

The Book of Judges: Views Among the Critics

JONATHAN HART

The interview is an illusion. The interviewer asks us to think that the best kind of interview engages its subject in a seeming moment of ease and keeps company with the interviewee. Apparently, the interview lets the listener or reader hear the voices of the interlocutors as if the audience were overhearing a casual conversation, and it assumes in its written form, despite the customary editing, that it constitutes a more off-hand and oral structure than the rigours of written argument or even writing in general. Even if the transcript records the time and location of the interview or accompanies it with a photograph of the person or the locale (and Salusinszky does not include a picture of himself), it ignores the theatrical gestures or private rituals of the oral. Perhaps this apparent immediacy, when both 'conversants' can experience a change in colouring, an alteration in pitch or tone, a shaking hand or a tapping foot in conjunction with specific silences or words, has at least since Plato given the oral priority over the written in Western culture. What constitutes that culture other than written and visual representations of orality and arguments in manuscript or print about that lost and evanescent orality — that vanished conversation under the trees at Plato's academy or by Tintern Abbey or on a beach last week — as though an absence or invisible and inaudible subtext, intertext and antitext haunted religion, literature, philosophy and history? The breath of God at the beginning of Genesis; the recorded conversations of Ben Jonson and Dr. Johnson as well as those in Montaigne and the fictionalized debates in *The Magic Mountain*; the Platonic dialogues and the Derridean questioning of the opposition between the oral and the written; and the speech of Pericles that Thucydides missed but reconstructed anyway through rhetorical possibility and conversations with witnesses all represent the fascination with what is oral (for Thucydides, see especially Findley's "Introduction" 26-27). Interviews with writers complicate the issue because they spend so much time translating the written into the oral and the oral into the written. This translation particularly characterizes professors who teach and write, so that their classroom and written arguments interact. Being teachers and researchers, scholars often field questions in class and at conferences and

often question their own evidence and methods. When a scholar interviews other scholars and then contextualizes, annotates and organizes the results in a book, s/he cannot pretend that the text is spontaneous. For scholars, the oral text often seems written. As one of Frye's students, I often heard in his lectures the syntax from his books. The interviewer can only hope that there are novel and intense moments that awaken the reader to new perceptions or reorient old ones. To have the critics talking to a critic is, in the etymological sense, to have judges speaking to a judge, which may involve as much sublime artifice as Wordsworth's poets and readers being men speaking to men. Imre Salusinszky's *Criticism in Society* raises such issues.

The book discusses the role of the critic and his or her relation to self and society. By asking all those interviewed but Derrida to discuss Wallace Stevens' "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (Derrida would not discuss matters about which he modestly says he knows little (174)) and by making the interviews available to the interviewees for their comments, Salusinszky tries to achieve some play between the scripts and to create a relatedness rather than a set of interviews thrown together and called a book (5). The interviewer seems to be giving Derrida a fatherly presence or Derrida, Frye and Bloom a trinitarian authority from which all subsequent interviews take their substance and sustenance or to be providing each subsequent interviewee with a more synchronic and katasopic view of the sequence, as if Hillis Miller (the final interviewee) is handed the narrative force to summarize, as the President of the MLA at the time, with however much irony and however much Frygian guidance on Salusinszky's part, from the high end the influences and relative positions of the critics interviewed here. Salusinszky succeeds in engaging these critics, in bringing out their personalities, and in enabling the collected interviewees to talk to one another. *Criticism in Society* is a fascinating book because it avoids toadyism and voyeurism and demonstrates the interviewer's firm grasp of criticism and theory. His ability to ask searching questions without alienating his interviewees shows that Salusinszky does his homework. Although he admits that the critics selected are mainly North American while calling attention to his Australian experience, he still could have taken a more comparative approach. Language might be a barrier: finding international scholars comfortable with an interview in English might be difficult. In selecting one of Stevens' lyrics as the text under discussion, although defending it as a self-justifying selection (232-33), Salusinszky bases his choice of interviewees (except for Said and Barbara Johnson) partly on Stevens' influence on their thinking and indicates his own interest in romanticism and in a form that formalists have long celebrated.

