

LONERGAN AND POETRY II

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So far I have attempted to explain from a Lonerganian perspective how literary art works and inevitably this has led to a consideration of how we, as readers, respond to literary art. To assess the capacity of Lonergan's transcendental method to illumine the nature of critical response we could do no better, I think, than compare the structure of that method with the recorded practice of F. R. Leavis, the English critic who has arguably contributed more than anyone this century to our understanding of the nature of critical engagement with literature. Both Lonergan and Leavis emphasize the need to train and cultivate the feelings if moral maturity is to be achieved and, as a literary critic, Leavis is especially insistent on the ability of literature to effect this and, indeed, would partly justify the place of English in the university on these grounds (see 'Education and the University' in *Scrutiny*, Vol. 9). But it is on Leavis's analysis of the structure of critical response to literature that I should like to focus. It may seem paradoxical to compare Leavis to a philosopher since he was at some pains to decline the invitation of the philosopher Rene Wellek to state 'more explicitly' and 'more abstractly' the assumptions underlying his practice and was especially resistant to the philosophical notion of a *norm* by which poets are measured. It has been suggested, however,¹ that Leavis was less philosophically innocent than he protests to be and that it was the dominant logical-scientific paradigm of philosophy at that time (1937) to which he was so resistant. In any case, in his reply to Wellek and in several other places in *Scrutiny* he sets out the manner in which he comes to appreciate a poem and reach a critical evaluation. The importance of such recorded practice to Lonergan's method is that Lonergan claims to be thoroughly empirical in approach, that his mapping out of method is simply the objectification of the processes that occur spontaneously in actual practice (see *Method*, p. 4).

In his reply to Wellek Leavis writes:

¹ For example, by James Bradley in his article, 'Gadamer's "Truth and Method": Some Questions and English "Applications",' *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol xviii No 4, October 1977. I should like to express my indebtedness to this article for suggesting the relevance of Leavis to this kind of philosophical discussion.

By the critic of poetry I understand the complete reader: the ideal critic is the ideal reader. The reading demanded by poetry is of a different kind from that demanded by philosophy ... Philosophy, we say, is 'abstract' ... and poetry 'concrete'. Words in poetry invite us, not to 'think about' and 'judge' but to 'feel into' or 'become' – to realize a complex experience that is given in the words. They demand, not merely a fuller-bodied response, but a completer responsiveness – a kind of responsiveness that is incompatible with the judicial, one-eye-on-the-standard approach suggested by Dr Wellek's phrase: 'your "norm" with which you measure every poet'. The critic – the reader of poetry – is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process. The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: 'Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to ...? How relatively important does it seem? And the organization into which it settles as a constituent in becoming 'placed' is an organization of similarly 'placed' things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations. (*Scrutiny*, Vol. 6 pp. 60-61)

I suggest that we can find here many points of significant agreement with Lonergan's analysis of how evaluation is achieved and validated. There is agreement on how feelings can lean us towards particular valuations, and on the need for a maturing process if feelings are to be cultivated and lead spontaneously and with a certain practised facility to weighing and placing a poem. There is the same repudiation of any empiricist notion of norms external to the subject by which poems and poets are measured: the emphasis throughout is on the man of experience acting as his own criterion. Implicit in this is a rejection of the Principle of the Empty Head. Leavis's writings make it clear that a literary training is one in which the student moves gradually from relatively straightforward analysis and judgment to more complex areas calling for the refinement and subtlety of response that only the practised critic can provide (see 'Education and the University (3)', *Scrutiny*, Vol. 9). And clearly there is no worry in Leavis's mind about deriving a value judgment from descriptive statements; at the same time the act of evaluation is taken to be cognitively serious: it is not a matter of adding approval to what is otherwise a purely empirical observation. Rather, 'a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing'. This, as we have seen, is on all fours (almost) with Lonergan's notion that in reaching value judgments we move

from judgments of fact to judgments of value, from the third level of consciousness to the fourth. There is the slight query as to whether Leavis would recognize *any* difference between descriptive and evaluative utterances, though in view of the position he is reacting against his emphasis is understandable. Elsewhere (*Scrutiny*, Vol.13, p. 60), he speaks of the critic (of Shelley's poetry) 'passing by *inevitable transitions*, from describing characteristics to making adverse judgments about emotional quality; and from there to judgments that are pretty directly moral'. If for the words in italics were substituted, 'by the spontaneously generated questions effecting a transition from one level of consciousness to another', his position would be identical with Lonergan's. Lonergan, as we might expect in a philosopher, articulates his position with much greater elaboration than does Leavis, who is simply recording, in that wonderfully condensed and energetic manner of his, his own critical practice, and hence the vocabulary of the two writers is somewhat different; but the similarity is undoubtedly there.

