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P. N. Furbank

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On Criticism as Value-Judgement

P. N. Furbank

AS CAN BE IMAGINED, it was a thrill for me to be rung by Professor Frank Conroy with the news that my biography of Diderot had won the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism. It was also quite a surprise, since up till now the book has not been exactly what you would call a best-seller. The trouble is, partly, that Diderot is one of those figures about whom people feel, guiltily, that they ought to know more than they do—or that they know a lot, if only they could manage to bring it to mind. When his name comes up in conversation, a hunted look comes over people's faces. Now, there is a good reason for this, and it is largely the result of Diderot's very queer publishing history, the works we are most likely to value him for now having been, quite simply, unpublished and unknown during his lifetime. Thus I would not think of blaming people for a certain blankness on the subject. Though on the other hand, I do feel they are missing something.

So much for Diderot. Since the Capote Award is for a work of literary criticism, I ought, in the course of thanking the Writers' Workshop and the judges, to say something on the subject of criticism in general. I shall not pretend that I do not have views on the subject; I have decided to make it an excuse to state my basic ideas on art and criticism, or in other words to expound my theory of aesthetics. I am afraid it may all be rather dry, and I just hope you will forgive this.

I would begin by positing that literature, music and the plastic arts are at bottom the same kind of thing. This seems reasonable, if for no other reason than that there seems to be a lot in common between the careers of a Wordsworth, a Rembrandt or a Beethoven, and about the sort of achievement they seem to be pursuing. But granting this—if you do—a large consequence follows. For what seems to be true about all the arts, but comes home to one most obviously in the case of music, is that the arts are all about value. Art has, essentially, no other *raison d'être* than to be intrinsically valuable. I am exaggerating a little, of course. For a long time, Western art was in the service of the Church and therefore could be said to have had a utilitarian function. Still, if we consider a secular work of music, shall we

say a string quartet by Haydn, what other *raison d'être* could it be said to have than to be good, to be intrinsically valuable? There is nothing much, after all, that you could *use* it for.

The point is really obvious, but it becomes less so when one thinks of literature; for, unlike music, literature employs a medium—words and sentences—which have all sorts of utilitarian uses as well as their artistic one. Literature, unlike music, seems to be committed to *meaning*, as indeed does painting—or at any rate representational painting. It is here that we need to cling on to the example of music and to the identity of the arts.

I stick to my point, that the *raison d'être* of literature is not to have meaning but to be valuable. The way that writers and composers speak or behave, and a study of their manuscripts, tends to support me. So often, the language that they speak is about *discovering* things—discovering them rather than *intending* them, or finding the way to *express* something. It is as if they were concerned with finding things—valuable combinations of thoughts or words or harmonies that have lain about for all eternity to be discovered. Art, viewed from this point of view, is a supremely empirical activity.

But if this is so, then this surely says something important about criticism. For if the arts only exist to be intrinsically (and not just instrumentally) valuable—if the sole mode of being of a poem or a quartet is to be valuable—then it must surely follow that the essential function of criticism in the arts is value-judgement. I think why discussions of literary criticism often go wrong is because critics want to compromise over this issue. There is a very strong school of opinion which says that value-judgement has no place at all in literary criticism. Pierre Macherey writes that “the literary work must be elaborated and *used*, for without this it will never become an object of knowledge,” but “it must also be *left* as it is, if we are to achieve a theoretical judgement and avoid value-judgements.” Stanley Fish, likewise, explains that his method “is oriented *away* from evaluation and towards description,” and Paul de Man speaks of evaluation, dismissively, as “the most naive” form of criticism.

Now Stanley Fish, at least, strikes me as a wonderfully talented critic, with an extraordinary ability, when writing about Milton, to improve our sense of what Milton's verse *is*, what sort of thing it is, what cunning artifices and strategies are at work in it. He has also written, very funnily, about “Why literary criticism is like virtue”—that is to say why criticism is its own reward and should look for no other. Still, as a matter of logic, one

asks oneself why is it so important to orient oneself away from evaluation? The point is, when Fish is helping us to see what is there in a certain passage in Milton, he is also tacitly, by the same act, making us see it as *good*. In criticism of the arts, evaluation is going on all the time, though for the most part silently. Eliot once said, in answer to those who attacked criticism, that we cannot stop criticising—by which I think he meant value-judgement—for it is as instinctive as breathing; hence the only choice open to us is between bad criticism and good.

Let it be remembered, too, that for ninety percent of his or her day, a writer or a composer is engaged, not in creation but in criticism—in rejecting a certain phrase or epithet or modulation in favour of another and better one. This is criticism as value-judgement, if ever there was such a thing; and what of course it brings home to us is how artificial the distinction between criticism, or a certain kind of criticism, and creation really is.

The choice for the theorist, thus, seems to be either to hold that value-judgement has no rightful place at all in criticism, and in so far as it tries to creep in, it should be severely repressed as a naivety and a distraction. Or, on the other hand to hold, as I do, that, directly or indirectly, criticism is *all* about value-judgement and about nothing else. Either are respectable positions. What is not respectable, and is a fatal creator of muddle and bad faith, is to hold that value-judgement is just a part of a critic's duty—perhaps something he does in his more relaxed moments, or for private consumption only, and always with a humble proviso that “Of course this is only my personal opinion.”

The clue to why this issue still puzzles us is that, as I have said, critical evaluation tends for the most part to have to take place silently. It is here that Wittgenstein is so helpful. “It is remarkable,” he writes, “that in real life, when aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as ‘beautiful,’ ‘fine,’ etc., play hardly any role at all. . . . The words you use are more akin to ‘right’ and ‘correct.’” And again, “We think we have to talk about aesthetic judgements like ‘This is beautiful,’ but we find that if we have to talk about aesthetic judgements we don’t find these words at all, but a word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity.”

“A word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity”: this to my mind exactly describes what is happening in genuinely good criticism. T. S. Eliot once argued, in a famous essay, that Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* was best seen not as a tragedy, but as a savage farce. This was a

brilliant stroke of criticism, enabling us to see Marlowe's play more clearly for what it is—what sort of thing it is—and simultaneously to see it as *good*, and yet without employing any epithet of praise.

This is how much of the best criticism works. But do not let us be misled by it. Because Eliot's remark happens to turn a key in the lock for this particular play, we must not try to convert it into a rule or a generalisation, or start thinking there must be other plays lying around that only need to be seen as savage farces to be found good. (Of course there *may* be, but that is hardly to the point.) Knowing Marlowe's play, we feel Eliot's observation to have worked in this instance in a marvellous fashion, but the effect is not repeatable.

To generalise, a good critic has a superior instinct for the good in art, but the device he finds for alerting us to this good will never be what it seems. It may sound like something generalisable, but this will be an illusion. The reason he gives for a judgement can never be more than a pseudo-reason. And to the question, "Yes, I see what you are pointing out, but why would that make it *good*?" there can never be an answer.