Salusinszky himself takes his intellectual journey from Australia to Yale to Oxford (to write a thesis on Frye) and back to Australia. He can be witty

about his homeland, for instance when he suggests in a subordinate aside that one reason Hillis Miller was leaving Yale for California was to be closer to Australia (237). But to imply that the main theoretical axis is northeastern and revolves mainly around Yale (even with side trips to Toronto and elsewhere) is problematic because it emphasizes the important formal line of new criticism, structuralism and poststructuralism above all others. On the other hand, as Hillis Miller suggests, even if this axis implies a parochial choice, the "East coast people" Salusinszky has chosen to interview are diverse, and it is an inventive strategy to ask about the critic's relation to society of those who, with the exception of Said and Lentricchia, apparently turn away from such questions. Except in the interview with Derrida, in these conversations the new critics, especially the more complex influences and exemplars like T.S. Eliot, William Empson and Kenneth Burke, hover between background and foreground, their past and invisible presence often being weighed or criticized. I should now like to touch on the notions of influence, intertextuality, reading, teaching, the nature of criticism, and its relation to society.

Written texts seem to abstract the human body more than photographs, films and realistic paintings. The interview can play with the illusion of the colloquial and everyday voice that criticism itself sometimes diverts or organizes into long formal arguments. Salusinszky enables us to hear the distinct voices of these critics, people of great accomplishment with strong and often flexible minds. Some of them talk about their own bodies, the books that most influenced them, their upbringings and their relation to the other interviewees. This direct indirection is fascinating. Too many intertextual strands exist in this collection to trace, but the influence of Frye, in whom Salusinszky is particularly interested, provides an example of how these critics interact and how their voices converge and diverge. Bloom, author of *The Anxiety of Influence*, credits Frye with being his critical father and says that Freud, who also knew about such fathers, found his theories in the greater works of another father, William Shakespeare, not to mention Bloom's elaboration of genealogies like the one of a tributary Marx to a Hegel who pays tribute to Heraklitus and so on (5, 33-34, 61-66, 70-71). But Hillis Miller claims that Eliot, not Frye, is the true influence on Bloom (238-39). Even after giving high praise to Frye's style, Kermode prefers Empson to Frye as the critic of the century (104, 110). When Salusinszky asks Hartman about his essay on Frye in *Beyond Formalism*, Hartman sidesteps the issue of influence, but later answers more dogged inquiries on the debt to Frye. Hartman demonstrates his ambivalence towards Frye. He says that, like Frye, he does not like to evaluate but later qualifies Frye's idea of the university (79-80, 88-89, 95). Said thinks that Frye and Derrida find their ideas already in the world while he finds in the world distortions

of his political position. He also opposes his secular and worldly criticism to Frye's total and separate system, but values Frye's idea of displacement and wishes that Frye had explored the relation between tonal music and the scheme of the *Anatomy* (Said and Frye share a love of music) (132, 137, 140-41). Lentricchia observes in Frye the structuralist and poststructuralist moment, which, for the interviewer, is perceptive because deconstructionists have ignored Frye's influence and have pretended that they superseded new criticism without mediation (185-86). Derrida, de Man, Bloom, Hartman and others — and not Frye — seem part of the *zeitgeist* for Barbara Johnson, although she implies that the so-called Yale school is too oriented to men and suggests ways that women can extend and enrich the deconstructive enterprise (esp 155; see also Spivak for the relation between Derrida and feminism).

The biographical details and engagement with earlier texts often arise more directly in these interviews than in critical texts. The personal can become more engaging than the intellectual history. As opposed to examining examples from each of the nine interviewees, I would like to focus on Said. While it is interesting to discover the importance of Conrad, Chomsky, Benda, Gramsci, and Foucault for Said, it is even more so to see how misunderstood he is. Said's upbringing was Anglican: he lived in Jerusalem and Cairo, summered in Lebanon, and attended a colonial English public school until he left for the United States when he was fifteen. Here is a man, brought up as a member of a tiny minority in a volatile region, who has advocated a secular and worldly criticism that works against any type of religious fundamentalism, including the Christian variety, and yet he is too often vilified as a fanatical defender of Islam. I attended one of his seminar courses and heard one of his charged public political speeches and probably misunderstood him as much in my admiration as in my resistance. What I did not realize in my bones, although I had heard talk of such distressing events, is that Said has lived under threats and with attempted break-ins at home and raids on his office. Said still speaks under the threat of violence and speaks courageously and generously (131-33). Without being a reductionist, I wonder how Said could not assume a world to break in on the critic and the text. His sense of struggle may derive in part from his early experiences and the hostility he still encounters. While he likes Bloom's notion of struggle, Said's is social while Bloom wants his to be strictly individual (139-40, see 68-69, see also Cixous' notion of struggle).