This similarity becomes more remarkable when we consider a later piece of writing by Leavis in which he reflects on what he means by analysis of a poem. Wellek, interestingly, had suggested that Leavis, on account of his insistence on the actual, was inclined more to realism than idealism, but what he has to say on poetic analysis suggests less a simple-minded realism (or idealism) and something remarkably like Lonergan's 'critical realism'. Leavis is defending the critical reading of a poem against the charge of 'murdering to dissect':

We can have the poem only by an inner kind of possession; it is 'there' for analysis only in so far as we are responding appropriately to the words on the page. In pointing to them (and there is nothing else to point to) what we are doing is to bring into sharp focus, in turn, this, that and the other detail, juncture or relation in our total response.... Analysis is not a dissection of something that is already and passively there. What we call analysis is, of course, a constructive or creative process. It is a more deliberate following-through of that process of creation in response to the poet's words which reading is. It is a re-creation in which, by a considering attentiveness, we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness.

As addressed to other readers it is an appeal for corroboration: 'the poem builds up in this way, doesn't it? This bears such-and-such a relation to that don't you agree?' In the work of an English School this aspect of mutual check—positively, of collaboration 'in the common pursuit of true judgment'—would assert itself as a matter of course. (Education and the University (2), *Scrutiny*, Vol. 9 p. 309).

Apart from being a trenchant affirmation that artistic appreciation is a re-creation, this quotation bears a close resemblance to certain central features of Lonergan's cognitional theory. Leavis's saying of the poem, 'it is "there" for analysis only in so far as we are responding appropriately to the words on the page' (on the previous page he had written, 'an approach is personal or it is nothing: you cannot take over the appreciation of a poem, and unappreciated, the poem isn't "there"') – this has an uncanny resemblance to Lonergan's general position that reality is not already-out-there-now but consists of the raw data of experience ('marks on the page', 'sounds in the air') intelligently understood and reasonably affirmed in judgment. While insisting on the poem being 'there' only in the reader's creative response, Leavis clearly avoids the accusation of subjectivism or idealism by his insistence on pointing to the words on the page—'there is nothing else to point to'. Again one cannot fail to be struck by the resemblance between this and Lonergan's use of data in his cognitional theory. For without the intelligent inquiry of the subject, data for Lonergan are simply inert and indeterminate; at the same time the givenness of the data acts as a check against unbridled speculation: explanations and interpretations must continually be confronted with the data, for it is the data that have to be explained and interpreted. Leavis's insistence that an appreciation is something personal that cannot be taken over from another corresponds to Lonergan's stated account of the nature of judgment ('A judgment is the responsibility of the one that judges. It is a personal commitment'. *Insight*, p. 272), while his reference to the inwardness of the movement towards possession suggests Lonergan's position that with each stage of consciousness the subject enters more deeply into himself till with judgments of value consciousness he becomes self-conscious. Leavis's approach to the critical appreciation of a poem is open on traditional empiricist premises to the accusation of subjective interference with a meaning already 'out there' on the page and yet Leavis affirms that by it 'we ensure a more than ordinary faithfulness and completeness'. There is implicit here a clear repudiation of the notion that subjectivity is the enemy of objectivity and again remarkable accord with Lonergan ('objectivity is simply the consequence of authentic subjectivity'. *Method*, p. 265). Finally, Leavis's appeal in the second paragraph of the quotation for collaboration 'in the common pursuit of true judgment' echoes Lonergan's finding that insights are cumulative and mutually corrective and that it is only by 'ongoing collaboration' that true judgment in any field of inquiry can be ever more closely approached.

