

1967

## Book Reviews

Criticism Editors

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### Recommended Citation

Editors, Criticism (1967) "Book Reviews," *Criticism*: Vol. 9: Iss. 3, Article 6.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol9/iss3/6>

## Book Reviews

*The Classic Line: A Study in Epic Poetry* by Albert Cook. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1966. Pp. xvi + 314. \$7.50.

The publication of Albert Cook's third comprehensive book is perhaps as good an occasion as any for a retrospective glance at a critic whose work deserves to be better known. This work—*The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean* (1949), *The Meaning of Fiction* (1960), and now *The Classic Line* (1966)—unites a number of qualities unusual individually and especially so in combination.

First, Cook's criticism stems from a strong feeling for the primacy of direct literary experience, rather than from a preoccupation with talk about literature. Cook makes his own maps as he goes along, and plunges the reader, again and again, deep into actual terrain by means of quotations—quotations sometimes compared, sometimes analysed, nearly always apposite. If, for example, *The Classic Line*, a study of epic tradition as embodied in folk ballads, *Beowulf*, the *Cid*, the *Song of Roland*, Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, is compared to Brian Wilkie's current and far more conventional *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, it is apparent that when Wilkie speaks of "the marginal status [as epic] generally awarded *The Divine Comedy*" he is merely reporting some vague consensus of received opinion, whereas when Cook dismisses Camoens' *Lusiads* as not an epic but rather "a superficial romance of the picaresque with some fine detail and occasional lyric moments," the natural inference is that Cook has read this work, all of it, with some care, in the original Portuguese, and doubtless more than once. Furthermore, if on two separate expeditions Cook's experience shows him the same terrain in differing lights, he is careful to supply two honest, separate reports. Thus although both epics appear in each book, his best account of the *Iliad* is in *The Classic Line*, his best of the *Odyssey* in *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*.

A second characteristic of Cook as critic is his great and continuing interest in the relation of literature to life—not by any means a predominantly propaedeutic ethical interest like Wayne Booth's in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (that 450-page expansion of Johnson's Rambler No. 4)—but rather an interest in literature as a reflection of life, as a pointer to the quality of possible civilizations past and present, as a secret window on lived experience. "How penetrating of Balzac," he writes in *The Meaning of Fiction* (p. 83), "to see that it is the macaroni manufacturer whose simplicity would be open to the full anguish which assails Père Goriot. It is a verifiable observation that wholesalers of foodstuffs tend to be more devoted family men than, say, the public functionaries of *Les Employées*"; or again (*Dark Voyage*, p. 34) "An expanding imperialist society—fifth-century Athens, seventeenth-century France, nineteenth-century Britain, America today—will always produce increasing numbers of pure-action diplomats and, in their wake, great comic poets—Aristophanes, Molière, W. S. Gilbert, Chaplin." This "lifelike" interest of Cook's sharpens his handling of such literary questions as how

to interpret a suspicious exchange of goods on the battlefield (*Classic Line*, p. 59), or how to distinguish the originator of a genre from a couple of followers: "In Theocritus' work [as contrasted with Fletcher's or Tasso's] a balance is maintained so perfectly between each term of his underlying analogy that we are unable to say either is primary: that poetry is merely an attunement to the real nature in which shepherds tend flocks; that shepherds are mainly dimmer servants of the order and grace which poetry serves" (*Classic Line*, p. 173).

The balance and delicacy of the sentence just quoted illustrates a third striking quality of Cook's, his self-awareness as a writer, his felt need to produce something meriting better than a reviewer's tag for the works of a prolific academic litterateur—"couched in his usual colorless, odorless, tasteless prose." Cook's own prose has had its ups and downs. Crisp and lucid in his first book, it seems to have fallen under the influence (here and there) of the worst aspects of two favorite mentors (Tate and Blackmur) in his second, in which at one point he remarks of the Bovarys that "Her love affairs, his desperate clubfoot cure, her suicide, his sinking into death, concretize the feelings her reactions are metamorphosing." (Some other examples may have been due to proofreading inadvertence: the clause "the city novelist like Dickens or Dostoyevsky may be ridden all his life by excruciating if heuristic psychological handicap" will lose its me-Tarzan-you-Jane ring if "an" is inserted after "by" or if "handicap" is made plural). Stylistic problems more than anything else no doubt accounted for the condescending reception given *The Meaning of Fiction* in what few reviews it seems to have gotten on its appearance—not many journalistic reviewers can spare time and effort to digest an argument as compressed and muscularly put as this book's; yet the argument intrinsically repays perusal and re-perusal. Cook's capacity to transcend and even profit by a damn-him-with-faint-praise reception comes out in the strong style and structure of *The Classic Line*.