Like the other interviewees, Derrida has to cope with his academic reception and fame. In recent years he has been a celebrity in the literary academy, so that he has sometimes to "fight against this reception," which can be as conflictual among his supporters as among his opponents (23). What interests me even more is Derrida's interest in teaching, which

represents daily and discretely the relation of the university to itself and to the community. It is perhaps too easy for readers of the *Grammatology* to forget that Derrida teaches and cares about teaching. If Derrida claims that his deepest desire is "to write literature, to write fictions," he has not abandoned teaching and criticism (22). In 1975 he founded the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Enseignement Philosophique, which advocated teaching philosophy to ten and eleven year olds, well before the last year of high school when the subject is customarily taught in France, because these students enjoyed the study. Similarly, Derrida speaks about his involvement with the International College of Philosophy in Paris, which has active international directors and attempts to be unstable by avoiding the stereotypes that titles and discrimination based on sex, nationality and age can bring. He states its goal: "it would be an institution which would give priority to problematics, topics, research, which are not legitimized or accepted in the given institutions in France and in the other countries" (15, see 13-14). Salusinszky's questions about the idea of the university reveal something about the importance of theory in teaching but also the relation of the university to the society: deconstruction may have far-reaching everyday applications in the classroom and in the streets. Derrida gives us two good examples even while he properly warns that he cannot see clearly the applications of his theory in the schools.

The other interlocutors make provocative remarks about teaching, reading, and reading and teaching Stevens' "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," the poem that ends the *Collected Poems*. Another network of allusions in the interviews centres on the influence of teaching and in particular of the so-called Yale school. Bloom mentions his teacher M.H. Abrams' denunciation of Derrida and asserts that he himself has no disciples as de Man, Hillis Miller and the deconstructionists do. Kermodé says that he only once came under the influence of a school — Leavis' — as the result of "ferocious young teachers" and claims that, unlike Bloom, he has created no school, although Hillis Miller thinks that Kermodé knows how important his own influence has been (54, 111, 218). Having herself been affected by the teaching of de Man, Johnson says that de Man was more interested in teaching than Bloom is, that de Man wanted allies in resisting their selves and misunderstanding, and that deconstruction affects her teaching by helping to create "a discourse of hesitation" rather than one of knowledge. Salusinszky thinks that "the big question" of this series of interviews is "whether the university can even get outside of ideology." All the interviewees give him various but evocative answers. Whereas Frye suggests the university sometimes can, Johnson replies that "It seems to be hypocritical to teach in a place like this [Harvard] and act as if you're not complicitous. So you would have to deal with the contradiction between your

desire to put the institution in question and your desire to remain a member of it" (159-60, 172-73, see 37-40). Lentricchia says that ideas are important, so that if American Marxists pursue their struggle for social change in the universities, then their efforts should not be belittled because the university does empower (190). This position contradicts Bloom's view that scholars who wish to alleviate political and economic exploitation are hypocrites — and here Bloom refers directly to "so-called Marxist critics" — unless they leave the academy for the world (66; see Althusser on ideology and Williams esp 1-7, 145-50). Hartman argues that the multiplicity of American universities makes them hard to control ideologically, which relates to his view in *Easy Pieces* that since the tyrannies of Stalin and Hitler literary theory has increasingly resisted ideology (78, 95, Hartman 214).

The Stevens' poem enables a number of provocative responses, as if the reader were overhearing a seminar. For instance, when Salusinszky asks why Stevens never became popular, Frye observes in an allusive gloss:

I suppose because he's so studiously oblique. His work is *all* "asides on the oboe." You're never quite sure just what you are hearing. You said a moment ago that Derrida is perhaps the first non-Platonic critic; well, when you read a poem of Stevens saying "beauty is momentary in the mind ... but in the flesh it is immortal," people just blink. That's not what he's supposed to say. He's supposed to say it's momentary in the flesh, but it's immortal in the mind. (36)

Frye compares the poet and the theorist in their use of ironic inversion to shake up the world and its fixed ideas. Derrida becomes apparently less solitary and more historicized while Stevens seems more radical in context. Within this new context these authors in conjunction demonstrate the power of the twentieth-century rebellion against the mainstream of Western tradition. Hillis Miller disagrees with Bloom and Said on the representation of the bird's cry announcing the rising sun in "Not Ideas." This announcement reminds Bloom of Whitman but Hillis Miller of the opening of the second part of *Faust*. Whereas Said says that the chorister "whose c preceded the choir" suggests an instrument played out of turn, Hillis Miller interprets the line to mean the pitch-pipe in the acappella choir before the singing begins (61, 143, 235). Another connective detail is Lentricchia's railing against the "thundering banality" of 1960s experimentalism where Stevens is the great meta-writer aware of the dangerous relation between things and fictions and of how one cannot get outside and the one who shows his sophistication with "as" and "like." Although Kermodé and Said would not agree that we are worldless and without historical contexts, they do discuss the intricacies of Stevens' use of "like" and "as if" (116-17, 143, 202). Is Lentricchia consciously or unconsciously criticizing Kermodé or Said or does he see them using this illustrative detail from the 1960s to overturn this earlier



insularity and unworldliness? The questions of teaching and reading seem inseparable and sometimes have to do with larger theoretical orientations even in the details. For these critics, teaching, the institution of the university, and the text constitute important aspects of their discourse and concrete practices.

