

RENÉ WELLEK :

PROFESSION OF CRITICISM

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In the fall of 1978, the distinguished American literary theorist, critical historian, and comparatist scholar René Wellek spoke at the Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, on the occasion of an exhibition of his publications and the celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday. After outlining the main tasks ahead of him, he looked back on his writing life over the past fifty-four years and noted that his books reflected the many changes in literary scholarship and criticism. Still, he hoped that he had preserved his own integrity and a core of convictions. Wellek, whose impulse has always been to help clarify the methodological Tower of Babel, once explained : "My views and aspirations are best expounded in my books." No doubt many Indian literary scholars know the convictions and aspirations in Wellek's twelve books, if not in all of his hundreds of scattered essays and reviews. In honor of his seventy-fifth birthday, René Wellek's friends in India might like to know more about the early stages of his remarkable development, particularly about the formative years preceding his first scholarly publication as an undergraduate.

René Wellek was born in Vienna on August 22, 1903, the oldest of three children. In this old Hapsburg capital—cradle of much contemporary thought in psychology, medicine, philosophy, politics, art, music, and literature—Wellek and his younger brother Albert (1904-1972) spent their boyhoods. The culture of Wellek's parents influenced his development profoundly. His father Bronislav Wellek (1872-1959), then a government lawyer, was a Czech from a petty-bourgeois Catholic family in Prague. Known as a *Liedersänger*, a Wagnerian, and an opera reviewer, Bronislav Wellek also was an ardent Czech nationalist, a transmitter of Czech values to the Austrian consciousness, a biographer of the

composer Bedrich Smetana and a translator of the poets Jaroslav Vrchlicky and J. S. Machar. René Wellek's mother, *née* Gabriele von Zelewsky (1881-1950), came from a different background. Born in Rome, she bloomed into a dazzling beauty who spoke German, Italian, French, and English. René Wellek's maternal grandfather was a West Prussian nobleman of Polish origin; Wellek's grandmother was a Swiss Protestant from picturesque Schaffhausen. After the nobleman's death, his wife and daughter travelled on the Continent. In Vienna, Gabriele von Zelewsky met Bronislav Wellek.

In the crowded capital the young couple and their sons moved from apartment to apartment. From 1906 to 1908 Bronislav Wellek served under the Austrian prime minister, Baron von Beck, to whom he gave Czech lessons. In 1912 the Welleks settled in a large house with garden and terrace. At home and in the kaleidoscopic Danubian metropolis with its baroque elegance and *Kaffeehaus* culture, René and Albert grew up in an atmosphere rich in linguistic, aesthetic, political, and religious overtones. Since the Protestantism of his Swiss grandmother prevailed in the family, the Brothers Wellek had been baptized in the Lutheran Church. Even the agnostic Bronislav became a nominal Lutheran.

As a boy René Wellek read voraciously. He and his brother developed "crazes" for all kinds of encyclopedic and historical information—geography, science, religion, literature, military campaigns. Familiar with Viennese opera, René Wellek also took piano lessons. At school he and his brother spoke German, but sensed anti-Czech feeling. At home and on vacations in the river valleys and pinewoods of Bohemia, the brothers spoke Czech. A month after he became ten, René Wellek started Latin lessons, and for eight hours a week for eight years he read much of Livy, Cornelius Nepos, Caesar, Cicero, Ovid, Vergil, Horace, Catullus, and Tacitus.

During the First World War, René Wellek recalls, food in Vienna grew scarce and cannon boomed in the Carpathians. When he was thirteen he started Greek, and during the next three years he read Xenophon, much Homer, some Plato, and some Lucian. During his convalescence from scarlet fever, his father read to him the whole of *The Pickwick Papers* in German. When he returned finally to the *Währing Gymnasium*, he was permitted to substitute English or French for his interrupted Greek studies. Wellek's choice of English influenced his life decisively. Though he still spent long hours at his Latin, he grew increasingly sceptical of mechanical instruction.