A fourth characteristic of Cook's work is his recurrent attempt to take account of important scholarship and criticism relevant to each of his authors. To do this exhaustively, on the scale on which Cook operates, would consume a few lifetimes; and his main forte, in any case, is making diverse literary works comment on each other. But although his criticism cannot serve as convenient annotated bibliography he will often be found intelligently aware of some key scholar or commentator—of Simone Weil on the *Iliad* or the swarm of interpreters of Kafka's *Castle*. One area in which he might profitably enlarge his awareness (I think) is Milton: though his selected references to Rajan, Eliot, Prince, Stein, Empson, and others are central enough, he misses Christopher Ricks's pertinent, vigorous study, and unless I am much confused he needs to look again at the traditional expositors of Milton's cosmos, not quite so fluid a jelly as he supposes.

Finally, all three of Cook's books show an admirably fresh and roving appetite for contemporary writers (James Jones, William Sansom, Rilke, Yeats, Frost, Robinson), though their main topic is the past; and all three show unusual and original organizing power. *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, his most available and entertaining work—definitely the one for a new Cook-reader to begin with—makes great capital of a simple structural gimmick that neatly overlaps literature and life: statistical probability. Things being what they are, the betting odds heavily favor the chance that you, like Tom Jones, will fall out with a girl friend you later marry, rather than the chance that, like Oedipus, you might

murder your father inadvertently in a moment of blind rage. Expanding this notion like a Japanese paper flower, Cook produces not only a suggestive new theory of literature but also valuable fresh readings of Aristophanes and Molière as well as some good pages on Cervantes, Fielding, Joyce, the Odyssey, and several nineteenth-century British comic writers. The only book I can think of to compare *Dark Voyage* with is Auden's *Enchafed Flood*, a similarly inventive combination of bravura rapid-fire theory with detailed exposition of specific literature, in this case *Moby Dick*. It came out two years later than Cook's (not that it seems to have been influenced by him); and Cook's is, I think on rereading both, the better book.

For me the high points of *The Meaning of Fiction* are the two extended discussions of *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* that launch Cook's analysis of the inner-outer nature of what he means by fiction; the seventeen pages on Flaubert that introduce the section on "poetic style" in novels; the long analysis of *War and Peace* to illustrate one of several sources of unity in fiction; the twelve pages in which *The Castle* is used to show how close fiction can come to allegory and yet remain fictional; and the fifteen pages on Proust in which a parallel point is made about fiction and autobiography. *The Meaning of Fiction*, however, deals with a wealth of other writers, among them Balzac and Stendhal—perhaps too many for its theoretical structure to encompass comfortably. There is at times a sense of strain, especially, it seems to me, in the section on Henry James, another stylist whose influence I think Cook could have done without.

*The Classic Line* returns to the organizing method of *Dark Voyage* in focussing on a single central question: the kind of verse line found in epics, or rather in each of a series of successful epics. On the one hand the specific qualities of its verse may distinguish an epic from a ballad or a lyric; on the other, they clearly differentiate epic handling of narrative from the way narrative is managed in prose fiction. Cook's central topic leads naturally to a second organizing device, his distinction between epics composed in a loose quasi-ballad-like style (*Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, *The Cid*) and epics composed in what Cook calls the Refined Style, which begins, in Cook's account, with Virgilian imitation of earlier Greek and Latin poetry and continues in many poets, notably in Virgil's two greatest followers, Dante and Milton.

Too complex for ready summary, Cook's handling of the Refined Style is one of the chief fascinations of *The Classic Line*. Specifically, he traces the style back to the Greek Anthology and notes its use in a number of lyric poets, including Jonson—what he means by the term "refined" has several affinities with what is often called "plain." His meaning defines itself better by the series of examples he supplies from Frost, Rilke, Robinson, Dryden, Propertius, Catullus, Callimachus, and others than by any formula, though one can extract formulaic elements from his discussion: ideally, the Refined Style would be limiting, inevitable, objective, emotionally even, logical, clever, given to both monosyllables and abstract nouns, highly patterned in diction and syntax, paradox-laden, nearly epigrammatic, pure (in excluding much) and strong (in its compressed inclusions).

