

## INTERVIEW

JAG: What were the strongest influences in your formation as a literary critic?

HL: I had the privilege of growing up in the early years of what was then regarded as the century of Modernism, and it was exciting to welcome the new voices, appreciate the innovative viewpoints, and observe the permutation of forms as they emerged. If there was a climate of innovation, there was also a sense of international continuity. Though my birth and background were provincially Midwest American, my awareness of European culture was reinforced by a German-born father, a Russian wife, and terms of study and later teaching at a French university. But most of my career as a teacher has been connected with Harvard, ever since I entered it as a student sixty years ago. There I was exposed, of course, to the Greco-Latin classics and to those old-fashioned philological methods which were even then yielding to more critical approaches. One of my teachers, then a young instructor, was F. O. Matthiessen, soon to be a pioneering figure in the study of American literature; another, Milman Parry, was proposing new solutions to the Homeric problem, and thereby opening the field of oral literature. Classical tradition was represented by Irving Babbitt, the formidable proponent of "New Humanism," and the practitioner of comparative literature whose chair I was later to occupy. But, insofar as my conceptual perspectives were widened, and I was taught to view my subject more analytically, perhaps I owe most to Alfred North Whitehead, the English logician and philosopher of science. As good luck would have it, T. S. Eliot was visiting professor of poetry during my senior year. The poet closest to my contemporaries, he became our arbiter of literary taste, though by no means our ideological mentor. If I was ever confirmed in the vocation of critic, it was when he benignly undertook to publish my first article in his journal, *The Criterion*—an undergraduate paper on the Metaphysical Poets, which had been shown to him by my tutor.

JAG: What do you perceive to be your biggest achievement as a critic?

HL: "Achievement" is a bigger word than I would use for myself. My biggest book, however, is *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists*. It was written over a period of some twenty years off and on, while most of my professional endeavors were focussed on Anglo-American literature. But since I had undertaken to work out a theory of realism, as the most direct expression of the relationship between literature and society, it had become increasingly apparent that the central features of the realistic novel were most clearly to be discerned through five successive generations of French writing. Hence my theoretical conclusions were based upon detailed analyses of Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, and Proust. Since he must keep up with his own times, or else bog down in convention, each realist must move beyond his predecessors. That movement, although individualistic, could be correlated socially with bourgeois-democratic liberalism and intellectually with a scientifically oriented secularism.

JAG: How would you define your function as a literary critic?

HL: As an extension of my profession, pedagogy, over a broader area and from a more personal outlook. Also as research into matters too often obscured by their surfaces, seeking to analyze the workings of literature and to relate it to other branches of human knowledge.

JAG: In the past critical theories originated in Europe; lately, however, most theoretical creativity has taken place at major universities in the United States. How would you explain this shift?

HL: Much of our collective accumulation of critical theory still originates in Europe, and much of what you hear today from American universities is merely its echo, rather than "theoretical creativity." On the other hand, Americans could point to creative minds whose criticism has hardly been acclimated to the academy: for example, Kenneth Burke.

JAG: On the other hand, American scholars often turn to Europe for the critical germs. People such as Derrida and Lacan have found particular theoretical resonance in the United States. How would you explain this phenomenon?

HL: It's less phenomenal than strikes the eye. Derrida has unquestionably found resonance in the United States, much more than Lacan-since Americans have encountered Freud, and produced their own variations upon him, long before the French. As for Derrida, he once graciously recalled that he had attended a course of mine during his early years as a visiting fellow at Harvard. But I can scarcely claim to have instructed him; nor shall I boast of the fact that Paul de Man was my Ph.D. candidate. So far as transatlantic currents can be traced, it seems to me that both sides now inhabit the same universe of discourse.

JAG: Literary criticism today is influenced by theories that are outside the literary domain. Do you take this as an indication that literary criticism is moving away from being purely literary?

HL: Literary criticism has seldom been "purely literary," since such purism is apt to be sterile or pedantic, and literature itself glories in its many and varied relations with the rest of life. My own work is grounded in the concept of "literature as an institution." As such it has its own codes, rules, techniques, and standards; and yet it functions as a part of society as a whole, responding to its impulsions and articulating its values.

