

A Raid on the Articulate: G. Wilson Knight and the Battle of Elsinore

by David P. Gontar (October 2014)

“And so each venture / Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling, / Undisciplined squads of emotion.”

– T.S. Eliot

Introduction

What Eliot says so well about the fashioning of poetry applies also to its reception by readers and audiences. Where the richest tropes are concerned, rarely are we equal to the task. Outnumbered by words, we leap from book-strewn trenches when exegetical duty calls to try to gain a few hundred yards of insight before we are tossed aside by winds of doctrine. Indeed, the bones of many a once-renowned *littérateur* lie bleaching in the sun. Among those forgotten heroes is G. Wilson Knight (1897-1985), in his day the prolific doyen of *belles-lettres* and Shakespearean exposition. Knight rests now, buried in footnotes and interminable bibliography. It will be argued here that what led to his discomfiture was not inadequacy of principle, but rather a seeming inability to cleave to the very concepts and distinctions which made him a unique and powerful voice in twentieth century commentary. For Knight and his critical heirs, the “raid” was not upon elusive moods and sentiments but on poetical and dramatic texts, each possessing at their core a ‘hard gem-like flame’ making of disparate elements a living unity. Regrettably in his treatment of particular plays he seemed to descend into precisely the sort of carping criticism he discommended in more general discussions. Yet, despite departures from his own protocols, Knight’s legacy is significant. His idea of a literary work as an aesthetic gestalt or organic mystery which naturally resolves seeming difficulties has had a salutary influence on the art of reading and deserves reconsideration today.

The Critique of Criticism

In the first chapter of *The Wheel of Fire* (1930), "On the Principles of Shakespearean Interpretation," Wilson Knight defends his key distinction between popular criticism, which aims at the detection of narrative imperfections, and interpretation, which seeks the 'root metaphor' (see, Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses*) out of which the work arises and whose apprehension tends to put everything in proper order. As the title (drawn from *King Lear*) implies, each Shakespearean drama may be conceived as a wheel from whose hub the disparate elements of the play emerge. There burns that "right Promethean fire" in and through which all is vital and integrated. As the generative moment is essentially insusceptible of reproduction, we can never sound a Shakespearean play to its very depths, for it "hath no bottom." (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, IV, i, 214) Nevertheless, we are naturally capable of achieving a resonant *Verstehen* of each work, if only we can preserve "something of that child-like faith which we possess, or should possess, in the theatre." (Knight, 3) Our readings and viewings thus remain fresh and engaging, undiminished by ivory tower niggling. That, at least, is the hope.

For instance, Shakespeare's early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* lacks top marks for some scholars in large part because of Valentine's inopportune surrender to the cad Sir Proteus of his rights in Silvia (V, iv, 83), a gesture hard to square with his betrayal of Valentine and attempted ravishment of his lady at the play's close. (V, iv, 83) After 'much throwing about of brains' amongst contemporary analysts, this minor wrinkle is still presented as a text-marring blunder. But though a minor issue might ruin the play as far as conventional literary experts are concerned, Knight would observe that such caviling needn't spoil the fun for audiences. The paradoxical theme of youth's coupling of fickleness and fidelity, from which the action emerges, provides sufficient context in which Valentine's blunder is rendered aesthetically harmless, as is cross-dressed Julia's incongruous willingness to woo Silvia on behalf of Proteus. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helen continues her dogged pursuit of Bertram even after she learns of his plan to seduce Diana of Florence. (III, v, 65-75) As this brand of devotion is inconsistent with actual life and sentiment, modern criticism would tend to set such a 'flawed' play down as unrealistic and thereby substandard. Wilson Knight dissents. Though "criticism" might hold its nose, an interpretation which hearkens back to the original vision underlying the play would affirm the comedy's symbolic integrity: Helen is not a weakling who would be Bertram's absurd "spaniel," (See, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II, i, 203); she is rather an icon of devotion who "looks on tempests and is never shaken." (See, Sonnet 116) This view tends to reinforce the dictum of Harold Bloom and others that the plays of Shakespeare are not "stories" so much as poetry, the complete consort of images dancing together.