With the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, the Welleks (and infant Elizabeth) moved to the ancient cathedral city of Prague, that picturesque, gloomy settlement at the entrance to Eastern Europe. "Czechoslovakia after the war," Wellek notes, "more than ever, stood at the crossroads of all cultural influences, in consequence of her geographical position, her Slavonic language and her Western sympathies." Like his father high in government office, the schoolboy René Wellek identified with the new Czechoslovakia. "The outcome of the great war, which for the Czechs meant the fulfilment of a centuries-old desire, was a surprise and shock for the Germans in Bohemia and Moravia." Still, the first president of the Republic, Tomas Masaryk, hoped that Czechoslovakia might become the Switzerland of Central Europe and Prague the Athens.

No English, however, was taught at Wellek's *Realgymnasium*. Nevertheless he, continued to read English literature at home, particularly Shakespeare and the Romantic poets. In school he studied botany, history, geography, and three literatures—Latin German, and Czech. He read a good deal of Reformation history and became familiar with the German classics. After reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, he puzzled over his mother's sentimental piety.

In 1922, Wellek entered Charles University (the Czech University of Prague). Viewing his father's legal profession as boring and his brother's medical interests as unappealing, Wellek prevailed upon his father to allow him to study Germanic philology. Academe promised intellectual adventure and social responsibility, art and learning, passion and judgment. At Charles University, German historical scholarship still held sway but often it collaborated with criticism. Joseph Janko lectured on Gothic vocalism and consonantism, Arnost Kraus on the *Minnesänger*, Otokar Fischer on the psychoanalytic interpretation of Heine, F. X. Salda on Symbolism, and Václav Tille on comparative folklore. From each Wellek learned, but from each he withheld total allegiance. Fascinated by the judgmental boldness of Friedrich Gundolf's *Shakespeare und der deutsche Geist* (1911) and *Goethe* (1916), Wellek in 1923 visited Heidelberg to hear Gundolf lecture; after calling on him, however, Wellek was repelled by Gundolf's adoring cult of Stefan George.

At Charles University, Wellek enjoyed the lectures on English literary history given by the highly regarded Czech scholar and teacher Vilém Mathesius (1882-1945). The noble and polite Mathesius, Wellek later wrote, was "the type

of the Czech scholar who grew up under Austria in the tradition of Czech Protestantism, with Masaryk as a model in mind, who devoted himself to the building of the nation between the wars." During Mathesius' sudden loss of sight, Wellek (who then cared only for Shakespeare and the Romantic and Victorian poets) read portions of *The Fairie Queene* to him and observed that often Mathesius' responses to Spenser went beyond the conventions of 9th-century positivistic philology. Mathesius, in fact, encouraged his students to free themselves from fanatic German factualism and to write Czech exposition in the simple, clear style of the English. Though Mathesius seemed to Wellek insufficiently concerned with the problem of evil and tragedy, with irrationality and the interior life, Mathesius instilled in him "a sane respect for order, tradition, common sense, lucidity... distrust of the merely new, the pretentious and opaque...a concern for genuine discovery for the frontiers of knowledge."

With his father's help Wellek in 1924 spent two months in England preparing his thesis on "Thomas Carlyle and Romanticism" and responding favorably to the Metaphysical Revival. The next year he and other Czech students, under the auspices of the British Union of students, visited Cambridge, Birmingham, Liverpool, Oxford, Bristol, and London. As an undergraduate Wellek began publishing his efforts in Czech books and periodicals. His first essay in Fischer's and Salda's review *Kritika*, took to task J. V. Sládek's Czech translation of *Romeo and Juliet*. Other early essays are on Byron and Shelley, early reviews on various studies in Czech, English, French, and German. Under Mathesius, Wellek completed his thesis on Carlyle: Wellek argues that Carlyle fought the Enlightenment with weapons from German Romanticism, but remained a Puritan. In June, 1926, at age twenty-three, Wellek received his D. Phil.

