Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Richard Levin. *New Readings vs. Old Plays: Recent Trends in the Reinterpretation of English Renaissance Drama*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. Pp. xiv, 277. \$19.00.

With his latest book, Richard Levin enters a debate more extensive and disorderly than his title suggests. He begins to define its real dimensions in the Preface, where he describes his investigation of recent critical trends whose "influence now pervades the interpretation of works in just about every genre and period ..." (p. ix).

Even as Professor Levin composed this volume during the 1970s, literary criticism entered a new phase of self-conscious reassessment by means of such approaches as semiotics, structuralism, and reader-response theory. In 1979, when his book was published, assessments of the reassessments began to appear – for example M.H. Abrams, "How to Do Things with Texts" (*Partisan Review* 46 [1979], 566–588) and Gerald Graff, *Literature against Itself* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979). Norman Rabkin surveys the continuing, unpredictable tide of dispute in his most recent contribution to it, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), a book also "some ten years in the making" (p. ix):

Literary criticism, as even the popular press reports, is in crisis. Only a generation ago the war between an academic establishment committed to historical and philological studies and a guerrilla band of New Critics waving the banner of exegesis seemed to have been resolved by a permanent consensus, and until very recently, at least in the United States, critical energies have been devoted with little self-questioning to perfecting the technology of interpretation. Only yesterday it was widely assumed that the critic's job was to expound the meaning of literary works. Today, under an extraordinarily swift and many-fronted attack, that consensus is in ruins. (p. 1)

Professor Levin has entered the fray before the most recent frontal attack, focusing primarily on studies that "have appeared since 1950, and the great majority since 1960" (p. ix); his *terminus ad quem* appears to be the mid 1970s. As a result, he concentrates on approaches inspired by the New Criticism and strengthened by, among other factors, social change and "the professionalization of literary studies" (p. 197) within the university (pp. 194–199). As Professor Rabkin states, these approaches no longer represent the latest mode, a fact attested by dwindling attendance at recent MLA sessions which feature them. Yet a glance at current academic

bibliographies like the most up-to-date versions in *PMLA* and *Shakespeare Quarterly* shows that this newly old-fashioned influence remains pervasive in print, not only in the interpretation of Renaissance drama but also, as Levin contends, in "the interpretation of works in just about every genre and period. ..." Levin creates a sensible dialectic from this aura by fixing his attention on three kinds of readings, "their basic assumptions, their techniques, and their consequences" (p. ix); he illustrates his argument with unidentified quotations from contemporary books and articles. In this process, he has documented a phase of literary criticism whose vigour may not survive journal backlogs.

The first chapter identifies this Age of Criticism as an Age of the Reading, and defines "reading" in ten trenchant paragraphs as "a general attitude (or collection of attitudes)" puffed with professional ambition (p. 2). A reading provides the complete and uniquely true, close and new interpretation of the real (rather than the apparent) meaning of a single literary work. It justifies both the work and a thesis about the work.

[Finally,] a reading is a *tour de force*. It is regarded as an exhibition of the critic's skill, of his ability to discover and to demonstrate an interpretation of the work which no one else ever thought of. The reading is therefore peculiarly his own property, since in composing it he is not so much the explicator of a work already in existence as he is the creator of a new work. ... (p. 5)

In the next three chapters, Professor Levin singles out three kinds of readings which he has found most pervasive: the thematic, which "interprets a literary work as the representation or expression of some abstract concept, which will therefore give the work its unity and its meaning" (p. 11); the ironic, which denies the obvious meaning of a play and provides another meaning antithetical to it (p. 79); and the historical which maintains "that the real meaning of the plays is wholly or largely determined by some component of the extradramatic background and can only be apprehended in relation to it" (p. 147). According to his analysis, Levin's three approaches share certain features. In the first place, they are all reductive. The thematic turns drama into platitudinous, logical discourse (Chapter Two); the ironic levels the stature of characters and refutes the finality of the ending (Chapter Three); the historical demeans character, turns the dramatist into a mere "conduit" for ideas (p. 161), and "grossly oversimplif[ies] the audience's activity as well as the artist's" (p. 163; Chapter Four). In the second place, the three kinds of readings are self-generating, infinitely expandable, totally unreasonable, and therefore threatening to the whole enterprise of logical discourse. A technique applicable by all of them – and by other critical approaches as well – occupies an Appendix titled "The Figures of Fluellen"; Levin describes here the determined building of analogies out of inconsequential details, a procedure comparable to the logic displayed in *Henry V* when Fluellen argues that the King is a second Alexander the Great because "There is a river in Macedon, and there is also a river at Monmouth. ... and there is salmons in both" (see IV, vii, 22–46).

