, "that such a book, filled with fine reflections on poetry, on inspiration, and on different genres and figures in literary history, ends with a somewhat empty gesture toward a religious metaphysics." It is a more acute pity that Wellek has felt honorably obliged to read hundreds of such babbling books.

In the end, the *History of Criticism* is most interesting, most touching, as Wellek's intellectual autobiography. The pressure of his life in literature and criticism is felt in a word here, a word there, an interpolated *strange* or *curious* or *odd* when Wellek cannot bear to leave the paraphrased sentences without comment. His own life is in those adjectives, for the most part ruefully enforced.

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OTHER TITLES

Contemporary Affairs

BOILING POINT: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity. By Kevin Phillips. Random House. 307 pp. \$23

The "American dream" has always been vague, but most people (especially outsiders) have assumed that it was fundamentally material rather than spiritual. Phillips's sprawling threnody to American exceptionalism makes the assumption explicit. His argument is that the American "middle-class squeeze" has reached a decisive historical

moment. "Previous cyclical troughs for the U.S. middle class," he writes, were "mere hiccups in the historical expansion that reached a late 20th-century zenith at some point in the 1960s or 1970s when 50 to 55 percent of Americans belonged to an economic middle class without any foreign or historical equivalent." Other analysts tend to see the present economic slippage of the American middle class as merely another symptom of worsening global economic conditions, but Phillips puts the blame on specifically American circumstances, on bad choices made by American business and political leaders.