In his writings Leavis maintains that there can be no proof of a critical evaluation, certainly no laboratory demonstration of its correctness (as opposed, say, to the attempt at this made by

I. A. Richards—see *Scrutiny*, Vol 9, p. 310). This is of a piece with his rejection of any external norm by which poets and poems can be measured. But he also maintains that certain features of a poem or novel can be pointed to in an invitation to evaluate or place the poem in a particular way, and he holds up the ideal of ‘the perfect reading’ and speaks of ‘the one right total meaning that should commonly control his (the student’s analysis)’ (Ibid. p. 310). This ideal would be warmly welcomed by Lonergan who speaks of the potential Universal Viewpoint grounded on the realisation that meaning is not ‘out there’ but has its primary sources immanent in the interpreter (*Insight*, chap. 17). It is by appealing to the self-correcting process of understanding (or understandings) that Lonergan would overcome the problem of relativism and Leavis’s methodological formula, ‘This is so, isn’t it?’, inviting the reply, ‘Yes, but . . .’ encompasses a similar understanding of understanding. But the criterion of correctness for Lonergan is ultimately the subject’s self-transcendence. Does Leavis have anything corresponding? I would suggest that the features Leavis picks out as leading to a positive evaluation and ultimate approval are on a par with what Lonergan describes by the term self-transcendence. The set of terms he uses to signify the positive qualities of a poem are actuality, intelligence, self-knowledge, maturity, reality—and these are set against another set of interrelated terms such as sentimentality, immaturity, day-dreaming, self-indulgence, failure of intelligence, lack of self-knowledge, and so forth. Leavis’s critical vocabulary (see John Casey’s chapter on Leavis in his book, *The Language of Criticism*, for an excellent guide here) comes close to a definition of what Lonergan means by self-transcendence, a notion which incorporates the actuality of experience, intelligent response and maturity of judgment and evaluation. If for Leavis ‘reality’ and ‘sincerity’, as Casey puts it, ‘come close to being equated’ (Op. cit. p. 186), this is also true of Lonergan in the sense that sincerity (‘authenticity’ is Lonergan’s term) is the ultimate criterion of what is real, true and good, and this resides in the subject. If Leavis maintains an indissoluble link between form and content then this is patently true of Lonergan whose ontology is isomorphic with the structure of cognitional process. The real is what is *intelligently* understood and *reasonably* affirmed (the true is the real): the *how* of the subject determines the *what* that is affirmed. For Leavis the *how* of the writer indicates his contact with reality and this in turn indicates his moral seriousness. When Leavis speaks of form he is not referring so much to a poet’s technical skills as to the qualities of intelligence and sincere engagement that are manifested in a poem’s concrete organization. As I said previously, what is distinctive about artistic form is that it is expressed in the experiential mode: valuation and meaning are encapsulated and enacted in the concrete. To illustrate the point fur-

ther would require close examination of the detailed analyses of poetry and the comparative judgments that Leavis's work offers, but this is not possible here, and perhaps I have said enough for the point to be taken. One possible objection that should be anticipated is that for Leavis a poem's failure is *not necessarily* a reflection on the poet as a person, just as for Lonergan, although error *may be* due to culpable bias, this is by no means universally true as his references to historical, cultural, intellectual and physical limitations clearly suggest.

One other important point. Rene Wellek had thought Leavis's insistence on actuality inclined him towards a realist philosophy. But John Casey finds much of his critical writing to be couched in the language of romantic or expressionist, as opposed to mimetic, theory. His final judgment is that Leavis 'produced a synthesis of mimeticism and expressionism' and he adds, 'For a critic to have arrived at such a theoretical position is a very remarkable achievement' (Op. cit. p. 177). Mimeticism and expressionism correspond roughly in philosophy to certain traits in empiricism, and idealism respectively. If the degree of agreement between F. R. Leavis, the literary critic, and Bernard Lonergan, the philosopher-theologian, is as great as I have attempted to argue it is, this is not unconnected with the fact that Lonergan saw his philosophical enterprise as a correction of both empiricism and idealism and, as in the case of Leavis, that correction is not primarily opposed to the excesses of empiricism and idealism but to what each leaves out (*Insight*, p. xxviii). If Lonergan overcomes cartesian dualism by a synthesis of the givenness of the data and the subject's cognitional processes, Leavis overcomes the aesthetic dualism of form and content by a synthesis consisting of the actuality of experience and the poet's (and ultimately also the reader's) response to that actuality. Anyone looking for the epistemological basis of Leavis's aesthetic theory will find it, I believe, in Lonergan. And anyone seeking Lonergan's aesthetic theory as applied to literature will find it in Leavis. (I hope it is clear that I can say this without implying that Lonergan must agree with Leavis's every individual judgment). The agreement between the two men is, I believe, a remarkable tribute to both. It testifies to the courage of Leavis who in the face of a hostile philosophical tradition remained faithful to principles he found himself practising as a critic. For Lonergan Leavis's practice and his faithful recording of that practice are a wonderful vindication of his *method*.