So much for the basic structure of *The Classic Line*, its aim and program. As for its achievement, in my judgment Cook is at his best in dealing with specific lines and passages, relating particular examples of style to central topics in a poem, sketching possible unifying elements in an enormous complex like the *Iliad*, or

comparing the way in which *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy* incorporate analogous but subtly different elements from the same religious tradition. His illustration of Dante's versification by contrasts with a poem of Yeats seemed to me especially fine; so did the contrasts embodied in such a pair of sentences as "Achilles stands at the center of the *Iliad*, but his world measures him. Odysseus, however, measures his world as he moves through it." On minutiae of style and major issues of structure the book often, I think, sheds great illumination; where it will provoke most disagreement—and to be provocative is a virtue in as good a book as this one—may well be in its handling of certain middle-sized elements. Cook's discussion of the epic simile, for example, is in my view too categorizing and pluralistic: he neglects, I feel, the large number of interesting qualities the similes of Milton, Dante, and Virgil share with each other and also with many of Homer's. So, too, I think that the extent to which Homer originated the style Cook calls refined is much underplayed in Cook's analysis. To conclude with a specific illustration, in the spirit of Cook's own discussions, I suggest that the original Greek in which Jupiter praises Juno's charms in *Iliad* XIV, comparing her to other females he has known, is so fine an example of Cookian Refined Style that the best English translation of the passage so far is unquestionably the one made by the great master of the style, Alexander Pope, as follows:

Ne'er did my soul so strong a passion prove,  
 Or for an earthly, or a heavenly love:  
 Not when I press'd Ixion's matchless dame,  
 Whence rose Pirithous like the gods in fame:  
 Not when fair Danaë felt the shower of gold  
 Stream into life, whence Perseus brave and bold.  
 Nor thus I burn'd for either Theban dame  
 (Bacchus from this, from that Alcides came:)  
 Nor Phoenix' daughter, beautiful and young,  
 Whence godlike Rhadamanth and Minos sprung.  
 Nor thus I burn'd for fair Latona's face,  
 Nor comelier Ceres' more majestic grace.  
 Not thus even for thyself I felt desire,  
 As now my veins receive the pleasing fire.

This passage (for fuller discussion of which see the forthcoming Twickenham edition of Pope's *Iliad*) shows, in the English and Greek alike, nearly all of the most crucial earmarks, as I understand them, of the Refined Style postulated in *The Classic Line*—and it is by no means an un-Homeric or even un-Iliadic example.

I end with this controversial citation in response to Cook, not at all in disparagement of him. *The Classic Line* is a worthy successor of his two earlier books and one of the best pieces of American literary criticism in several years. Less a technical philologist than Auerbach and a good deal more flexible a theorist than the "science"-obsessed Frye, Cook brings to the enterprise of repossessing the literary past powers that place him in a small but distinguished group of modern critics.

WILLIAM FROST

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*The Partial Critics* by Lee T. Lemon. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965.  
Pp. xi + 273. \$5.75.

Mr. Lemon maintains in *The Partial Critics* that much of our criticism is throttled by set premises and a correlative vocabulary. Anyone partial to any system and its terminology, he argues, can only see a poem in part, i.e. along the lines of, for example, paradox and irony (Brooks), extension and intension (Tate), texture and structure (Ransom), or connotation and denotation (Winters). What we need, according to Mr. Lemon, is rather "a system based on general terms" where "the critic is free to look into the poem to see what is there, rather than into his theory to see what should be there" (p. 150). The two sets of terms he proposes are *coherence* and *congruence*, or internal consistency and external reference, and *integrity* and *complexity*, terms that "permit the critic to discuss the intensity and quality of the coherence and the range and quantity of the congruence" (p. 221). "The best poem is simply the one which exhibits the most complexity and integrity" (p. 223), the most external references with the most internal consistency.

