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A L A S T A I R   F O W L E R

F. W. Bateson is commonly thought of as the compiler of the five-volume *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (1941–77), but his achievement was much more than that. As perhaps the only Oxford tutor of his generation who grasped the full scope of literary criticism, he is of incalculable local importance. He had been a Commonwealth Fellow at Harvard in the late twenties and observed the rise of the New Critics – Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom – whose “close reading” superseded the scholarly tracking of sources, influences, and historical contexts. The New Critics’ habit of drawing moral and political conclusions directly from the self-contained literary work seemed to many unsound; Bateson returned to Oxford with strong reservations about them.

During World War II, Bateson had been a statistical officer in local government, well accustomed to navigating oceans of print. He was one of the few tutors who had worked outside academia. After the war he made himself au fait with European and American developments in criticism, omnivorously reading literature and its contexts. Used to keeping many strands in play, he made himself a contextualist in a new sense.

Visitors to Bateson's house in the hilltop village of Brill might find many signs of his diverse interests. Taking the sun at his open door, behind him a Victorian elephant on wheels, by his side his wife, Jan, pacifying wasps with a jar of jam and water, he would explain how Brill had served as an observation post during the siege of Oxford in the English Civil War. Or as the doyen of local historians, he might show visitors over the windmill.

In the university, Bateson was a patron and an enabler. At the Critical Society he liked to air preposterous views until his gadfly provocations met humiliating rebuttals. The heated objections would turn his ruddy complexion blush-red. Once he applied Coleridge's definition of poetry as "the best words in the best order" to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, rearranging lines to show their lack of inevitability. How much of this coat-trailing was mentoring, how much masochism?

Bateson founded *Essays in Criticism*, a journal that still survives, still ignores critical fashion, still maintains a high level of scholarship. He conceded that F. R. Leavis's *Scrutiny* was the better journal of criticism. But this betrays his tendency to overrate judicial criticism. Of the two journals, *Scrutiny* more often fell into dogmatism and loss of proportion.

As general editor of the Longman [later Pearson] Annotated English Poets, Bateson dispensed significant patronage. By choosing beginners as editors – Christopher Ricks, for example, and John Carey – he changed their lives. What would Carey be without his editions of Milton's shorter poems, or Ricks without his two Tennysons? Above all Bateson kept his editors up to the mark, giving them tutorials, in effect, on editing.

Bateson's essay "The Literary Artefact" made us aware of Fredson Bowers and modern bibliography. And Bateson himself brought contemporary American and European criticism to our notice by enabling us to meet U.S. critics. We had scarcely heard of genre theory before a visit by R. S. Crane, the Chicago theorist. Lionel Trilling, too, was brought into our orbit. No accident that Trilling was the most contextualist of the New Critics, as witness his *Mansfield Park* essay in *Encounter* (1954). Trilling had a better sense of historical context than to claim, as Wimsatt and Beardsley did, that "the history of words *after* a poem is written may contribute meanings which if relevant to the original pattern should not be ruled out by a scruple about intention."

In the 1950s, European structuralism was a closed book to the Oxford English faculty: even R. A. Sayce's seminars made little impression. Although Bateson was no believer in structuralism, he made sure we had some idea of it, doing so as much through his personal interventions as by his studies *English Poetry and the English Language* (1961) and *The Scholar-Critic* (1972).

Helen Gardner was almost Bateson's opposite. Justifiably proud of her place in a man's university, she defended it with great success. But she fought for more: total domination, whether in teaching, writing, or talking. Her enemies (and there were some who refused to share a room with her) spread it about that she considered her tutorials had failed unless they ended in tears.

This seemed plausible, if you knew what Dame Helen was capable of in debate. A nervous speaker to a seminar on François Mauriac advancing a risky view of *Thérèse Desqueyroux* was liable to be mercilessly cross-examined – “Are you quite familiar with the ending of that chapter? Have you even *read* it?” – until she broke down before her audience. In such debates Dame Helen must have seen herself as defending a sacrosanct literary text against critical manipulation. The text's authority ruled.