Supported by the Czech Ministry of Education, Wellek once more visited England, this time to prepare a monograph on Andrew Marvell in relation to Baroque and Latin poetry. But at Oxford, where he met Mario Praz, Wellek was surprised to learn that the French scholar Pierre Legouis was preparing a large book on Marvell. With recommendations from Oxford, Wellek applied to the Institute of International Education, and in the fall of 1927 he went to Princeton as a Procter Fellow of English. He spent a busy year in the

regular graduate seminars of Thomas M. Parrot, Robert K. Root, Charles G. Osgood, and Morris W. Croll. Unfortunately, Wellek's seminar assignments were much like those of his early years in Germanic philology. At the time Princeton offered no modern or American literature. Wellek, however, managed to read H. L. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks, and the New Humanists.

Since there was no opening for him at Prague, Wellek remained in the United States and taught German the next year at Smith College. The following year he returned to Princeton to teach German. Having avoided at Prague the professors of positivistic philosophy, at Princeton he attended Ledger Wood's seminar on Hegel's *Logic*. Wellek's thesis on Carlyle had led him to Coleridge, and Coleridge led him to Kant and Schelling. During this period, Wellek decided that the topic of his second thesis (*Habilitation*) would be the influence of Kant on English thought. Wellek then voyaged home by way of England. At the British Museum he scrutinized Coleridge's MS. "Logic," amazed to see the fair and unfair use Coleridge made of Kant.

Back at Charles University by the fall of 1930, Wellek completed *Immanuel Kant in England: 1793-1838*. Though Mathesius had reservations about the subject of the *Habilitation*, he advised Wellek to enhance his chances of securing a professorship by writing a paper on the Middle English poem *The Pearl*. Wellek passed his *Docentura*, basing his inaugural lecture ("The Two Englands: Empiricism and Idealism in English Literature") on an entry in Coleridge's notebooks. Writes Wellek: "I developed the contrast between the two traditions with an unconcealed preference for the Platonic idealistic poetic tradition." Still, Mathesius selected Wellek his eventual successor as Professor of the History of English Literature.

From 1930 to 1935 Wellek lived in Prague. He became an active junior member of the famous Prague Linguistic Circle, translated Joseph Conrad's *Chance* and D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* into Czech, taught English as a *Privatdozent*, and wrote in Czech, English, and German for a variety of Czech journals. In 1932 Wellek married Olga Brodská, an elementary school teacher from Moravia. Wellek early surveyed the work of the Cambridge critics— I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and William Empson —and contributed articles and reviews to *Slovo a slovesnost*, journal of the Prague Linguistic Circle. He further developed his considerable skill in textual analysis, formulation of theory, and

reasoned evaluation. Believing that history can be written only from a sense of direction, Wellek as early as 1932 sought in his paper on "Wordsworth's and Coleridge's Theories of Poetic Diction" for anticipations of the views of the Russian Formalists and the Czech Structuralists. Of great interest to Wellek at this time were the theories of Viktor Shklovsky, Roman Jakobson, Jan Mukarovsky, and Roman Ingarden.

Since prospects for a professorship at Prague seemed remote, Wellek from 1935 to 1939 was Lecturer in Czech Language and Literature at the school of Slavonic studies of the University of London. Sponsored there by the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education, Wellek also gave six public lectures a year on Czech culture. During these London years, he contributed his important "Theory of Literary History" to the sixth volume of *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* (1935). Wellek notes that this essay for the first time in English discusses Russian Formalism and Ingarden's phenomenology. Wellek argues against merely accumulating facts about literature, against reducing literature to historical information. He advocates concentrating on the actual works of art themselves, on bridging the gulf between content and form.