Through most of his book, Professor Levin's sharp wit caricatures three kinds of interpretative follies (and one technique) so cleverly that their procedures and effects may seem more amusing than destructive. But other features of his prose regularly inflate his cartoons into disturbing abstract images adrift in void. In dealing with each

kind of reading, Levin's strategy is to follow the approach to its logical conclusion, which inevitably proves absurd, and to delineate the absurdity in hyperbolic terms of unlimited vacuity, expansion, or licence. Hence, themes are ultimately unmeasurable entities without substance: "... there is no way to determine what dramatic components should be counted as the units in this measurement, since a theme may be found in any part or aspect of the play" (p. 32); "[i]t is difficult to avoid the suspicion ... that these [thematic] arguments are concerned with anything substantive – certainly not with anything susceptible of proof or disproof" (p. 40.). Levin imagines a Platonic ladder that rolls up behind the interpreter of themes, leaving him stranded in the rarefied atmosphere of ideas, far from the dramatic text which motivated his ascent (pp. 52–54). The ironic approach appears monstrous, as "It is impossible to know where it stops ..." (p. 124). Ironic readings which rescue flawed dramaturgy by claiming that its deficiencies are intentional may individually "be nothing worse than a harmless exercise in wishful thinking, [but] their cumulative impact is far from harmless. Already they are beginning to reinforce each other in a self-sustaining chain reaction ... , and there is no end in sight ..." (p. 132). The historical critic who insists that ideas of the time govern Shakespeare's meaning in *Troilus and Cressida* also finds the same conventional doctrine in *Measure for Measure*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*.

Nor can we stop there, for the historical context which governed Shakespeare had to govern his contemporaries as well, and the result must be that all of the works of all of the writers of the English Renaissance will embody the same set of ideas and attitudes and therefore will have the same meaning. (p. 162)

In the end, Professor Levin achieves something more important than an attack on critical approaches whose time, it seems, had already come. With tenacious logic, cumulative evidence, and bold rhetorical effects, he demonstrates how easily the process of literary criticism can turn from ratiocination into a mechanized vehicle which finally drives us away from the texts we mean to understand. He skirts some hazards himself in his demonstration, especially a tendency to reduce all criticism, great and silly, to the level of his brief anonymous illustrations; and his suggested means for harnessing runaway critical tendencies – focus on the text as literal representation and have more dialogue among ourselves (Chapter Five) – are not presented in enough practical detail to prompt their expeditious devising. Nevertheless, Levin's analysis of bad criticism has already stimulated several pieces of responsible criticism, providing one point of departure for Norman Rabkin's new book and the source of probing reviews in such journals as *Shakespeare Quarterly* and *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*. Moreover, as governments and universities flog practical disciplines with social purposes, Levin offers a timely reminder of an important critical purpose epitomized in one of Randall Jarrell's pithy rhetorical questions: "Criticism *does* exist, doesn't it, for the sake of the plays and stories and poems it criticises?" (quoted in *TLS*, 19 June 1981, p. 704). Finally, as he anatomizes the abuses of critical thinking, Levin reveals the varieties of subjectivity and influence which confuse intellection in many spheres of modern experience. His own critic-persona buttonholes the reader in her sessions of sweet silent thought and asks him what he has accomplished there. He leaves us self-conscious about thinking.

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