In her Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard (1979–80), published as *In Defence of the Imagination* (1982), Dame Helen explicitly defends the text's authority, rejecting any “strong” criticism as deconstruction. Denis Donoghue's hostile review describes her as “peculiarly embattled, surrounded at every turn by error, mischief, and frivolity.” This is well put. Unlike Bateson, say, or Frank Kermode, she had no wish to discover what could be said in favor of a new type of criticism. Indeed, her otherwise puzzling opposition to Kermode is best explained as overreaction to his besetting curiosity – in this case, his tolerance of deconstruction. He was endlessly fascinated by any new critical trend – the more unsound the better, it almost seemed. Certainly he showed more interest in finding new problems than in solving old ones.

Dame Helen, by contrast, had no time for deconstruction. Even when it claimed to expose inconsistencies or offensiveness, it made no impression on her. It was as if she herself pursued a hermeneutics of suspicion, targeting criticism instead of literature.

In any case, few Oxford tutors were drawn to deconstruction in

the sixties. Superior schooling in linguistics dissuaded them: Deirdre Wilson's account of communication left little room for Jacques Derrida's undecidables.

Dame Helen intended her editions of John Donne – *Divine Poems* (1952) and *The Elegies, and the Songs and Sonnets* (1965) – to dislodge Herbert Grierson's canonical edition. She wasn't entirely successful in this. She brought to bear more manuscripts than he had used, but in collating them she tried to prove too much and provided too little convincing criticism. Her three books on T. S. Eliot were much better: *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (1949), the edition of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and *The Composition of "Four Quartets"* (both 1978).

Meanwhile, her position as Merton Professor gave her an unspoken supremacy in the Oxford faculty. And she planned to extend this geographically by placing deputies in strategic Chairs throughout the realm. If her pupils preferred to try for Oxford fellowships, she felt that it threatened to create a wasteful concentration of sound deputies; against that event she steeled herself to write them unfavorable references. This or that fellowship candidate "would be happier in the provinces."

As a lecturer Dame Helen was skillful, able to put her experience of amateur dramatics to good use. Her lectures were useful and well attended, despite enjoying far less popularity than those of C. S. Lewis. Lewis's lectures were compelling performances, brilliant expressions of a stored mind. They seemed to issue directly from his capacious memory rather than lecture notes. They were so lively, so hilarious, so profound, that they naturally played to crowded lecture halls. Lewis made sixteenth-century studies attractive to many students.

Among the members of the English faculty Lewis enjoyed less supremacy. At a time when updating the curriculum was long overdue, his views seemed inappropriate. He would have nothing to do with Bateson's scheme to abandon Anglo-Saxon and consider English literature as beginning after the Norman Conquest. Lewis wanted to retain Anglo-Saxon, not in order to make the English school as exacting as classics, but because he believed in the integrity of the English literary canon. Not all his colleagues shared this belief. Still, when the faculty voted for Rachel Trickett's proposed

curriculum (extended to take in Victorian literature for the first time) they also retained Anglo-Saxon, probably in the main through Lewis's influence.

Lewis's importance has always depended chiefly on his publications. *The Allegory of Love* (1936) is a great work of historical vision. For decades it has shaped medieval studies and made Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Spenser accessible to students. It has taught generations to see in allegory something more than gratuitous obscurity. Readers conditioned to suppose medieval writers naive and credulous have seen that Lewis makes this assumption untenable. He has taught them to reject the "chronological snobbery" of the modern age. For Lewis displays Chaucer's seminal force: "Often a single line such as 'singest with vois memorial in the shade' seems to contain within itself the germ of the whole central tradition of high poetic language in England."

Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (1954) played down the classical models of Renaissance literature – almost played down the Renaissance itself. Yet no volume of the Oxford History of English Literature is more often opened. The reason is simple: Lewis freshly engages with every author he treats. Combining descriptive with honorific criticism, he is always ready to dismiss merely conventional writing or to praise an unknown work showing quality.