The book up to this point is little more than an elevation of the obvious into the rational. But with the terms complexity and integrity, Mr. Lemon offers his own view of the poem as symbol, a view that successfully undercuts the poem/world dichotomy (closed-form and mimetic theories). The poem as symbol stands between the creator's mind and the world as both and neither: "the ultimate source and final resting place of poetry is reality as transformed by the human mind" (p. 186). Analyzing Stevens' "Study of Two Pears," he says that the poem is an "interpretation of the physical and conceptual worlds." More generally, "a poem is likely to be both more and less than a rendering of a perception; a part of the original physical reality is left out, and a part of the world of ideas put in" (p. 102). Such symbolic form "is creative—it remakes the shape of reality; and because what is interpreted is reality, its consequences extend beyond itself. Thus neither mimetic accuracy alone nor internal coherence alone is the test of a symbolic form; the test is both" (p. 183).

There is an urgency behind such a formulation. The central issue in all this critical debate, I think, is the old dualism of matter and spirit. Critics are striving to overcome the either/or, dualizing habit of the Western mind, striving to develop a vocabulary and an approach that is true to their suspicion, as Ralph Monroe Eaton states in *Symbolism and Truth*, that "mind and body are aspects of, abstractions from, a known reality which is wider and richer than either." Certainly that was the case with Coleridge, whose desire for "succession of time and unmovable eternity, infinite change and ineffable rest"—for both matter and spirit at once—led directly into his definition of art as "a middle quality between a thought and a thing . . . the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human." Mr. Lemon doesn't pay much attention to Coleridge in this connection, a pity because Coleridge is unquestionably the first great advocate of symbolic form, as his definition of art makes clear. And the imagination, Coleridge did say, "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image." The imagination reveals itself, in other words, as a symbol-making faculty. The symbol it makes is the poem which

unites thoughts and things, ideas and images, in a synthesis that is neither one nor the other but both.

When Mr. Lemon does look at the criticism of T. S. Eliot, he gives the predictably captious analysis. And he fails to notice major issues in hunting down minor contradictions. He fails to notice how Eliot's discussion of the dissociation of sensibility ties in with his own effort to undercut the dissociation between the world of ideas and physical reality; and further fails to notice that the theme of the Incarnation lies at the center of Eliot's very critical poetry as an answer (a symbolic one, certainly) to that dissociation. Nor does Mr. Lemon see how intension and extension, denotation and connotation (terms he rejects as too confining) bear the same relation to a discussion of the poem as symbol that his own more general terms do; that these other sets of terms are also built upon the premise that the poem is a reality wider and richer than either mind or matter.

*The Partial Critics* was an inevitable book. Vocabulary has gotten in the way of useful analysis, and Mr. Lemon points this out. What he does not point out is that his own approach to the poem as symbol is just the approach of one critic, Herbert Read, whom he spends most time rejecting for reasons that are untrue in a tone that is condescending. Read outlined his position in "Surrealism and the Romantic Principle." "In dialectical terms," he stated, "there is a continued state of opposition and interaction between the world of objective fact . . . and the world of subjective fantasy." The artist "resolves the contradiction by creating a synthesis, a work of art which combines elements from both these worlds, eliminates others, but which for the moment gives us a qualitatively new experience—an experience on which we can dwell with equanimity."

RAY BENOIT

*Saint Louis University*

*Man's Changing Mask: Modes and Methods of Characterization in Fiction* by Charles Child Walcutt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966. Pp. 368. \$6.75.

Mr. Walcutt announces at the outset (Part I, Definitions) that characterization in fiction is effectively achieved only through plot action:

The accumulation of little activities (i. e., mannerisms) makes the character who discovers and defines himself in the big acts that come from the crucial choices at the crucial places in the plot. I have stressed the point that these acts, big and little, are most comfortably meaningful for the reader when they occur in terms of the central values, customs, and manners of a society.

When, in his view, a novel fails, and most in this survey do, it fails because character is not satisfactorily realized through the action of the plot. His central tenet is familiar enough, coming as it does from Aristotle. Furthermore, as he develops his thought through the introductory section, he states that he will move in "a roughly historical sequence" from *Hamlet* to *Herzog*, and that part of his interest, closely related to his principal aim, will be "to trace the

evolution of certain leading ideas of man (let us call them masks) which are created by and embodied in the kinds of actions that we see from *Hamlet* to Beckett and Bellow." It is not at all clear that he accomplishes this. Most of his energy is expended in either prolonged or capsule analyses of particular works.

