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A Strange Discussion: ›Ethical Criticism‹

The articles by Marshall W. Gregory and Peter J. Rabinowitz in this journal have already been subjected, by Norbert Groeben, to a theoretical and methodological criticism with which I find myself in practically complete agreement.¹ What I hope to add to it, perhaps going beyond Groeben, is likely to require some preliminary remarks.

I would like to begin by distinguishing between ›literary criticism‹ as something practised in journalism and the media for an audience interested in literature, and ›literary studies‹ as a university subject. They are not bound by the same rules. Literary criticism has liberties that the study of literature does not. The study of literature, like every scholarly discipline, should develop theories and methodologies and make oral or written statements that seek to meet the norms of logic and the analytic theory of science – by employing concepts that can be defined to some extent at least, by arguing logically, and by justifying its assertions, which should always have an empirical foundation. This should be the case in both research and teaching, with the two differing at most in the fact that a certain amount of simplification and popularization may be deemed necessary at first in teaching. While there thus cannot be any fundamental difference between the outcomes of research and the content of university teaching, there certainly is one between teaching in universities and in schools. How literature and other works in various media are treated in schools, and the purposes for which this treatment may be functionalized, are outside my area of expertise; they are the concern of educational studies. In what follows, therefore, I am speaking only of the study of literature as a university subject. Gregory mounts a heavy assault against »postmodernism« and »post-structuralism« (274), and it should also be clear from these preliminary remarks that I align myself neither with one position nor the other.

Now, the basic unit in the empirical object domain of the study of literature is the individual literary text. Where the latter is concerned, we should distinguish between its *interpretation* in the study of literature (the reconstruction, which should meet the above-mentioned norms, of the meanings which the text has in its period) and *recipients' understandings* (the assignments of meaning to the

¹ Cf. Gregory 2010; Rabinowitz 2010; Groeben 2011. Groeben puts things more amicably than I will.

text that are performed by non-scholarly readers and, not being bound by scholarly norms, can both assign to the text meanings it does not have and potentially fail to perceive ones that it demonstrably does have). To be distinguished both from scholarly interpretation and from recipients' understandings, finally, there are also what we can call the *cognitive, affective, evaluative effects of the text on the reader*, or, better, the *reader's responses to the text* (on the basis of the meanings he has, rightly or wrongly, found in it). While – assuming that interpreter and recipient have at least the minimum competence required by the language of the text – an overlap of greater or lesser extent between interpretation and the recipient's understanding is to be expected, the relationship between the meanings assigned by the interpreter or recipient and the effects or responses that they trigger is far more complex. This is because the effects or responses obviously depend on the ideological attitudes and psychological structures of the person who has assigned the meanings to the text. It seems to me undeniable that these attitudes and structures are to a greater or lesser degree the product of that person's socialization in a particular culture or period, and I point this out only because I am not sure whether Gregory agrees.

There can be no doubt that the possible responses of a reader to a text include the fact that he can, but not must, evaluate it. Such an evaluation can be, among other things, *aesthetic* or *ideological*; I would agree with Groeben that, at least in principle, we can and must distinguish between the two possibilities. To take a simple example: hardly anyone is likely to share the ideology of Dante's *Divina commedia* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* in present-day Europe, but this does not prevent both texts from being classified as aesthetically accomplished. ›Ideological‹ is meant here in a non-judgemental sense and is intended to refer to all positions that cannot, or cannot easily, be justified rationally – that is to say, assertions and attitudes of a religious, moral, or similar nature, for example. Now, as far as ›morals‹ – that is, values and norms – are concerned, a glance at any guide to deontic logic will show that values and norms can be derived not from non-normative statements about the world (even if they are true), but only from more fundamental values and norms (whose justification is in turn equally problematic) – that they are ultimately based only on a social consensus. Here too, I must set myself apart from Gregory. He complains that ›postmodernism‹, ›post-structuralism‹, and so on have devalued all human knowledge as consisting of nothing more than socially conditioned, ultimately arbitrary constructions. In so far as his claim is correct, one can agree with him, for there clearly *is* something resembling rational, inter-subjective knowledge: if the postulated laws of physics were nothing more than arbitrary constructs, no computers would work and nobody would ever have landed on the moon. He also, however, complains that these movements in the study of literature (and elsewhere too) claim that systems of values and norms are culturally relative, and explains that biological research has in contrast demonstrated the invariability of norms. Let us pass over this latter assertion, particularly since he does not specify what the invariant norms might actually be. A glance at a few hundred

years of cultural history – even if we take a short cut and confine ourselves to Europe – ought to suffice to reveal the extent to which values and norms are culturally relative: the difference between classical, Christian, and present-day (European) sexual norms, say, would be a compelling example.