JAG: One of the new trends is feminist criticism. How would you evaluate this new and particular approach with other new critical developments?

HL: In 1965 I published an article suggesting that more attention should be paid to distinctively feminine modes of style, nuances of emotion, and points of view. Naturally, I have been gratified to watch so much more substantial a series of moves being taken in that direction. These have been understandably pushed far beyond the

field of literary criticism. As has been the case with Marxism in the past, and currently with Afro-American criticism in the United States, there may now be some danger that aesthetic criteria will be pushed aside by sociological considerations.

JAG: Are we now at a new turning point in criticism, as for instance when the formalist school appeared?

HL: As a pluralist and a self-confessed relativist, I like to believe that we are always at a turning point in criticism. We learned a good deal from the Russian Formalists, the American New Critics, and those in other countries who concentrated on stylistics and genres. More recently we have been learning from the Franco-American Post-Structuralists something we ought to know about the contingencies of meaning, the importance of semiotics for criticism. But lately they have been repeating themselves so conformably and so noisily—from the extreme of epistemological stalemate, on the other hand, to that of interpretative anarchy on the other—that it now seems time to move on.

JAG: The question of the canon of American literature has evoked a great deal of debate. Criticism has been launched against critics and others who have perpetuated a body of literature to the exclusion of others. What position have you taken in this debate?

HL: Having been rash enough to review *Finnegans Wake* when *Ulysses* was still banned, and Joyce himself was still viewed in academic circles as an unintelligible charlatan, I believe that canons must always be kept open to talents hitherto unrecognized. The five great names of the classic American literature—Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman—were already recognized by a growing consensus when their reputations were crystallized in Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*. The only name I should like to see added at this point is that of Emily Dickenson; but it is true that she was somewhat younger, and that her recognition was retarded by a difficult publishing history. Perhaps we should be careful about

setting new canons, at a time when the old ones seem to be already falling apart, and fewer books of any kind are read.

JAG: Some of this criticism has come from proponents of minority literature. Is their criticism justified?

HL: Generally speaking, this kind of criticism tends to be less literary than social, legitimately objecting to a state of affairs which allowed minorities little opportunity to express themselves upon an accepted literary plane. What they did manage to produce was exceptional, by definition, and we should read it with sympathetic concern. But we should not confuse the respect we pay it with that which is due to tested artistic masterpieces.

JAG: Who determines what is good literature?

HL: Readers. Not the largest or the most immediate body of readers, for best-selling popularity can easily –and, in most cases, fortunately– fade away, while true originality can long be overlooked or misunderstood at the outset. Critics, though they do not sit in final judgement, can offer valuable help in this process of spotting, sifting, and sorting out. And, though the appeal to posterity offers no more than another shifting audience, time does provide a situating dimension. There is more to be said for what lasts than for what falls by the wayside –or, to put it conversely, what lasts is what there is more to be said for...

JAG: Everybody would agree that *Don Quixote* is good literature...

HL: Not quite everybody. Edmund Wilson, our finest American critic of the last generation, did not. I vainly tried to reason with him in more than one conversation, but he stubbornly declared that Cervantes bored him. Despite his linguistic aptitude and ranging curiosity, he had a blind spot for Spanish culture –as did his friend, Mario Praz. Incidentally, I once heard W. H. Auden casually assert that of course no one had ever read *Don Quixote* all the way through.

JAG: Some have even gone to the extent of declaring *Don Quixote* to be the first and only novel, and everything else that has followed to be mere derivations from Cervantes' work. Would you say that this is a rather extreme estimation of *Don Quixote*?

HL: It is an overstatement, to be sure. *Don Quixote* may well be considered the first, but it is certainly not the only novel, and one of its great distinctions is to have paved the way for so many others. Switching a phrase of Cervantes, I have ventured to call it "the exemplary novel." But, although Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Dostoevsky's *Idiot* conform—in their altogether different ways—to the archetypal pattern, they obviously constitute a great deal more than "mere derivations." Cervantes, like a path-breaking scientist, made a discovery: what I have termed "the Quixotic principle." He understood that literature was cut off from life itself by its innate literariness; that it could approach, but never quite attain, reality by undercutting that literariness; and that, since life keeps moving on, this systematic disillusionment would have to be repeated in differing terms and changing contexts.

