The Implications of Literary Criticism: A Review

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Levin, Harry. *The Implications of Literary Criticism*. Jonathan Locke Hart, ed. and intro. Jean Bessière, series editor. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2011.

When Harry Levin was approaching the height of his acclaim, having completed in mid-career three stunning and innovative books, *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe* (1952), *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1955) and *The Question of Hamlet* (1959), American intellectual and academic life over the coming few years was struck by two radical changes, which could be labeled the Big Switch and the Great Diaspora. The first was an intellectual movement, made familiar in the novels of Turgenev and Dostoevsky as the drama of liberal fathers and radical sons. It sought total liberation from any recognizable meaning in a text, in fact a total freedom in dealing with a literary text. Anything goes was as good as everything goes. The receding author became a figure of little or of no account, and the critic was king of all he and she surveyed (here the double gender is not perfunctorily provided). This bald summary will be supported by some of Levin's own words and those of others. But the important thing is the emergence of a new caste of judges, with new language and novel ways of beholding literature. Where there had been some form of generational continuity (to be sure differences had existed between the philologists and those committed to literary criticism) both abiding within common rules of evidence and argumentation, now there was generational warfare; in fact, a revolution, where one generation superseded the other. They were not close to being on the same page. The train had left the station.

Where the Big Switch was intellectual, the Great Diaspora was ambulatory, as the number of universities, four-year and two-year schools multiplied. The towers of learning began to crumble under a new latitudinarianism as distinguished profes-

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sors dispersed, some laudably moved to Southern schools, while most followed the allurements of California and New York state schools, a new gold rush that also provided opportunities to frame their own intellectual programs or to participate in the novelties of getting one started. In the words of one astute observer, the pyramid of learning had been leveled and a parity achieved. In the course of this interregnum, it was lamentable to attend a panel discussion, where Levin had delivered a sparkling paper but was bound to endure silently while all questions were directed at some hotshot theoretical gunslingers. Elena Levin, her husband's staunch and loyal protector, confided that Harry felt underappreciated; but he along with some other notables was too *menschlich* to engage in bleating.

Levin withdrew (he quickly resigned his MLA membership when a man with limited scholarly achievements was elected its President) but he did not retreat. There was too much in him and he had too much to do. Moreover, as this volume makes clear, he had his own skills in exposing the deficiencies of the new breed of cultural hero. He enjoyed quoting Robert Nozick's contention that the literary practitioners of supposedly innovative theory were actually flaunting second-rate philosophy in a second-hand way (32). From essays included in this volume, the title piece "The Implications of Literary Criticism" and "The Crisis of Interpretation" will indicate his pluck and intelligence in showing at what dead-ends such criticism arrived. At an evening session commemorating the late Leo Spitzer, Levin reminded his auditors that as in the paintings of Jerome, there was a lion in Spitzer's study. There was also one in the study with Levin.

This helps explain the enormity of Levin's output in the years of disappointment. But there were other qualities as well. Levin benefitted from what might be called "saving setbacks." Albert Camus' tubercular susceptibilities rendered him unfit for military service and ineligible for an academic career; instead it saved for us Camus the writer. Levin was a bleeder, suffering from a form of hemophilia that built a certain justifiable caution into his life habits. The mere sound of a mosquito, whose bite could be deadly, would send him packing from the beach. Secondly, he was extremely hard of hearing, which meant that at conferences he would have great difficulty in hearing questions, but as befits a literary scholar he became highly proficient in piecing the words together from an overall sense of context.

These handicaps, burdensome as they were, promoted reserved distance and mature consideration which only enhanced the more positive qualities that constituted Levin's great gifts. He had an eye for the significant and a mind for the memorable. His essays—with which I concern myself here—have scope, range, a multitude of references and an exquisiteness in detail. This brings us to a remarkable fact, Few scholars there are who can write the great number of wide-ranging books of the highest quality as did Levin (in addition to the three mentioned above, consider *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* [1963] and *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* [1969]), and also respond to contemporary life and critical issues with lively essays.* Normally, as I know from experience, to complete a book requires

tunnel vision. Yet Levin had the truly prodigious capacity to collect his fugitive thoughts while busy with his more engrossing preoccupations. But his thoughts were not all that vagrant, as his practice involved a constant intercourse between books and reviews, the courses he taught and scholarly essays. He had a keenly "archeological" grasp of a subject, with a clear understanding of the studies that were mainstays or that marked turning points in our knowledge. With the selectivity of an expert he was able to station them where they mattered most. Literature was a discipline, an institution as much as it was a fine art. There was no room for amnesia; in response to the brave new world that the more audacious or blinkered thought they discovered, he might have and did echo Prospero's response: "'Tis new to thee." As Elena confided on another occasion, Levin essayed to derive several publications from every course he taught, a tactic he may have learned from Edmund Wilson who managed to arrange his reviewing to coincide with his current book project.