In contrast to Gregory, I would prefer to speak of ›normative‹ rather than ›ethical evaluation‹, because ›ethical‹ has the connotation of being ›positive‹ while many a system of norms and many a ›moral‹ evaluation are anything but ›ethical‹ – I hope I do not need to recall the values and norms of fascism, Stalinism, or Christian, Jewish, and Islamic fundamentalism here. Such systems of thought also give a most unhappy illustration of how difficult it can be at times in a given culture to keep the ideological rejection of a position as ›wrong‹ separate from its moral rejection as ›reprehensible‹. In seventeenth-century European Christianity, for example, an ›atheist‹ – whatever that is – is precisely not someone who supports a religiously ›wrong‹ position but someone who is considered capable of any moral ›improbability‹ – and someone whose elimination is considered religiously and morally legitimate. Normative stipulations of what is desirable or undesirable behaviour always play a central role in ideological systems.

Now, it is well known that literary texts (like all other artistic works) produce a model of the world,² and that we must reconstruct this world through interpretation. The attitudes that the text puts across – be they those of anthropomorphic characters in the represented world, or those of the text itself or the speaker in whose mouth the text is placed – are of course among the components of the represented world. The values and norms that are explicitly or implicitly espoused in or by the text are of course part of it as well. Thus, we will always have to reconstruct how the characters speak, think, feel, and act, the rules according to which they do so, and the position that the text or its speaker adopts toward this. In so far as texts draw on ›ethical‹ positions, the latter are therefore by necessity an object of the study of literature, and they are so independently of whether the interpreter shares these positions of the text. And that is unlikely to be the case particularly often, even if we restrict ourselves to the last five centuries of the European literatures (including those in America). Anyone dealing with literary history is therefore concerned mostly with texts whose ideological positions in general, or moral ones in particular, their values and norms, are wholly or in part not his own.

My generation experienced what Gregory refers to as the ›old ethical criticism‹ – which he rightly rejects – in our student days. Back then, a good few people working on the history of literature evaluated the texts they treated according not only to aesthetic but also to ideological criteria, which were often dressed up as aesthetic ones: a text whose ideology, or system of values and norms, was disagreeable to the interpreter was often evaluated as aesthetically bad. There was a tendency in the writing of literary history to follow a selective approach

² See Lotman 1977.

based on aesthetic and ideologically normative criteria, which resulted in large bodies of literature being silently excluded. An analogous approach seems to have been taken in the history of (more or less philosophical) thought. A historiography of literature (or other media) and thought that is fit for scholarly purpose, though, must fundamentally take as its basis *all* available evidence (and where this is not practically possible, assemble a quantitatively and qualitatively representative corpus): the object of the study of literature is not that which we find aesthetically, ideologically, morally pleasing, but that which is there. Our own aesthetic, ideological, moral preferences must not lead to an adulteration of history. The highest moral norm for the study of literature, as for all other disciplines, is still *intellektuelle Redlichkeit*, or intellectual integrity.

In what follows, I will leave to one side the question – difficult as we know it to be – of what the criteria of aesthetic evaluation are, even though we all often, implicitly or explicitly, make such evaluations. Making an ideological and/or moral evaluation of literary texts or other semiotic utterances is doubtless the *right* – even if not the *duty* – of not only the non-scholarly but also the scholarly reader. The latter, of course, should engage sparingly and carefully in such activity. He should, for a start, have this right only if he, firstly, has analysed as accurately as possible the ideology and system of values and norms of the text or corpus of texts and, secondly, has kept his interpretive statements with their claim to scholarly status as clearly apart from these non-scholarly evaluations as possible. Societies of the European-American type (to speak only of these), though, are ideologically – and consequently also ›morally‹ – pluralistic. Any ›moral‹ evaluation of statements that refers to disputed values and norms is thus only a private opinion, at best the opinion of a group, be it a large or small one. Personally, I would certainly find any evaluation that is ›progressive‹ in relation to a given system of values and norms easier to advocate than a ›reactionary‹ one; but that is clearly just my private ideology. In the type of society I have mentioned, it would probably be easiest to settle on, and use as the basis for evaluations, the values and norms that originated in the (western) European ›Enlightenment‹ of the eighteenth century – in other words, those that can be subsumed under the rubric of ›human rights‹ and, as was not yet at all obvious in the eighteenth century, should of course apply to women and people of non-›white‹ descent as well.³

One aspect of these ›human rights‹ is that a form of behaviour is morally permissible if it takes place as a consensus among those involved in what is done and