The initial distinction between criticism and interpretation is stated this way:

Criticism to me suggests a certain process of deliberately objectifying the work under consideration; the comparison of it with other similar works in order especially to show in what respects it surpasses, or falls short of, those works; the dividing its 'good' from its 'bad'; and, finally, a formal judgement as to its lasting validity. 'Interpretation', on the contrary, tends to merge into the work it analyses; it attempts, as far as possible, to understand its subject in the light of its own nature, employing external reference, if at all, only as a preliminary to understanding; it avoids discussion of merits, and, since its existence depends entirely on its original acceptance of the validity of the poetic unit which it claims, in some measure, to translate into discursive reasoning, it can recognize no division of 'good' from 'bad'. Thus criticism is active and looks ahead, often treating past work as material on which to base future standards and canons of art; interpretation is passive, and looks back, regarding only the imperative challenge of a poetic vision. Criticism is a judgement of vision; interpretation a reconstruction of vision. In practice, it is probable that that neither can exist . . . quite divorced from the other. The greater part of poetic commentary pursues a middle course between criticism and interpretation. But sometimes work is created of so resplendent a quality, so massive a solidity of imagination, that adverse criticism beats against it idly as the wind that flings its ineffectual force against a mountain-rock. Any profitable commentary on such a work must necessarily tend towards a pure interpretation. The work of Shakespeare is of this transcendent order. (Knight, 1-2)

There follows a rich and evocative discussion of the critical/interpretive duality, attempting its elucidation on the basis of a number of interrelated tropes. An abstract of these categories is provided below.

Criticism focuses on temporal sequence, interpretation on 'spatial' configuration.

"To receive this whole Shakespearean vision within the intellectual consciousness demands a certain and very definite act of mind. One must be prepared to see the whole play in space as well as in time." (Knight, 3)

This presentation of poetic drama in spatial terms runs throughout Knight's exposition, and gives the impression that each Shakespearean drama may be regarded as a kind of symbolic tableau in which deeds are generated as a display of more primal meaning. That meaning is best quarried not by making of chronicity the play's substance, but by looking to the creative

fount out of which its atmosphere arises and in which its sequencing is situated. (Knight, 3) Taking *Hamlet* as an illustration, Knight urges that while criticism dithers fruitlessly over the puzzle of why the hero cannot dispatch his homicidal uncle (Knight, 2), a recognition of the underlying "death-theme" in that play draws us closer to its molten center, resolving a number of apparent aporia with a single insight or feeling tone. (Knight, 3) "The spatial, that is, the spiritual, quality uses the temporal, that is, the story, lending it dominance in order to express itself more clearly." (Knight, 4)

Knight's theory of "interpretation" will naturally remind some of F.S.C. Northrop's later principle of the "undifferentiated aesthetic continuum" which he opposed to the western "theoretical component" (science, causality, and technology) in his classic study of culture, *The Meeting of East and West*. Northrop utilized the spatial dimension in Chinese landscapes to represent what is most singular in eastern civilization. Corresponding to Northrop's "theoretical component" is Knight's concept of "criticism" which tends to focus on such secondary factors as intentions and sources, rather than submit ourselves to "the original poetic experience." (Knight, 6-7) We might also bear in mind that Hesiod's initial cosmological category was not a *logos* but rather "Chaos," a pre-rational feminine substratum which gives birth to the differentiated cosmos. And it is worth noting the role that "feeling" plays as a metaphysical foundation in F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*. That impression of the primacy of feeling probably descends to Knight via the influence of A.C. Bradley, the philosopher's brother. The reader will note in T.S. Eliot's Introduction to *The Wheel of Fire* his mention of F.H. Bradley's comment on "instinct." (Knight, xix, xxii) It is well known that Eliot did his doctoral dissertation at Harvard on F.H. Bradley's theory of knowledge. And instinct itself receives interesting comment in *King Henry IV*, Part One, II, v, 275, where we learn from an unimpeachable authority that "instinct is a great matter." The entire complex of interpretation, feeling, poetic experience, and instinct stands at odds with the spirit of criticism as understood by Knight.

Interpretation Entails Mystery

This suggests that more is involved here than methodology. The reversionary exercise of interpretation may be seen for G. Wilson Knight as return to the sense of mystery. (Knight, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 32, 44, 45, 53, et al.) This is unsurprising, as we can no more fathom the nature of poetic creation than we can know the nature of things generally. As Montaigne says, "*Que sais-je?*" That is why the ancients turned to divine muses and inspiration to account for poetry. The conflagration at the center of the "wheel of fire" may be tended by the human spirit but surely is not kindled by it. That is plainly the view of Shakespeare, who credits heaven for his art. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, i, 1-17) Poetry is ultimately a gift of the