But most important was that Levin lived the life of the active mind and did not have to wander far from the Harvard yard to be stimulated by the great congregation of scholars gathered there: from the time of his undergraduate classes with Alfred North Whitehead, to the *va-et-vient* of visiting intellectuals like Edmund Wilson, or Harvard regulars like H.A. Murray, B.F. Skinner and J.D. Watson he encountered constant possibilities for intellectual exchange. Most notably his greatest associations were with René Wellek at neighboring Yale, and co-chairing the Harvard Comparative Literature department, the brilliant Renato Poggioli, whose life was so tragically cut short by an automobile accident in California. A part of Levin was lost in that death.

All told, Levin published a half dozen books of essays (hardly to be considered as the products of his left hand); the two that stand out are the largest omnibus volumes, *Grounds for Criticism* (1972) and the one under review here. They deserve to face each other, the first representing the world before the Big Switch and thus concerned mainly with literary matters and the other after the Big Switch and thus fully addressing the state of letters, the condition of academia, but also the new possibilities for growth provided by legitimate trends in literary studies.

The hallmark of a Levin essay is its swift forward movement, made possible by the variety of references in tautly woven sentences. In these densely structured units epistemology and style come together. If truth or truths are multiform then a subject requires differing points of reference, many facets. In this compilation a plentiful variety of people, books, and of issues come together to illustrate the dimensions of an argument. He was a true Baconian in that he had a weakness for evidence. His characteristic sentences are made of "hammered gold and gold enamelling" and not even an emperor could be overcome by drowsiness at their varieties of reference. His sentences are compact with telling phrases capable of doing summary work. With reputations that were overblown, or with potentially insightful thinkers turned into gurus by the new celebrity hunger, his was a marvelous skill in bringing them back to earth with a single phrase that stands out like an arrow reverberating in its target. Yet

he was not content with simply denigrating a reputation; his major disputes were normally followed with calmly stated cogent reasons why such a famous crowd-pleasing position could bear no credit. The most complex literary mind of his generation dared to endorse simplicity.

These qualities are discernible in all of his essays, but most pregnant in those dealing with literary figures. Following Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation," he lists ("at least") four reasons why a passage or "body of criticism" needs to be interpreted (26-27 and 84-85). The anxiety of influence becomes the "be-all and end-all" for Harold Bloom, "who envisages writers as motivated by virtually nothing except their attitudes to previous writers." Yet such an influence hunter as John Livingston Lowes denied that Coleridge's poems could be reduced to such a patchwork of intertextual influences (29-30). Deconstruction, proclaiming a break-through, has become a road block. Levin concedes that criticism would do well if it confronted its "doubts and difficulties;" but it will thwart itself if it erects them into irrational dogmas" (35). Derrida's declaration that "nothing exists outside the text" could not possibly be true, and Levin proceeds to provide the obvious reasons showing if that were true neither he nor Derrida would be there performing their various functions (84). About Edward Said's "polemical" *Orientalism*, he objects that in Said's telling "the entire endeavor of Occidental scholars to interpret the Orient is reduced to a self-serving mirage." Comparative literature is converted into "counter-propaganda" and deflected into the feud between Zionists and Palestinians (374). On all similar occasions Levin objects to the kind of parti pris that is singular, reductive and largely irrational, in the real sense of that phrase.

It might be objected that such oppositional challenges—they are more than revisionist—do serve a larger purpose. They may force traditional criticism to expand its own horizons and to revitalize itself, to be suspicious of known certainties and to explore less obvious paths of understanding. But perhaps their greater service was to deepen understanding; to make the effects of literature more striking to the reader. But even so, maturity of judgment must still count for something. And scholarship and criticism must fulfill their respective functions of enlightenment

In the early 70s literary criticism had arrived at a cross-roads. But one could say that it took a wrong turn. In *The Implications of Literary Criticism*, while indicating the natures of the various pis-allers, Levin also draws up his examples of fruitful ways to develop the larger dimensions of literary study. A large step along the way, one that helped prompt a release from the narrow relentlessness of explication was provided by A.O. Lovejoy's advocacy of the history of ideas. Levin had heard Lovejoy lecture at Harvard in 1935, and was able to express his own appreciation in a review of *Essays in the History of Ideas* in 1949. Lovejoy's exploration and development of "unit ideas" and of idea complexes helped create a major opening for Levin's own studies. Along with appreciation there were some reservations. The famous essay "On the Discriminations of Romanticisms," involves a skeptical pluralism that is a "counsel of despair" (*Grounds* 133). Lovejoy's procedure seems to follow the history of an

idea, that is diachronically but not synchronically studied, and he seems to make literature and the literary imagination handmaidens to philosophy. While finding the overall application much to his liking, by exploiting the reservations Levin was able to produce the essays on thematics and comparative literature. They do not stand by themselves but are like levers that lift a broad eclecticism of approaches from philology, biography, historical contextualism, detailed analysis and explication, in short to all the methods which brought together make his books and essays such invaluable and highly readable guides.