³ German politicians (for the sake of civility I will not say anything about American ones here) have referred on occasion to ›Christian values‹ in recent years, clearly without knowing what they are talking about. ›Tolerance‹, ›human rights‹, and so on, for example, are among the values that the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had, in a bitter struggle, to impose on Christianity; only as a result of this was the latter humanized. And when such politicians present ›family‹ as a Christian value, they have clearly never read what a certain Jesus of Nazareth had to say on the theme of ›family‹ according to the Gospels.

does not harm any of those involved. It is clear that this legitimizes, for example, forms of sexual activity that are still considered repulsive and worth prohibiting by law in orthodox Christian circles. Thus, not even in the cultures of the European-American type is there actually a consensus about a system of values as fundamental as that of human rights, to say nothing of societies which are dominated by fundamentalist religious groups (Christian, Jewish, Islamic) or a political ideology in which human rights have no place. Now, I would certainly, without hesitation, allow myself to make a moral judgement about texts that violate human rights – but this judgement would then be acceptable only to groups that respect those human rights. If we are doing literary history, of course, the problem becomes still more complex because of the fact that the post-classical European societies were not familiar with anything along the lines of ›human rights‹ prior to the seventeenth century: evaluating early texts according to these norms would therefore mean evaluating not a text but a whole epoch. Should we denounce whole epochs? (The question is not meant rhetorically.) Apart from rare exceptions in the sixteenth century, for example, a discourse about religious tolerance does not appear before the seventeenth century: from then on, and the more so in the eighteenth century, there is a new norm, albeit still in a minority, against which we would be able to measure contemporary texts from the period – precisely because the new, from an Enlightenment perspective ›more human‹, norm would already have been available to every ›informed‹ and ›rational‹ individual. And that brings us to the question of whether it is acceptable to evaluate texts according to norms that were not those of the time, or only according to ones that already existed at the time. It is obvious that the latter is easier to legitimize than the former, but this does not mean that the former is not permissible. I will stop here and leave the decision to the reader. But I maintain that my problems have not been discussed properly by Gregory or Rabinowitz. It is, incidentally, significant that both of them refer only to individual texts when seeking to elucidate their ›ethical‹ problems, never to relevant problems involving whole corpuses or periods: both of them behave as though texts did not have a literary, intellectual, cultural context – they behave as though there were no history in which texts are located, as though there were no (dominant or minority) ›cultural knowledge‹ apart from their own, in relation to which they, whether they mean to or not, adopt a particular position. I do not mean to insinuate something that may not be the case, but they do appear, at least, to be behaving as though texts were quantities outside of history whose contexts – in which and for which they are produced – are quantities that can be neglected.

Let us continue to concentrate on Gregory for the time being. He confronts the ›old ethical criticism‹ with his ›new ethical criticism‹ – only very near the end of his article, of course, and what he presents in the process (288 ff.) as a ›new methodology‹ does not deserve the name. I can see neither that it is ›new‹ nor that it is a ›methodology‹. He is concerned with the ›ethical‹ consequences that the reading of

a text has for the reader, postulating, without any empirical evidence, that every reading of a text changes the reader. It does not seem likely that the postulate will meet with agreement easily in the form of this generalization. If there are semi-otic statements that aim to ›influence‹ the recipient, to bring him to attitudes and decisions that he had not previously intended, then they are to be found in the linguistic and non-linguistic statements of advertising – and the latter, as we know, are successful only if they connect with attitudes recipients already have and decisions they have already made about values; if they do not succeed in this, they fail completely. He rightly maintains that every semiotic statement is an offer (an ›invitation«, as he calls it): the recipient is offered a cognitive, affective, evaluative attitude, naturally including decisions about values and norms. (The study of literature, of course, fights the tendency of readers to treat reading as a form of identification because this impedes rational analysis; students, at least, should not be encouraged to follow such an approach.) According to Gregory, the reader can say ›yes« or ›no« to an ideological offer; to put it carefully, this is expressed a little simply. A diversity of propositions that the text posits as ›true‹ can be derived from any reasonably complex text, and agreement or rejection is possible for each of them. I can make some behavioural judgements in the text my own; others, in contrast, I can reject. But let us put this too to one side – for it gets worse.

