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History as a Tool in Critical Interpretation: A Symposium Monroe C. Beardsley and others, ed. Thomas F. Rugh and Erin R. Silva

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BEARDSLEY, MONROE C., and others. *History as a Tool in Critical Interpretation: A Symposium*. Ed. Thomas F. Rugh and Erin R. Silva. Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978. 100 pp. \$4.95.

Reviewed by Marden J. Clark, professor of English at Brigham Young University.

The most remarkable thing about this book may be that it should exist at all. Its two young editors, then graduate students in the Department of Humanities at Brigham Young University, apparently had bypassed or forgotten all about laws of possibility and probability when they set out to organize and promote a

Brigham Young University Symposium on the Humanities. They certainly had never been told how difficult it would be to get money for and acceptance from even one big-name participant, to say nothing of five. So they went ahead and brought together five remarkably important people in history and criticism of literature and the arts. Not only that, they started a series of such symposia that I trust will go on indefinitely (The Third Annual Symposium was held in the winter of 1979).

BYU had had important individual lecturers in the humanities many times before, but never a group at one time of anything like the prestige of: Monroe C. Beardsley of Temple University, esthetician and extreme apologist for the New Criticism in literature; E. H. Gombrich, emeritus of the University of London, one of the world's most distinguished art historians; Karsten Harries, chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Yale; E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Kenan Professor of English at the University of Virginia and one of the most influential of the younger critics who have been challenging most of the assumptions of the New Critics; and Rene Wellek, emeritus, of Yale University, who with Austin Warren authored *Theory of Literature* (1948), a broadly based study of literary theory and methodology which very soon became the theoretical base for much of the New Criticism, then at the highest level of its authority in university English departments.

The central issue of both symposium and book can be best dramatized against the history of literary criticism in the past half-century. By badly oversimplifying, we can see that half-century as the rise, domination, and decline of the New Criticism (the term has stuck since John Crowe Ransom used it as the title of his book, 1941). The New Criticism was essentially a formalist criticism ("the poem itself" was the rallying cry) with strong roots in Aristotle, French and English classicism, Kant and Coleridge. It reacted vigorously against the approaches to literature then dominating the universities: humanistic, historical-biographical, psychological, sociological, ideological—all of which, the New Critics claimed, sidestepped the basic critical task, the close engagement of the work of art.

The New Critics focused on the internal workings of the poem, theoretically in complete isolation from anything else: on its verbal texture, on ambiguity, irony, paradox, on tone, on structure, on theme only as it developed from these.

Given this background, one would expect real fireworks when such a group got together, with Beardsley and perhaps Wellek de-

fending the formalist/autonomous approach to the work, Gombrich and Hirsch defending the biographical/historical approach, and Harries somewhere in between. This is, of course, how they did line up in the symposium and, in rather muted form, in the record of it in this book. But one hardly finds fireworks. Partly, the reason may be that the participants were simply too much gentlemen to really explode at one another. But the real reason is probably itself historical: the New Critics had won almost too complete a victory, and their early polemics for "the poem as in itself it really is" had already softened by the mid-fifties. They also began to receive serious challenges from all sides, so that the history of criticism in the past twenty years is almost the history of those challenges. One of the strongest of them has been Hirsch's own, launched with *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) and continued in *The Aims of Interpretation* (1976). These two books seem almost directly aimed at Beardsley's essay (written with William K. Wimsatt) "The Intentional Fallacy," one of the most influential and widely reprinted essays of the New Critics. Wimsatt and Beardsley had argued that it is both useless and misleading to seek or take into account the author's intention in writing a poem—that we have no way of knowing the author's intention except as it gets expressed in the poem; that is, his intention must have been to write the poem that we now have. And even if we could know, the knowledge would be useless to the critic: he would still have to come to terms with the poem as we have it, not as the poet intended it. Hirsch challenges both points. We not only can but must know the author's intention before we can have real validity in interpretation; hence Hirsch's "thought experiment" in the symposium, on those last two lines of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which he hypothesizes the discovery of a letter by Keats that explains exactly what the lines meant. Hirsch argues that such a discovery would essentially end speculation on the lines. Beardsley responds as we would expect, though not as vigorously, that he would still have to take the lines as they come in the context of the poem.

This exchange may be as close to direct confrontation as the symposium generated, certainly as the book records. What we get, though, is probably more valuable than the direct confrontation, even if less fun. What we get is a judicious, extremely intelligent analysis of the basic question from significantly varied viewpoints. Beardsley in the first essay allows history its place if we carefully separate historical from ahistorical questions. In his major essay

Harries develops a subtle analysis of the place of history in philosophy, concluding that "philosophy becomes rootless and uncritical without the history of philosophy." Thus he does tie his analysis to criticism at the end, but one suspects that his real concern, even in this symposium, is with philosophy rather than art or literature or even criticism—see his comment (p. 36) about the poetic function yielding more than "mere poetry." Gombrich in his brief essay (the three brief essays by Gombrich, Wellek, and Hirsch were prefatory statements to the "Dialogue" that the book records in detail) defends history as a tool for criticism, partly because art works are themselves history, but more importantly because the process of discrimination necessarily involves comparison: "A work in total isolation could be enjoyed, but it could not be criticized, because there is nothing to compare it with." Wellek admits the place of history in elucidating literature but finally takes the New Critical position: "There is a point where history fails. It cannot determine quality." Hirsch's prefatory essay develops the thought experiment already referred to. The final essay, Wellek's on Edmund Wilson, is only indirectly related to the immediate question, but it shows in action the very complex relation of history to criticism.

The Dialogue on "History as a Critical Tool" is more interesting for its record of the interaction among the five participants than for the subtlety of thought. It records the final meeting of the symposium, the only one in which the five participated together. My memory of the exchange has Beardsley getting the worst of it. But they seem much more equal in print than on the platform. The issues are raised and explored again but without real resolution. The fun is in the exploring.

And the fun was in the exploring throughout the symposium and is throughout the book. Those who take questions of art and literature and criticism seriously will find in this book the interchanges among five remarkable people who also take them seriously. In their unassuming "Introduction," Rugh and Silva do little to catch the excitement of their achievement in bringing the symposium and this record into being. This review is my tribute to them for doing so. Their book will never hit the best-seller lists. But it is important for those who value the life of art and the life of the mind.