The nature of criticism and its relation to society will persist as a complex question. Does criticism criticize society as well as literature or is it separate from the social or complicit with it? Is criticism progressive or conservative or protean? Does language determine or free the critic or does the critic use language or is it impossible to discuss language, which is the basis of texts, intelligently? (see 106). To answer the question about the function of criticism, no matter how tentatively, in light of this collection, is to say that the function of criticism is hotly contested in a college of disputants or "conversants" who are still talking to and sometimes through one another. Whether these critics are friends or enemies or are caught between or in the ambivalences of both states has not impeded their ability to debate, to pursue that idea or image or truth of self. Except for Bloom, the interviewees share a view that critics work in a community within the classroom, university and society and that criticism has a social function. Even Bloom needs students, the university and readers: he communicates even if he says he is singing a song of myself. Whether criticism should be oppositional and effect social change depends on the critic. Deconstruction, like the language it analyses in texts, has a refractory relation to the world, but, as Derrida, Hartman, Johnson and Hillis Miller show or demonstrate by their example, it is not an ahistorical movement (see Young 1-28; Ray 170-85; Mailloux 11-13; for the relation of new historicism to deconstruction, see Fineman esp 58-59 and Veesser xii, xv-xvi). These people are teachers who care about teaching and about improving education. If critics like Frye, Bloom, Kermode, Said and Lentricchia have considered the impact of deconstruction, it is only right that they should enter into a dialectic with it and illuminate other complexities of text and world that deconstruction might have missed or overlooked. When Johnson asks "Are our ways of teaching to ask *some* questions always correlative with our ways of teaching students *not to ask* — indeed, to be unconscious of — others?" and when Said asserts "That's where the future is: in the evolution, over time, of notions of community that are based on real interdependent experiences, and not on dreams that shut out the other person and half of reality," their observations apply to our experience of the text and the world (130, 172, Johnson 173). Consciously or unconsciously do we leave things out? If we try to understand each other, the others, do our actions in the world improve as much as our reading? Perhaps it is too optimistic to think of a time when people like Hartman, Said, Lentricchia, and Johnson, and those they represent, do not

experience displacement or persecution because of their race, religion, class or gender. This collection raises more issues than I can touch on. Salusinszky's is an open book worth opening.

University of Alberta

#### Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971.
- Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. George Birkbeck Hill, ed. Rev. and enlarged L.F. Powell. 6 vols. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1934-50.
- Cixous, Hélène, with Catherine Clément. *La Jeune née*. Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975.
- Derrida, Jacques. *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit, 1967.
- Fineman, Joel. "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," *The New Historicism*. H. Aram Veesser, ed. New York: Routledge, 1989. 49-76.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *Easy Pieces*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Johnson, Barbara. "Teaching Ignorance: *L'École des Femmes*," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 165-82.
- Jonson, Ben. *Timber, or Discoveries*. Ben Jonson. C.H. Herford, P. and E. Simpson, eds. 11 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1925-52.
- Mailloux, Steven. *Rhetorical Power*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Mann, Thomas. *Der Zauberberg*. Berlin: S. Fischer 1924. Trans. *The Magic Mountain*. Trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter. New York: Vintage, 1969.
- Montaigne, Michel de. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.
- Ray, William. *Literary Meaning: From Phenomenology to Deconstruction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1984.
- Salusinszky, Imre. *Criticism in Society: Interviews with Jacques Derrida, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Frank Kermode, Edward Said, Barbara Johnson, Frank Lentricchia, and J. Hillis Miller*. New York: Methuen, 1987.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Feminism and Critical Theory," *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship*. Paula Treichler et al., eds. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985.
- Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. Trans. Rex Warner. Introduction and Notes M.I. Findley. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954; rev. ed. 1972.
- Veesser, H. Aram. "Introduction," *The New Historicism*. H.A. Veesser, ed. New York: Routledge, 1989. ix-xvi.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Young, Robert. "Introduction," *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reading*. R. Young, ed. London: Routledge, 1981. 1-28.