Although he does work his way from *Hamlet* to *Herzog*, he begins his historical survey of prose fiction with Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a novel that, in his estimation, scarcely any work of fiction since has been able to equal, fulfilling as it does all of Mr. Walcutt's requirements for a novel, not just that of characterization. From Jane Austen he jumps to Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," and then back to *Moby Dick*, Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," and *Huckleberry Finn*, finishing this section of the book (Part III, "Characterizations in Symbolic Journeys") with an examination of the deficiencies of Katherine Anne Porter's *Ship of Fools*.

And how, the bemused reader may well ask, does *Hamlet* fit into his plan? There is no mistaking what *Hamlet* means to Mr. Walcutt: ". . . *Hamlet* is crucial to the emergence of modern notions about character in fiction." No real attempt, however, is made in the volume to develop this notion. One suspects that the critic's interest lies simply in contributing his bit (chapter long) to the clarification of the puzzle that lies at the center of the prince's character and which will continue to lie there. Shakespeare's play is not the only dramatic work which Mr. Walcutt more than once fits curiously into the pattern of his argument. There are considerations in the chapter on melodrama of Corneille's *Le Cid*, Lillian Helman's *Toys in the Attic*, and two motion pictures—*The Conjugal Bed* and *America, America*.

There are other equally startling juxtapositions in the book. Part IV includes analyses of *The Return of the Native*, some of Henry James's long and short fiction, and novels by Calder Willingham and Nancy Mitford. Willingham serves his purpose better than Faulkner, who is referred to only in passing. Indeed the omissions are as much cause for wonder as are the kinds of novels included. Where, that is, is the Eighteenth Century novel? Or the fiction of the mid-Nineteenth? Where is European fiction of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries? But this is to be unduly captious, perhaps, asking for the kind of examination of modes of characterization that the reviewer would like to see in an historical sequence from *Hamlet* to *Herzog*.

It is, of course, within the limits of this review, impossible to do justice to the subtleties of Mr. Walcutt's analytic summaries of particular novels. He minutely scrutinizes not only *Pride and Prejudice* and *Hamlet* but *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Ship of Fools*, among others, as I indicated above. Here, however, are observations on Mark Twain's novel:

. . . some critics have been impelled to write feelingly of the growing tragic vision of Huck, although in fact he does not change a bit because we don't ever know him to the point where we could mark a definite change.

The meaning of *King Lear* is right there in the action: it consists of what happens, and there can be no mistaking the events of that overpowering play. Mark Twain, on the other hand, never did clearly know what was happening or what was going to happen. That is why he delayed writing the story so many times, and that is why he was so hard pressed for incident at the end.

And this on *Ship of Fools*:

If . . . the writer does not believe in his characters, that is cannot identify with them, he will not be able (or will not want) to put them in situations where they are faced with significant decisions. Unless he believes in his characters he cannot believe in their problems. This seems to be exactly Miss Porter's problem with *Ship of Fools*: she does not see them as having significant problems that might be resolved by significant choices. They are, instead, a collection of grotesques whom she impales on the point of her pen and holds up to ridicule. She does not grant them any free life, any power to make a vital decision and so affect their destinies. They are held up naked and wriggling while she strips their petty souls bare. This gives her occasions for scintillating prose, but it prevents the characters from defining themselves in a serious plot.

For the rest, a few among many, he finds "Heart of Darkness" too much concerned with idea to be effective in the delineation of character. In *Victory*, on the other hand, although "the idea controls the action," Conrad "is able to make his characters live roundly and fully. . . . One can ask for no more." Cozzens's *By Love Possessed* he finds superb, but there is no mention of *Guard of Honor*, a far superior work. Peter De Vries's *Tents of Wickedness*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe*—all these, which occupy varying positions on an acceptable critical scale, he lumps together and finds wanting on the score of characterization.