JAG: Cervantes is probably one of the authors that you most frequently refer to in your work, yet generally we do not find any other Spanish writer mentioned. In *Memories of the Moderns* there are references to Irish, English, French, German, and of course North American authors, but no Spaniard or Latin American among them. Is there any special reason?

HL: I can only say that I wish I knew Spanish literature much more deeply and more comprehensively than I do. Cervantes has clearly been a point of departure and of return, since much of my writing has been about the novel. But, since Shakespearean/Elizabethan drama has been my main academic specialty, I have also been interested in the classic Spanish dramatists, and have touched on Tirso de Molina and others while discussing the Don Juan theme in my latest book, *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy*. My *Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* includes a few brief but necessary pages on the Spanish treatment of its titular theme. Coming late to the beautiful Spanish language, having already suffered a

hearing loss, I can read but not speak it, and have no competence in judging style. Consequently, my *Memories of the Moderns* contains no essay on the Spanish writer, though García Lorca is cited there and elsewhere; I greatly admired the poets of his generation, and counted Jorge Guillén as a dear friend. (I was also lucky enough to have the personal friendship of three scholars-in-exile; Amado Alonso, Américo Castro, and Pedro Salinas.) I have learned much from, and occasionally quoted, the writings of Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset. I follow the Latin American "boom" with keen interest, though I have had no occasion to comment upon it.

JAG: *Memories of the Moderns* is generally taken to be an endorsement of Modernism. But is there not also a certain criticism of this literary trend in your work?

HL: Modernism has been, among many other things, a self-critical trend –as I tried to show in an essay, "What was Modernism?," reprinted in my *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature* and elsewhere. But, paradoxically, I am still enough of an impenitent Modernist to regard self-criticism as a positive virtue.

JAG: How would you evaluate contemporary writers compared to the Modernists?

HL: It's too early to call them anything more descriptive than "Post-Modernists" –which merely means that they come after those that went before. And their forerunners were, as we say in American slang, "a hard act to follow." Internationally, I persist in believing that theirs was an exceptionally brilliant age in literature and the arts. Their successors have done well enough in consolidating those gains and updating those innovations; it is almost unfair to expect much more of them. Significantly, much of the liveliest writing today seems to come from Latin America, possibly because the cultural backlog has been less inhibiting there.

JAG: Are contemporary writers artists or practitioners of a craft?

HL: To apply the term "artist" –traditionally a practitioner of the plastic arts– was a grand gesture of Flaubert's generation, in the wake of Gautier and the cult of art-for-art's sake. That ideal would be

repudiated, by the tough-minded generation of Sartre, in favor of reportage and *engagement*. Thus the emphasis may shift; but, personally, I think the line should not be drawn too categorically.

JAG: How would you evaluate the importance of metafictional literature?

HL: I'm not sure I understand the term. So far as fiction itself is concerned, I have often noted that, in the modern journalistic era, literary realism cannot compete with the documentary facts, as they can be gathered and circulated by journalistic enterprise. This is borne out by what Truman Capote conceived as "the non-fiction novel." Norman Mailer seems to be doing better as a reporter than a novelist. On the other hand, when it is no longer so routinely committed to a closely observed actuality, the novel can enjoy the imaginative release of "magic realism."

JAG: What would you consider to be the main literary achievement of the twentieth century within the history of literature?

HL: It is always the achievement of literature to record, to chart, to exemplify, and to interpret the consciousness of its era and locale. That of our century may well differ from those that preceded it in its range, its diversity, and its individuality—in giving voice and image to some of the many different states of mind and orders of experience that had heretofore gone unexpressed: uncensored intimacies, newly articulate classes, the Third World and still others. That these additions may be ranked with what has already been canonized is the hallmark of their achievement.

JAG: What function has literature today, as we approach the end of the century?

HL: Regrettably but appreciably, it has narrowed down, as the humanities have retreated before the onset of technology and the role of the book has—more and more—been replaced by the audiovisual media. Yet nothing can adequately take the place of great literature, which—at least for some of us—becomes all the more valuable as it grows rarer, if we are still interested in learning from our forbearers or preserving and passing on our culture.