Why? Because the opposition between the ›old« and ›new ethical criticism« that the text constructs is simply wrong. In the last part of his article, Gregory sets out, with reference to a short seventeenth-century poem by Robert Herrick, an interpretation that is meant to illustrate his concept of the ›new ethical criticism«. While he previously used the term ›ethical«, thereby referring unambiguously to evaluations in which forms of behaviour or statements are judged on the basis of a system of values and norms, he – not by chance – now uses the term ›ethos« and – not by chance – refers to Aristotle.⁴ That ›ethos« in Aristotle means something different from ›ethical« in modern usage, is clear. Consequently, in the ›new ethical criticism« that Gregory presents with the help of his analysis of the poem, he is concerned with an ›empathetic‹ reconstruction of the feelings of the speaker of the text toward the fictional woman he loves.⁵ If we ignore the ›empathy‹ that is necessarily expected here, what is left is nothing more than what would be expected of any textual interpretation. The result, therefore:

parturiunt montes, nascetur ridiculus mus.

(›Mountains will labour, to birth will come a laughter-rousing mouse!«)⁶

⁴ Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*.

⁵ On the subject of such *Einfühlung*, or ›empathy‹ – which we have already been through once in the age of the ›old ethical criticism« in the German-speaking countries (think of Emil Staiger and his fellows) – there are various unpleasant remarks that could be made, and it is with some effort that I restrain myself in this respect.

⁶ Horace, *Epistula ad Pisones*, 139 (known since Quintilian as the *Ars Poetica*, in Horace 1929).

That reading texts can lead to changes in readers' attitudes is certainly not a new insight. Gregory, naturally, also allows for the possibility that the ideological or normative offer of the text is such that it can be rejected as undesirable from the perspective of the reader because it contradicts his values and norms. And that brings us to Rabinowitz.

If I found Gregory's article annoying more than anything else, I find Rabinowitz's shocking. He informs us that he has never read all of the well-known *Histoire d'O* and will probably never make it a topic of his university teaching (although the text is actually relevant for literary history),⁷ a stance that he is fully entitled to take. It would doubtlessly be a good thing if he stuck to it, given that one should speak only about texts one has actually read. Not having read a text does not seem a particularly special achievement to me; why might he be telling us this?

Be that as it may: in what follows he seeks to explain why he will not make this text the topic of his teaching. He is concerned not only, like Gregory, with the moral or immoral effect of the text on its readers, in this case students (although this is clearly important to him too), but above all with the effects of the text on the relationships between students: with what, as a result of reading the text, the attitudes of females to males and males to females will be among course participants – about which, of course, he cannot know anything. According to his own words, his students are aged between eighteen and twenty-three: so they are legally adults and able to vote. They are entitled to form an opinion about the world's most serious problems and put that opinion to practical use in deciding how to vote – and they are obviously not ›mature‹ enough to engage rationally with a sadomasochistic text. The university becomes a playgroup here, the students are forcibly infantilized. This kind of repressive pedagogy with its efforts at censorship is disenfranchising and patronizing; even the ›old ethical criticism‹ could not have done better. He says he has never taught *Gone with the Wind* in classes with African-American students. Does he mean, then, that we must therefore collate the ideological and normative attitudes of the students in a class before this or that can be taught? If there are religious fundamentalists in attendance: no anti-religious texts? If there are moral traditionalists in attendance: no philosophical-pornographic novels of the French Enlightenment, no texts about female or male homosexuality? And for all groups: under no circumstances Sade's novels? Does this mean that inquisition, torture, and so on cannot be covered? That will be a fine castration

⁷ The last ten to fifteen years have certainly seen a noteworthy series of French and German literary texts by women about sadomasochistic practices; I suspect it is no different in the English-speaking countries. Texts like the *Histoire d'O* and its successors are situated in several contexts in the history of thought: that of the debate about gender roles and emancipation, that about sexual norms, that about concepts of love since the eighteenth century. For these reasons alone they cannot be ignored: they represent relatively radical ways of solving problems, solutions that clearly have a striking relevance in the present.

of the history of literature and thought – the presentation of which will hardly be able to claim to be scholarly any more than.

Any history of literature or thought will confront us with positions that represent a moral challenge to various people. Some may be provoked by texts in which the (judicial) murder of those who have a different faith or do not have any at all is advocated – and there are plenty of them in early modern Europe. Others will feel provoked by texts in which passionate deviations from the Christian norms of sexuality are presented. Students who feel »debased or battered or seriously destabilized by the text« (Rabinowitz, 163) because they cannot cope with encountering attitudes that are culturally unfamiliar to them would be better off not studying the history of literature or thought; that could easily be explained to them in their first term. Rabinowitz wants to create an atmosphere in his classes in which his students are able to discuss openly and honestly. The aim is a noble one. It may certainly be harder to achieve in the case of texts whose ideologies, values, norms – differing as they do from the way the students think – are provocative, than in the case of ones that are harmless. But would that not be a rewarding objective for his pedagogic ambitions?

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