In Cambridge in the summer of 1936 Wellek for the first time met F. R. Leavis. Though Wellek's views in many areas coincided with those of the Cambridge group, his famous letter in *Scrutiny* in 1937 charged Leavis in his *Revaluation* (1936) with an inadequate appreciation of idealism as it descends from Plato, with underrating the coherence and comprehensibility of the Romantic view of the world. Leavis wrongly countercharged that Wellek was an abstract philosopher with an inadequate appreciation of sensitive, concrete criticism. As Bronislav Wellek before World War I had transmitted Czech culture to Austria, so René Wellek before World War II transmitted Czech culture to England. In London and environs, in speech and print, he sought help for his threatened homeland by acquainting the English with venerable Anglo-Czech relations, with Czech writers and values. Several of Wellek's thoughtful, factual accounts of Czech history and the Czech situation stem from this period.

After Hitler's troops marched into Prague in the spring of 1939, the Third Reich halted Wellek's salary. Thomas Parrott informed Norman Foerster of Wellek's plight. Foerster as Director of the school of Letters at the State University of Iowa invited Wellek to join the English Department as a lecturer

on a one-year appointment. Having ascertained the exact location of Iowa City on a map in the British Museum, Wellek and his wife gratefully sailed for America in June. Before the trip to Iowa, Wellek worked at Yale for six weeks on the manuscript of his *Rise of English Literary History*. The Welleks moved into a newly rented house in Iowa City on September 1, 1939—the day World War II broke out in Europe.

At Iowa, Wellek at first taught courses in the Humanities and the European novel. There he met several stimulating colleagues, among them Austin Warren. Reappointed, Wellek soon taught a seminar in German-English literary and intellectual relations. In the stormy debate in American Universities between scholars and critics (history versus values, facts versus ideas), Wellek naturally supported Foerster's Neo-Humanist reforms. Like England, America lacked theoretical awareness, its scholarship was antiquarian, its criticism impressionistic. To the collective volume *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*, (1941) Wellek contributed a revised version of his "Theory of Literary History." That same year the University of North Carolina published his *Rise of English Literary History*. Wellek became an associate professor at Iowa and associate editor of *Philological Quarterly* (1941-46).

At meetings of the newly-founded English Institute in the early 1940s, Wellek met William K. Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate. Robert Penn twice taught at Iowa as a visiting professor. Though Continental and American perceptions naturally differed, Wellek was impressed with these "New Critics." Sensing the limitations of New Humanism, Wellek and Warren decided to write *Theory of Literature*, a book stressing the nature, function, form, and contents of literature, as well as its relation to neighboring but distinct disciplines. The needed book would bring together Wellek's insights into slavish Formalism/structuralism and Warren's into American New Criticism. To expedite the collaboration, Wellek enlarged the scope of his reading in American scholarship while Warren read more European studies. Meanwhile, Wellek accepted Louis Wright's invitation to work as a Fellow at the Huntington Library during the summer of 1942—on what Wellek imagined would be the second installment of his *Rise of English Literary History* (since Thomas Warton to the present).

Though Wellek naturally lost touch with the Prague Circle, he intensified his theoretical interests. At the center of his convictions were the autonomy of the aesthetic experience, the human meaning of art, the necessity for responsible interpretation, the interdependence of theory and experience, and the interconnection of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. In the spring of 1943 Wellek's son Ivan Alexander was born. From 1943-44, Wellek was Director of the Language and Area Program in Czech, his function to produce translators for the U. S. Army. Wellek was promoted to full professor in 1944, but his grinding stint as language director had retarded progress on *Theory of Literature*. With support from the Rockefeller Foundation, however, Wellek and Warren spent the bright post-war summer of 1945 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Enthusiastically, the Czech and the American wrote, exchanged, discussed, and revised chapters. Of Austin Warren as writer and teacher, Wellek observes: "Working with him was a course in style, in the art of exposition, in the clarity of formulation." In the fall they returned to Iowa, but Wellek, having learned that Mathesius had died shortly before the liberation, considered returning to Prague. Yale University, however, offered him a post, and Wellek became a naturalised American citizen in May, 1946. That same year Yale presented him with an honorary M. A. degree, and he joined the editorial board (1946-50) of the Modern Language Association.