Quite apparently Mr. Walcutt hankers after the old way of writing a novel, the old way found in Jane Austen or in our time in Cozzens. Such an attitude allows for no belief in the forward movement in fiction and forward movement there has been from Defoe to Jane Austen, through Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot to James and Joyce, to Proust and Thomas Mann, and to Alain Robbe-Grillet. Nor does it take into consideration the fact that fiction may reflect its time in techniques as well as content. Such a view must, it seems, ultimately drive one desperate and despairing back to Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* or to Joseph Warren Beach's *The Twentieth Century Novel*. To these or to Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* or to Dorothy Van Ghent's *The English Novel* he must turn if he is not to lose faith in the pertinence of criticism. But it may be just as well to let E. M. Forster have the last word:

"Character," says Aristotle, "gives us qualities, but it is in actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse." We have already decided that Aristotle is wrong and now we must face the consequences of disagreeing with him. "All human happiness and misery," says Aristotle, "take the form of action." We know better. We believe that happiness and misery exist in the secret life, which each of us leads privately and to which (in his characters) the novelist has access. And by the secret life we mean the life for which there is no external evidence, not, as is vulgarly supposed, that which is revealed by a chance word or sigh. A chance word or sigh are just as much evidence as a speech or a murder: the life they reveal ceases to be secret and enters the realm of action.

There is, however, no occasion to be hard on Aristotle. He had read few novels and no modern ones—the *Odyssey* but not *Ulysses*—he was by temperament apathetic to secrecy, and indeed regarded the human

mind as a sort of tub from which everything can finally be extracted; and when he wrote the words quoted above he had in view the drama, where no doubt they hold true. In the drama all human happiness and misery does and must take the form of action. Otherwise its existence remains unknown, and this is the great difference between the drama and the novel.

ALVA A. GAY

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*The Drama of Comedy: Victim and Victor* by Nelvin Vos. Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1966. Pp. 125. \$1.95.

The chapters (or "acts") of this earnest little tract have mostly been derived from lectures, e.g. "at the Indianola Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio, in its series 'A Dialogue between Christianity and the Arts.'" Mr. Vos thanks "the responsive audiences whose comments have frequently been incorporated into [his] material." The book is published by the John Knox Press, the organ of the Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church, U. S.

Mr. Vos is relentless in miming his love-affair with DRAMA: the table of contents is called the "Program"; acknowledgements are "Credits"; chapters are "Prologue," "Act One," "Act Two," etc., and "Epilogue"; even within the Prologue subdivisions are "Introducing the Lead Role" and "Opening the Curtain." This provides the chromo-frame for one of the book's dubious theses: that the essence of the comic is somehow entangled with the "dramatic": "Literary theorists since Aristotle have recognized the centrality of action in drama (dran = to do) . . ." The other, and apparently more deeply entrenched, of Mr. Vos's allegiances, is to the version of Christianity associated with the names of Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers and enlisting Christopher Fry, Eliot, Auden, Claudel, Dante, and "the biblical narrative" (whatever *that* is) for a rather fast-and loose backing in "*Heilsgeschichte*."

His argument is "that the structure of dramatic comedy and the structure of Christ's passionate action bear an analogical relation to each other and that a study of these two orderings of experience may deepen our perceptions at once of the essential meaning of comedy and of the Christian account of human existence." I am afraid that the book does not come near demonstrating any such thing, even if it were likely to be demonstrable in the first place.

Mr. Vos has chosen three exemplars of his Christological comedians—Thornton Wilder, Eugène Ionesco, and Christopher Fry—and has pamphlet-racked them in his (again) relentless system of alliterative antithesis, synthesis, and symmetry:

"Victim, Victor, Victim-Victor."

"Sacrifice, satisfaction, substitution."

"The seriousness of comedy in the contemporary theatre is related to the comedy of seriousness in religious belief."

"If *Our Town* is a tragicomedy emphasizing the past, and *The Match-makers* is a farce concerned with the present, *The Skin of Our Teeth* is a comedy looking at man's future in the light of his past and present."

"In [Ionesco's] first plays, man is portrayed as a comic victim of his own language and rationality, in the middle plays man is a victim of his physical environment and of his social institutions. And, in the later plays . . . man is represented as the comic victim of his finitude."

"Tragedy, Fry writes, is the demonstration of the human dilemma, comedy is the comment on the human dilemma."

"That which is comic about the action is religious, and that which is religious about the play is comic."

"The comic victim lives without hope; the comic victor hopes without actually living."