A substantial body of Lewis's criticism from the fifties and early sixties – more than forty book reviews sequestered for decades in the *Oxford Magazine* – has been collected in *Image and Imagination* (2013). Everywhere the work shows the stamp of his caliber. Time and again he rises above the arrogant assumptions of modernity to recognize greatness in unfashionable writers such as W. P. Ker and Oliver Elton. And his impartiality shows equally in positive judgments of writers he differed from (for example, George Steiner) or who seemed a bit dull (such as J. W. H. Atkins). Lewis is notably bold to salute genius. In one review he acclaims *The Hobbit*; in another *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which he regards as potentially a classic on equal footing with *Orlando Furioso*.

The perspective of distance may help us to see Lewis's eminence as the greatest English scholar-critic of his generation. He towers above the misogynistic Empson in learning and judgment, above Leavis in depth, clarity, and sensitivity to feminine qualities.

And in the long run Lewis's unparalleled readability may increase his importance as he continues to broaden appreciation of past literature.

On Empson the man, Stefan Collini has written favorably, seeing him as the victim of unjust expulsion from Cambridge. The facts tell another story. It wasn't only condoms in Empson's luggage that led Magdalene College to annul his research fellowship, but the scandal he caused among college servants by fornicating without troubling to lock his door.

Both David Lodge and Jonathan Bate have described Empson as the greatest literary critic of his time. But to see the insularity of this view one has only to think of Empson's near contemporaries: W. K. Wimsatt, Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode. When Empson gave a lecture at Oxford (sporting long Fu Manchu mustaches), the performance wasn't exactly flashy, but it seemed too insubstantial to be challenging. While his ability as a critic, the acuity and bravura of his writing, were beyond doubt, his scholarship sometimes was not, as became painfully evident in his dispute with Rosemond Tuve about George Herbert's "The Sacrifice." Empson's best work is exciting; but often he hasn't read widely enough to do justice to his insights.

*Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which first brought him to general notice, succeeded as the precocious display of a brilliant undergraduate. But his attempt to develop similar ideas in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1977) lacks the clarity of a good theorist. *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), in some ways his best book, fails to deploy an adequate range of examples or to consider exceptions and difficult instances. *Milton's God* (1961), despite its confusion of purpose, has clarity, flair, and forcefulness. But where is the discipline of a good critic? Its argument is driven by hatred of Christianity rather than by literary insights.

Empson and Lewis were at their best discussing groups of works, or the place of one work in the canon at large. But Wallace Robson was best discussing a single work: his *Modern English Literature* (1970) is not a success. Lewis thought it "the chief duty of the interpreter to begin analyses and leave them unfinished," while Robson aimed to carry interpretation to its conclusion and say the

last word. (Who need write on Long John Silver after Robson's "The Sea Cook"?) In a word, Robson's approach was Cantabrigian rather than Oxonian. No accident that throughout his early career he wrote under the sway of F. R. Leavis, published in *Scrutiny*, and saw Lewis as the great adversary. After he broke with Leavis, however, Robson came to rate Lewis far more highly. No assessment of Lewis is more deeply considered than Robson's in "The Romanticism of C. S. Lewis" (1966).

Organization was never Robson's forte. The groups of undergraduates outside his door in the college were not listening for his brilliances: they were waiting for their own double-booked tutorials. At home, the floor of Robson's library was always covered with books, as he formed his final judgment taking in the positions of many critics. Similarly, when he gave his inaugural lecture (on *Hamlet*) he kept shuffling his notes, to his friends' dismay — was he not sure of his conclusions? Yet it was one of the best inaugurals I've heard.

Robson faulted W. H. Auden's inaugural for its excessive deference towards scholars and scholarship. Like Bateson, Robson overvalued criticism. (No wonder the two joined forces to form a *critical* discussion group.) Criticism was for them the queen of the literary disciplines, though they were themselves far from deficient in scholarship or creative ability: Robson published several volumes of verse.