Still working on *Theory of Literature*, Wellek in the fall of 1946 became Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Yale. There was no chair, no program, no department then, but Wellek sensed that the time was growing ripe for expansion. Soon there would be 125 undergraduates in his Survey of the Russian Novel. Wellek rightly insisted that we cannot study a single literature in isolation. All literature is interdependent, particularly the literature descending from Greece and Rome. Ideas, forms, genres, themes, motifs, techniques, metrics, stock characters, and much more cross all language barriers. Professors of literature in whatever language or languages must recognize as an ideal the supernational history of Literature.

Warren visited Wellek in New Haven the next two summers, but the illness and death of Warren's wife necessitated that Wellek write chapters originally assigned to Warren. Though *Theory of Literature* bears a 1949 publication date, most of the book was written between 1945-47, and it incorporates

earlier papers, including Wellek's well-known chapter "The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art," first published in the *Southern Review* in 1942. In the summer of 1947 Wellek lectured on literary theory at the University of Minnesota, and in the summer of 1948 he lectured on the history of criticism at Columbia University. He returned to Yale in the fall as chairman of his department. Meanwhile, Warren left Iowa for the University of Michigan.

Though not conceived as a textbook, *Theory of Literature* caught on in American graduate schools. In a short time, it became a *vade mecum*. Today it is an academic best seller, in twenty-two translations. Thanks to the fusion of the German-Slavic and Anglo-American critical traditions in *Theory of Literature*, students and professors of literature the world over have become cognizant of essential distinctions and with the cardinal idea that "a literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships." To the first issue of *Comparative Literature*, on whose editorial board he was a member, Wellek contributed his long essay, "The Concept of Romanticism, in Literary History," his well-known refutation of Arthur O. Lovejoy's argument in 1924 against the unity of Western Romanticism. In the summer of 1949 Wellek joined John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Yvor Winters as a Fellow at the Kenyon School of Criticism. After the publication of *Theory of Literature*, Wellek put his greatest labors after teaching and administration into his projected five-volume (later projected six-volume) *History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*. The books survey English, French, German, Italian, Russian, and American developments in criticism.

Limitations of space allow only brief mention of Wellek's major publications, activities, and honors since mid-century. He taught a weekly seminar in the Enlightenment at Harvard University in the spring of 1950, and in the summer he gave nine guest lectures in the Gauss Seminar in Literary Criticism at Princeton University. That year he also became a Fellow of Silliman College at Yale and a Fellow of the Indiana School of Letters. As a Guggenheim Fellow, he devoted 1951-52 to writing his *History of Criticism* in New Haven and afterward travelled briefly in Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. Still Chairman of the Slavic Department at Yale, he became Sterling Professor of Comparative Literature in 1952. He again became Visiting Professor at Harvard (1953-54) and again was elected to the editorial board (1953-54) of the Modern Language Association.

In 1955 Yale University Press published the first two volumes of his "monumental" *History of Modern Criticism—The Later Eighteenth Century* and

The Romantic Age. Praise was high and wide. For 1956-57 Wellek received his second Guggenheim Fellowship, which enabled him to work in New Haven without interruption and to visit Czechoslovakia. Lawrence College bestowed on Wellek the first of his twelve honorary doctorates. The next year Wellek accepted the Distinguished Service Award from the American Council of Learned Societies. For 1959-60 he was elected to the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association. He also was chosen Fulbright Research Scholar in Italy, mostly in Florence and Rome.

In 1960 Wellek received honorary degrees from Harvard and Oxford. In the fall he became Chairman of his outstanding Department of Comparative Literature at Yale. In 1961 he received an honorary degree from the University of Rome and was visiting professor at the University of Hawaii. During the next two years he was elected president of three large organisations: the International Association of Comparative Literature (1961-64), the American Association of Comparative Literature (1962-65), and the Czechoslovak society of Arts and Sciences in America (1962-66).