gods. And that means each great poem bears within a spark of the primal mystery. Again, we find that sense of mystery expressly acknowledged by Shakespeare himself in various contexts. (*Measure for Measure*, IV, ii, 26-45; *The Tragedy of King Lear*, V, iii, 16; *Hamlet*, III, ii, 364; *Timon of Athens*, IV, iii, 455; and see Knight, 7-8) Thus it is that Wilson Knight encourages a due respect for the art of reading, of which interpretation is the main component. Viewed in terms of literature, each play, says Knight, is "an expanded metaphor." (Knight, 14) In spiritual terms, the same works can be understood "as mystical representations of a mystic vision." (Knight, 15) By contrast, the critic starts from "a point on the circumference," and "instead of working into the heart of the play, pursues a tangential course, riding, as it were, on his own life experiences farther and farther from his proper goal." (Knight, 11)

Interpretation and Criticism Remain Complementary Terms

It is quite apparent, then, that Knight's initial sympathies lie wholly with the interpretive approach to the text. Indeed, he goes so far as to urge that "we should not . . . think critically at all," an extraordinary injunction. (Knight, 3) We should saturate ourselves rather with the "atmosphere" of each work, allowing that "omnipresent and mysterious reality brooding motionless over and within the play's movement" (Knight, 5) to leaven our diagnostic impulses with heavy doses of the play's symbolic vision. So far as possible we should refrain from problematizing the text at the expense of its integrity, always remembering "the quality of the original poetic experience, and . . . translating this into whatever concepts appear suitable" (Knight, 7) Indeed, to the extent we *criticize* we "falsify [our] own experience." (Knight, 12) There is something idealistic and yet natural in this outlook. After all, who has not noticed that each of Shakespeare's plays possesses its own unique style? Could a stanza from *Twelfth Night* ever occupy a place in *The Merry Wives*? It would never mesh with its surroundings. In terms of Knight's thesis, a molecule of one would generally import the wrong 'atmosphere' into the other.

Yet at just this point, we are bought up short by Knight's realism: interpretation and criticism turn out to be two aspects of reading which are indispensable and mutually implicative.

[I] would emphasize that I here lay down certain principles and make certain objections for my immediate purpose only. I would not be thought to level complaint against the value of 'criticism' in general. My private and personal distinction between 'criticism' and 'interpretation' aims at no universal validity. It can hardly be absolute. No doubt I have narrowed the term 'criticism' unjustly. Much of the critical work of to-day is,

according to my distinction, work of a high interpretive order. Nor do I suggest that true 'criticism' in the narrow sense I apply to it is of any lesser order than true interpretation: it may well be a higher pursuit, since it is, in a sense, the more creative and endures a greater burden of responsibility. The relative value of the two modes must vary in exact proportion to the greatness of the literature they analyse: that is why I believe the most profitable approach to Shakespeare to be interpretation rather than criticism. (Knight, 15-16, emphasis added)

Perhaps what is meant here is that in the early twentieth century such philosophies as positivism pushed literary thought in the direction of criticism (as was the case with T.S. Eliot himself), and that under the circumstances the only legitimate corrective was a strengthening of the importance of interpretation. Unfortunately, that is not what Knight writes. What he bestows in one moment on interpretation he seems to snatch away with the next. Nevertheless, this much may be granted: Wilson Knight's critique of criticism is a brilliant and revealing illustration of the non-rationalistic foundations of literature, and remains a permanent contribution to the theory and art of reading. It is congruent with a sense of the openness of the human mind, and our conviction that in absorbing the best of poetry we transcend the banal forces of life that conduce to our diminution. As F.H. Bradley once wrote:

All of us, I presume, more or less, are led beyond the region of ordinary facts. Some in one way and some in others, we seem to touch and have communion with what is beyond the visible world. In various manners we find something higher, which both supports and humbles, both chastens and transports us. (Bradley, 5)

Knight's principal contribution to literary theory may well be the finding of that "something higher" in Shakespeare's poetry. Of course, he was not the first to do so, but he did it at a time when it was becoming badly needed, and that remains his merit as a thinker.

The Stumbling Block of *Hamlet*

Curiously, in his very first words Knight gives us a candid disclaimer:

My remarks are . . . to be read as a counsel of perfection. Yet, though I cannot claim to follow them throughout in practice, this preliminary discussion, in showing what I have been at pains to do and to avoid, will serve to indicate the direction of my attempt. (Knight, 1)

The simplified order of discourse in "On the Principles of Shakespeare Interpretation" is

therefore as follows:

1. I am going to present in this essay my key principles of reading;
2. However, these principles are not consistently heeded, even by myself