This lofty conception of criticism appears everywhere in Robson's *Critical Essays* (1966). Yet the same volume betrays certain limitations that deny him greatness as a critic. Of these the most serious is unease in discussing women writers. From a century distinguished by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Margaret Oliphant, and the Brontës, he chooses to discuss only Christina Rossetti, insisting, as he elicits her qualities, that they are the qualities of a minor poet. By doing so he elevates his own severity and precision, but at a heavy cost. He implies that women writers can expect only secondary places in his pantheon. The lover of Iris Murdoch, the happily married husband and father, appears to retain in his criticism substantial traces of the bachelor Fellow of a male college.

Robson's tutor had been Lord David Cecil, chief of the older school of biographical critics. Biography was just as relevant to a writer's

oeuvre as it had ever been. But applying biographical facts was more problematic. What exactly did they purport to explain? And how could a writer's inner experience be known without psychoanalyzing both writer and work? Such problems seemed not to trouble Lord David. Trained as a historian, he took for granted the relevance of biography, applying it subtly in a great many critical studies from *The Stricken Deer* (1929) on. In the end, what one reviewer called his "gentle acuteness," his "clear head and clever heart," may be thought qualities much like those of an analyst.

Lord David was also a compelling speaker. Cigarette smoke found its exquisite way between his fingers, mesmerizing audiences unaware of watching a performance. This was an in-group they had never expected to join. The speaker's critical disclosures had the authority of one who knew the author, knew the author's works, and knew their meaning, all at once.

To Lord David's excellence as a tutor, the abilities of his pupil Wallace Robson perhaps testify. As a supervisor of research, however, he was less effective. His heart was not in the work of teaching literary research, still a recent innovation at Oxford. He was once observed leaning from an open sports car – much like the one Gervase Fen drives in Edmund Crispin's novels – to give a supervision lasting ten minutes or so. (In contrast Lewis, who disliked teaching research quite as much, would give hour-long supervisions at two-week intervals.) And the sports car incident was not atypical. Notoriously, Kingsley Amis had the greatest difficulty in making any contact with him at all.

Almost as important as tutorials and lectures were the many informal groups of students and tutors meeting out of hours to discuss literary topics. Before World War II, an undergraduate could attend a different discussion group every evening of the week.

In the sixties, such discussion groups were mostly attached to a specific college, like the Johnson Society at Pembroke (not limited to discussing Johnson) and the Florio Society at Magdalen (focused on creative writing). Bateson and Robson acted as mentors to a different sort of group, consisting of young tutors from any of the men's colleges, who met to hear and discuss a paper over a glass of claret, generally in the speaker's rooms. John Bayley, Roger Lonsdale, Jonathan Wordsworth, and later Bernard Richards were

among the regulars. From their papers and the responses to them, publications might emerge, as for example Bayley's "Keats and the Genius of Parody" (subsequently developed in a British Academy lecture, "Keats and Reality," on traces of Keats's Cockney culture). Similarly with Ricks's "Keats and Embarrassment" and John Burrow's "The Action of Langland's Second Vision," both of which appeared in *Essays in Criticism*.

There were no equivalent groups in the women's colleges (then still segregated). But the Bateson-Robson group, latterly organized by Dennis Burden, came to include women tutors, Barbara Everett being the first. And faculty seminars (like the one on Mauriac) were open to tutors and students from men's and women's colleges alike.

In retrospect, the sixties seem a golden age for literary studies. At a time of expanding universities and secure tenure, tutors could endlessly explore the literary canon, reshaping it and bringing it into better focus. Forgotten writers could be rediscovered and promoted to the canon. Neglected aspects of familiar writers could be given attention. And writers excluded by the Edwardians – especially women – could be reinstated.

This intense activity was largely untroubled by critics suspicious of literature. The time of deconstruction and cultural studies was not yet. Postcolonial criticism with its groveling politics lay in the future. And no one thought to abandon canonical literature for modern writing, although authors sharing our own assumptions would presumably have offered comfortable familiarities. Safe space was never demanded in the sixties. Canonical literature, with all its disturbing revelations, was still the subject of study.

Were we deluded? Probably. But every period has its own delusions, not least the present age, with its obsessive conviction that what matters most in writing is its politics.