"Thematics and Criticism" (161), an essay that already appeared in *Grounds for Criticism*, provides a rich store house for creative endeavor and literary study. With a light hand rather than a heavy foot, Levin traces and retraces the many varieties and manners of thematic studies. But always there is a germ of an idea, a stable identifying component, an enduring remnant. In W.B. Stanford's *The Ulysses Theme*, from Virgil to Dante, from Tennyson to Joyce, this is a story of the fortunes of and reactions to a resourceful highly intelligent person. In different epochs evaluations will alter as resourcefulness can easily become wiliness: for Virgil's Roman culture, which Dante in part follows, Ulysses' skilled worldliness is slippery, shifty, footloose, indifferent to the meanings of culture and civilization. His words are filled with oratorical deceptions. In more modern times, Western culture will bestow value on this mobility, this willingness to cope with the unpredictable and unstable elements of experience. But with all this historical variation the basic ingredients of Ulysses remain the same. Joined with the history of ideas (173, 177), thematics taps into mythic residues that willy-nilly inhabit human consciousness.

Comparative literature is the large counter where gems of literary study may be fashioned. While literature by its very nature is comparative not any subject can randomly comply. There must be a cohesion, a convergence of the twain (or more). The topics may cohere diachronically through the ages, or synchronically across borders and boundaries. They are particularly conducive to expansion of interest into elements of world literature (as is evidenced by the work of the editor of this volume, Jonathan Hart). They may involve individuals or groups of people. They may note the importance of dissimilarities in the midst of similarities, or more attractively, following Coleridge, and his important concept of recognition, develop similarities where only dissimilarities were suspected. Thus Coleridge can cite the similarities between the dualism of Luther and Erasmus and that of Voltaire and Rousseau. He can even bring into a linear comparison Luther and Rousseau, treating them as if they were contemporaries. In comparative literature one chances upon unexpected questions that provide unanticipated answers. For this reason comparative literature does and should resist crystallization. The best definitions of so elusive a field as comparative literature comes from the examples in works of practitioners like Levin.

As Levin makes clear there is no quarrel between comparative literature and theory. Coleridge's reliance on recognition to sort out dissimilarities and similarities and T.S. Eliot's realignments of the map of English poetry are both expeditions

into theory. Like comparative literature, theory takes us into the unexpected and the unanticipated, as a criterion for judging the adequacy of a theory are the works the author did not have in mind that are illuminated by his theory. And finally, like comparative literature theory looks for the permanent in an historically changing world. Beyond the variables it seeks out the enduring. In such ways comparative literature, as advocated by Levin, and theory may be conjoined.

To a person who declared that Harry Levin upheld the dignity and standards of the profession, a lady friend replied that he embodied them. And yet some of his best writing occurs when he recalls his years at Harvard and the dear friends "hid in death's dateless night;" then his is a voice that cannot be silenced, that must be heard. In a specially printed pamphlet, *The Waste Land from Ur to Echt* (1972), he brings together the two American masters of modernism, T.S. Eliot and the maieutic Ezra Pound, of whom it was reported that "he was as proud of *The Waste Land* as if he had been the author," holding that it was "the justification of the 'movement" of our modern experiment since 1900" (24). The final sentence of this priceless essay must weigh the fortunes of these two giants of twentieth century modernism and face the truths of their separate fates. "The irony is that he could not do for the *Cantos* and for his own fragmented career what only he could do for his illustrious friend." The lines break with a heartfelt sympathy yet recognition of Pound's great talents and self-induced misfortunes. In a memorial service following Eliot's death, it was Levin who held the stage, and brought out gasps when he acknowledged that even before meeting Eliot he and his colleagues were already his students: "He was, he always will be, the literary mentor for my generation, even when we disagree with him" (*Grounds* 296). This final spiritual salute, especially with the ending clause, shows there was a real man within the formidable presence of the professional scholar.

*Despite the success of his major monographs, it does appear (if my calculations hold up—that is, whether one considers the 1987 volume, *Playboys and Killjoys*, called an essay and actually a series of lectures and printed articles spreading over a number of years, a monograph or place it somewhere in between?) that after 1969 Levin did not write another long study. Instead he found his worth and his talents more fully satisfied in the essay form, a form that he mastered. It was a shorter work, more compact, which gave a sense of immediacy and expansion to his interests. In this form he felt less confined, and yet each essay was a kind of short-course in the subject itself. Thus essay after essay appeared to form a collection, a gathering of thoughts and theory, unsurpassed in their volume and their skillful abridgements.