This kind of argument-by-epigram serves only to numb or anesthetize the reader eager for enlightenment on the thorny tragedy-comedy question. The promise of isolating the essence of the comic—but no, it's the *drama* of Comedy; or is it the essentially comic (that is, of course, Christian) nature of (modern) drama?—comes anywhere near to fulfillment only when we arrive at the chapter on Fry and the epilogue-*leap* to Dante. Wilder gets a full run-through, only to be presented at the end of his "Acr" as a victim of his own sentimentality, "which mars both dramatic effect and literary quality." (There needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us this; but then why pick him as representative of a significant emphasis in contemporary dramatic comedy?) Ionesco is painstakingly demonstrated to be the dramatist of "the desperate and tragic absurdity of man's existence," and to purvey "a special kind of comedy, the comedy of the grotesque." (Again, no ghost needed—but how then is he representative?) And we are then told, three pages from the end, that

The various forms of the comic—indeed, the essential structures of dramatic comedy—are rooted in a sense of life that is, in a very considerable measure, *naturaliter Christiana*. Dante and his successors, including Wilder, Ionesco, and Fry [!], are really asserting that the story of the universe is to be understood as a comedy.

Watch out for anyone who ends up his special pleading with "in a very real sense," or "in a very considerable measure." Ecumenicism, and the ideal of the One Fold, are doubtless laudable enterprises; but Mr. Vos's version is too high a price for responsible literary (even dramatic) theory to pay.

LAURENCE MICHEL

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*A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance*  
by Northrop Frye. New York: Columbia University Press. 1965. Pp. ix + 159.  
\$3.75.

In a recent letter to the English Institute, Frye protests he has already said on the first page of *Anatomy of Criticism* that he doesn't care for systems themselves, only the insight they provide. (He comes closer to saying it on page 29 than on page 3, the first page of the book.) This is apparently in

answer to the standard review of Frye's books, which mentions its approval of separate insights here and there, but says of the work as a whole, of the systems it proposes: As for *those*, who would take them seriously?—just Frye drawing some of his amusing diagrams again, that's all. Frank Kermode and Reuben Brower, reviewing *A Natural Perspective* in the *New York Review of Books* and *Parisian Review*, for example, try to save some insights, while ditching the system.

The question is, what kind of insights are we talking about? Kermode and Brower nod with approval at an insight that might pass for some other critic's analysis of a particular play. But that is not mainly what Frye is up to at all. In the Preface to *A Natural Perspective* he says: "the bulk of Shakespearean criticism consists, rightly, I think, of commentary on individual plays. The present book retreats from commentary into a middle distance, considering the comedies as a single group unified by recurring images and structural devices. From this point of view they seem more like a number of simultaneous chess games played by a master who wins them all by devices familiar to him, and gradually, with patient study, to us. . . ." Here is an "insight" on *Timon* I doubt would appeal to his reviewers: "If we were to see the action of *Twelfth Night* through the eyes of the badly used Malvolio or the action of *The Merchant of Venice* through the eyes of the bankrupt and beggared Shylock, the tone would not be greatly different from that of the second half of *Timon of Athens*." (p. 98) Here the Kermode-Brower reviewer shudders over the lumping of Malvolio, Shylock (and Timon!), but Frye is exactly carrying out his promise of revealing Shakespeare's chess strategies. Frye's most characteristic insights are always those heading toward a generalization or system, and that is where he leaves his reviewers behind. Any one system may be dispensable, but the possibility of some system, with the present ones as instances, is crucial to Frye.

At stake is whether criticism must forever remain discrete and analytic, or whether synthesis is another acceptable option for it. Frye's "rightly" above suggests he can be more charitable to analysis than his critics can to synthesis. True, every literary work is different from every other literary work; does that prohibit anyone from observing any similarities between them? Synthesis abstracts, simplifies, hence makes criticism available to many; analysis, though also "right," particularizes, complicates, hence is essentially esoteric; it keeps you ever separating, differentiating, while relishing. Dilettantism (always analytic) rejects synthesis, for mystery and intrigue are its way of life, "restricted," as Frye says, "to ritual masonic gestures, to raised eyebrows and cryptic comments and other signs of an understanding too occult for syntax." (*Anatomy*, p. 4) In contrast, Frye says of a couple of his structures: "The full understanding of these two structures is complicated for the teacher, but their elementary principles are exceedingly simple, and can be demonstrated to any class of normally intelligent fifteen-year-olds." (*PMLA*, May 1964, p. 16)