III

In the light of the comparison I have made between Lonergan and Leavis, I am about to make a bold claim: Lonergan has got his theory of art wrong; and the reason it is wrong is because it is non-

Lonergerian. It is not the aesthetic theory of a critical realist, but of an expressionist, S. K. Langer. In *Insight* Lonergan seeks to integrate mathematical and scientific knowledge with his cognitional theory and in doing so reveals a grasp of these subjects from the inside, but when in that work and in *Method* the subject of art makes a brief appearance he hands us over to Mrs Langer. 'Here I borrow from Susanne K. Langer's *Feeling and Form*'; he tells us in *Method* (p. 61) and, as if to emphasize the derivativeness of what he has to say he adds in a footnote: 'For an application of the above analysis to different art forms . . . the reader must go to S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* . . .' (p. 64). Mrs Langer's theory of aesthetics is a particular kind of expressionism which is fundamentally Kantian, and for a philosopher like Lonergan who wrote *Insight* as a correction of Kant to take over without radical qualification a neo-Kantian theory of aesthetics is enough surely to put us on our guard. However, to say that Lonergan has got his theory of art wrong is, as I say, a bold claim requiring careful substantiation. Such substantiation will take the form of comparing Langer with Leavis and both with the structure of critical realism.

Feeling and Form is S. K. Langer's sequel to *Philosophy in a New Key* where she worked out and presented her notion of symbol, distinguished it from sign, and applied it to the art form of music. *Feeling and Form* widens the application to include all art forms. Signs (or signals) merely indicate the existence of something, past, present, or future; a bell indicates that dinner is being served, for example. Symbols, however, are 'vehicles for the conception of objects' (*Philosophy in a New Key*, p. 61). Black cloth is not simply the sign of mourning, but symbolises it, acts as a vehicle of our conception of mourning. With this understanding of symbol, Mrs Langer gives her definition of art: 'Art is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling' (*Feeling and Form*, p. 40). Music, to take Mrs Langer's primary example, is a tonal projection of the forms of feeling; crescendo, diminuendo, adagio, rallentando etc. It delineates the contours of human sentience, the pattern of life itself as it is felt and directly known. Unlike discursive language, art is not denotive but gets its meaning or import from human feeling which it articulates in a manner beyond the powers of discursive language: art communicates the unspeakable. The feelings articulated by art are not just any of the feelings that beset the artist; rather, the work of art bespeaks the artist's understanding of the forms of feeling, what he knows about the 'inner life'; the artist objectifies 'our subjective being—the most intimate "Reality" that we know' (*Feeling and Form* p. 366). Mimeticism or the representational function of art are dismissed as distracting from the true nature of art which is symbolic and expressive (*Ibid*, pp. 52, 361). The artist's sole concern is with form whose content is the feeling of which the work of art is the form: form and con-

tent dissolve into one. When she comes to apply her general theory to literature once more it is the *emotional* value of each detail of a poem or play that is stressed.

No one can gainsay the brilliance and scope of Susanne Langer's philosophy of art. Her analysis of the techniques by means of which art articulates movement, growth, vitality and sentience are quite stunning. And unlike other aestheticians who hold form to be the essence of art (Clive Bell, for instance) she insists on the relationship of form to life—namely, as an expression of our emotional being. But is that one relationship enough? She cares not a jot for *what* literary artists have to say—‘their alleged personal feelings and moral attitudes, their hopes and fears for the actual world, their criticisms of life’ (*Feeling and Form* p. 288). All that matters is their creation of an experience, ‘wholly formed, wholly expressive. . . .’ ‘All this concern with the philosophical and ethical significance of the hero's sufferings, however, leads away from the *artistic* significance of the play, to discursive ideas about life, character, and the world’ (*Feeling and Form* p. 358). Art's reality is illusory (though not delusory), quite cut off from the practical problems that face us in everyday reality: likewise, poetry is treated as ahistorical, and moral evaluations (either of a character or of a poet) are resisted (*Feeling and Form*, p. 218 and p. 361). Lonergan is clearly taken with this notion of art as a couple of quotations should make clear: ‘Art, then, becomes symbolic, but what is symbolized is obscure. It is an expression of the human subject outside the limits of adequate intellectual formulation or appraisal’ (*Insight*, p. 185); and ‘He (the subject contemplating a work of art) has ceased to be a responsible inquirer investigating some aspect of the universe or seeking a view of the whole. He has become just himself: emergent, ecstatic, originating freedom’ (*Method* p. 63). All this is in violent contrast with Leavis's insistence that literature bears directly on life, that it can teach us, and that it is fraught with moral choices and decisions for both artist and reader. And it seems to me that compared to Leavis's stance Mrs Langer's divergence from and Leavis's convergence with the normative pattern of Lonergan's transcendental method. It follows, naturally, that I believe Lonergan's espoused aesthetic theory to be inconsistent with the method he has elaborated and articulated with such rigour and applied fruitfully to fields as various as mathematics, science, history and theology.