For his sixtieth birthday, the society presented him with the publication of his key Czech writings in English: *Essays in Czech Literature* (1963). Wellek was Visiting Summer Professor at the University of California in Berkeley in 1963, the year another collection—*Concepts of Criticism* was published, a work which defines problems of method and periodization, sets conceptual ideals, and measures results against literature itself. Grants from the Rockefeller and Bollingen Foundations allowed Wellek to take another leave from academic duties in 1963-64. The University of Maryland in 1964 awarded him an honorary degree. That year he also became vice-president of the Modern Language Association. A year later Princeton University Press published his third volume of essays, *Confrontations: Studies in the Intellectual and Literary Relations Between Germany, England, and the United States during the Nineteenth Century*, prompting Howard Mumford Jones to declare that “Wellek is the most erudite man in America.....”

Boston College conferred an honorary degree in 1966, and Yale published the third and fourth volumes of his critical *History—The Age of Transition and The Later Nineteenth Century*. In 1966-67, on his third Guggenheim,

Wellek again visited Italy, mainly, Rome and Sicily. In the fall of 1967 Olga Wellek died. The next spring Wellek married a Russian emigré, Nonna Shaw, a most vital person and herself a professor of comparative literature. Columbia University honored Wellek with a degree in 1968, and that summer he was Fulbright Distinguished Lecturer in Germany.

The 1970s began for Wellek with degrees from the Universities of Montreal and Louvain and with the publication of his fourth collection, *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism*. Wellek's own bibliographies in *Essays on Czech Literature*, *Concepts*, and *Discriminations* reveal his astonishing range. He often culls the substance of his books from his profusion of articles, surveys, and notes on European and American philosophy, aesthetics, history of ideas, literary theory, history, criticism, periods, developments, movements, style, methodology, pedagogy, critics, scholars, and personal reflections. The bibliographies refer us to Wellek's introductions to literary and critical texts and to his many reference-book entries on writers, national literatures, and, of course, concepts. His numerous reviews on American, English, German, Czech, Polish, Russian, French, and Italian criticism are crisp and balanced. His letters and comments in learned journals contribute to critical inquiry, to a sense of intellectual community.

In 1972, at age 69, Wellek retired from Yale. As director of the graduate program in comparative literature since 1947, he had directed over fifty Ph. D. dissertations, many now published. Wellek once wrote: "I trust the company who have come from the department have, whatever the variety of conviction they hold and interests they pursue, at least two things in common: devotion to scholarship and complete freedom to follow their own bent." Indebtedness to Wellek has been expressed in the form of anniversary volumes, special issues, dedications, acknowledgments, and ubiquitous footnotes. His membership in learned societies includes the British Academy, the Royal Netherlands Academy, the Italian National Academy, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Bavarian Academy, the Connecticut Academy, the American Philosophical Society, and the Linguistic Society of America. As a member of the editorial board of the splendid *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, his contribution — including nine penetrating articles — were substantial.

In the year of his retirement from Yale, the Universities of Michigan and Munich conferred degrees, and Wellek was chosen Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities. At home and abroad, Wellek continued —and continues — to lecture in his rapid, Czech-accented clarity. In 1974 he was visiting Professor at Indiana University and that year in London he became president of the Modern Humanities Research Association. The following spring he returned to the University of Iowa as Visiting Professor, and in the summer the University of East Anglia accorded the irresistible critic of critics his twelfth honorary degree. In 1977 Wellek conducted a seminar at Cornell University as Senior Fellow of the Society of the Humanities. He continues to serve on several committees and editorial boards, including the editorial board of this journal. Recently he has read papers in Italy at conferences on De Sanctis and Vico. At the Yale celebration last fall, René Wellek defined as his central pursuits the completion of the fifth and sixth volumes of his *History of Criticism* and the revision of his early *Kant in England*. When asked how he likes retirement from academic duties at Yale, the sturdy, indefatigable, white-haired scholar quips, "I enjoy it but miss my vacations."

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