Like other reviewers I find his separate insights stimulating, but I want to discuss the structure, the theory, which is what the book is trying to be about. First I wish to correct a mistake—a mistake of theory; there may be several mistakes on particular points or plays without affecting the validity of the argument. Frye differentiates between the direct experience of literature, which moves in time, and criticism, which looks at literature spatially. "Criticism," he

says, "deals entirely with literature in this frozen or spatial way." (p. 9) Burke's "Psychology and Form" is a striking refutation of this statement, and there is no more necessity for criticism to remain frozen than to remain analytic, though I am sure it is mainly both.

What Frye has written after *Anatomy of Criticism* (except for a treatment of styles in *The Well-Tempered Critic*) appears to be *pro*- rather than *meta*-*legomena* to it. The present book is both an amplification and a simplification of the comedy section of the "Fourth Essay. Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths" of Frye's big book. This section (first written as an English Institute essay and probably the most reprinted section of the book) had already made considerable use of Shakespeare's comedies and romances. Now he takes up many missing or abbreviated points, characters, situations, and plays. The third (of four) chapters in the present book is frankly a rewriting of that section, and he says he will try to avoid repeating himself "beyond the irreducible minimum." But a question arises. If "there's nothing new in literature that isn't the old reshaped," (*The Educated Imagination*, p. 70) isn't there in criticism either? If every comedy tells the same story does every account of comedy too?

One important difference between the two accounts arises in characterization. The structure of characters in the *Anatomy* was two pairs of Aristotelian vices, *alazon-iron* (impostor-ironist), *bomolochos-agroikos* (buffoon-churl). Now he introduces a new role "in which a character personifies a withdrawal from the comic society in a more concentrated way" than does the clown (*bomolochos*). "There is, as usual," he says, "no word for this role, and I am somewhat perplexed what name to give it. Names which I have used elsewhere, such as *pharmakos* and churl, belong rather to the different character types that may or may not have this role. I select *idiotes*, more or less at random." The *idiotes* ("private person not holding public office"), then, is not a character but a role. Examples are Don John, Malvolio, Falstaff, Jaques, Shylock, and, in the passage I cited above, Timon. "Although the villainous, the ridiculous, and the misanthropic are closely associated in comedy, there is enough variety of motivation here to indicate that the *idiotes* is not a character type, like the clown, though typical features recur, but a structural device that may use a variety of characters." (p. 93) But in the *Anatomy* examples of the "character type" *agroikos* (churl) are Malvolio, Jaques, Bertram, and Shylock, and the type may be "miserly, snobbish, or priggish," which would seem as great a variety as villainous, ridiculous, and misanthropic. There was already in the *Anatomy* considerable shilly-shallying in characterization, and the *idiotes* doesn't help much. Frye had better straighten it out before the rest of us adopt Kermode's embargo on synthesis.

In the larger structure of this book (also in *The Educated Imagination*, p. 97) Frye regroups his structure of four myths into two pairs: comedy-romance, tragedy-irony, of which he discusses the first pair. Now either this pairing is right and should have been given in the *Anatomy*; or else the pairing is arbitrary and the opposite pairing, equally insisted on in the *Anatomy*, between comedy-irony and tragedy-romance, remains to be discussed. All critics, he says now, are either Iliad critics (tragedy-irony) or Odyssean critics (comedy-romance). Most modern critics, he says, are Iliad critics; if he has, as he says, "always been temperamentally an Odyssean critic . . . attracted to comedy and romance,"

it is partly, I suspect, in response to the ponderous Bradley-Lily Campbell school. Comedy and romance, he says, are the primary myths; "they can be taught to the youngest students;" (*The Educated Imagination*, p. 114) "comic and romantic stories are the ones to stress in elementary school." (*PMLA*, May 1964, p. 16) In *A Natural Perspective* Frye presents his most childlike face: I wonder how many will want to buss it.

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Erratum: Our attention has been called to the omission of the word *may* from a line on page 137 of Professor Eliseo Vivas' "Reply to Some Criticisms," which appeared in the Spring, 1967 issue of this journal. The line in question should read: "yet, in fact, they *may* have nothing whatever to do with the relations that . . ." (italics ours).