John Casey pinpoints the most obvious objection to Mrs Langer's theory: ‘How do we *know* that works of art stand in a relation of logical analogy to forms of feeling? Have we any way of becoming acquainted with these “forms” apart from their artistic . . . expression, so that we can compare them with the works in which they are said to be instantiated, and so decide whether they have been satisfactorily realized?’ (*Op. cit* p. 67). The ans-

wer is that we cannot since the forms of feeling are essentially ineffable, comparable to Kant's *noumenon*, things-in-themselves, unknowable except in so far as they are expressed in art (ibid.). Mrs Langer replies to the question, 'How is the import of a work known?' by falling back—she has nowhere else to go—on 'intuition' (*Feeling and Form*, p. 375). One consequence of this is that her theory fails to be critical: we have no way of evaluating a work of art and placing it by comparison with other works. We know by intuition that art expresses feeling and is, therefore, good. The only criterion Mrs Langer appears to allow is art's powers of expression: when art fails to be expressive and lapses into the alien mode of discursive language then it has to that extent failed. Mrs Langer's theory—and this is obvious in her practice of poetic analysis—forces us to take poems and plays at their own valuation; and necessarily so, since she can offer us no vantage point from which the quality or adequacy of the emotion registered by the poet or playwright might be gauged and assessed. This takes us to the heart of the matter. Mrs Langer's theory is monistic in the same sense that art is simply the symbolic expression of the artist's subjective being. Critical realism is dualistic, though (I hasten to add) with a 'small d', for its dualism is one that is overcome by means of synthesis. But there are two points in critical realism where idealism offers us only one—there is the subject and there are the data of experience; or, in poetry, there is the experience and there is the poet's response to that experience. Immediately we have grounds for a critical judgment: does the explanation fit the data? Is the poet's emotional response adequate to the experience he is describing? Time and again this is the question Leavis asks: it is the touchstone of the poet's maturity, sincerity, intelligence etc. as manifested in the poem. For Lonergan, judgment is reached when the explanation of the data has been subjected to suitable tests. A poem is a self-subsistent artefact and the 'test' of the poet's emotional response is for Leavis the poem's 'concrete organization'. Shelley is criticised for his deliberate striving after emotional effect as compared with 'the Shakespearean mode, which is one of presenting something from which the emotional effect . . . derives' (*The Common Pursuit*, p. 111). The following remarks about George Eliot make the point more fully.

(At her 'highest level' her) sensibility is directed outwards, and she responds from deep within. At this level 'emotion' is a disinterested response defined by its object, and hardly distinguishable from the play of intelligence and self-knowledge that give it impersonality. But the emotional 'fulness' represented by Dorothea depends for its exalted potency on an abeyance of intelligence and self-knowledge, and the situations offered by way of 'objective correlative' have the day-dream relation to experience . . . They don't, indeed, strike us as real in any

sense; they have no objectivity, no vigour of illusion.

(*The Great Tradition*, p. 93)

It is such a standard of objectivity that Mrs Langer's theory of art so clearly lacks. In following her so unreservedly Lonergan has failed to integrate his theory of art with his own critical realism and married it instead to post-Kantian idealism. The result, unfortunately, is an impoverished theory of art, attenuating art's relevance to life and divorcing it from morality, and so making of the subject engaged in literary appreciation, to use Lonergan's phrase, a *truncated subject*, his mind uncoupled from the difficult business of critical thinking and evaluation. No doubt Mrs Langer's theory was extremely attractive to Lonergan, especially in view of the prevailing positivistic attempts to reduce art to mere ornamentation or empty babble. The irony is that even when he was writing *Insight* the foremost literary critic in England, F. R. Leavis, was practising criticism in accordance with the principles of critical realism and transcendental method.

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