Bernard Sharratt's Little Parallelepiped

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Sharratt has taken the place for which the name of his father predestined him.[1] In Blackwell's English Literature department his book, if book it is, fits squarely on the shelves, or interlopes roundly, between the texts ascribed to Shakespeare and the works produced by Shaw. Physically, at least, it has the shape and weight of a book. Legibly printed, fondly designed, it also has a marvellous photograph of the Author on the jacket. Apparently taken on a motorway lay-by one misty Kentish dawn, perhaps on his daily jog, he is at first blush gazing truculently out into the far distance. On second inspection, however, like Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit, he turns out to have his eyes slanted resolutely upon oneself – his reader, the innocent eye, his *hypocrite lecteur*. To go by *her* latest communication Dame Helen Gardner isn't going to like *Reading Relations*. To drop some more illuminating names, the other waiting space into which this little parallelepiped so engagingly enters is the clearing between Terry Eagleton and Gabriel Josipovici (Marx and Nietzsche, or if you prefer: Raymond Williams and Roland Barthes).

For a start, the very idea of a *book*, with an *author*, has become questionable. In 1969, in a journal rejoicing in the name of *Manteia*, Roland Barthes wrote of "the death of the Author" (I don't say that he was the first to do so). The story goes roughly as follows.[2] Once upon a time, in the pre-modern cultures, the responsibility for a narrative was assumed by a relator, a shaman or a *seanachaidh*, whose "performance" might be admired, but whose "genius", "originality", etc. if such concepts had existed, would have counted as a defect and embarrassment:

> "The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual".

In effect, then, the rise of the self as individual and as subject, which was a historical process with specifiable social and economic determinants, led to the still dominant image of literature as centred on the *author*, with his own distinctive voice and message, owning his work in the sense of confessing to it as well as of having it as his property and possession. The idea is, according to Barthes, that, with the retrieval of an understanding of the essential dependence of the individual on the social whole, the author is once more becoming the one in whom the surrounding myth of the tribe is articulated: a node within a network, a hiccup, an involuntary spasm, in the endless, open-ended production of signs which is human conversation. The deep idea here is that *writing* no longer means merely *recording* (copying, representing) some already formulated "thought", or some "reality out there", putatively existing prior to, and independently of, the actual writing. The Author, if and when believed in, was (is) conceived of as the originator of his book: "he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child". Now, however, when (to adapt Barthes again) the Book that supposedly just "revealed" the already fully formed message of the Author has yielded to a new sense of a text as a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable shifting centres of our multiple tradition, the Reader (as of yore the listener to the teller of the lore) becomes the focus – the necessary active collaborator – in the performance.

The book thus becomes a notation, a score, and every reading is a production that constitutes the text. The unity of the text is no longer thought to lie in its origin in the demiurgic author's mind but rather in the interplay between writer and reader – and the writer of such a text, as opposed to the author of a book, will have left many threads hanging loosely in the fabric, with plenty of openings for an interpretation that would surprise him too. That fiction has been like this for generations now needs no demonstration. Apparent counter-examples are easy to multiply. Roland Barthes is quite explicit about the anti-theological implications of this kind of dispersal of the book into a text. The death of the author "behind" the book is clearly the abandonment of the model of the world as a book with an analogously hidden and transcendent originator. But if the novel has been going in this direction for some time (Joyce, Dickens, Sterne?) it is certainly more difficult to find critical-theoretical writing (in Britain) that makes a comparable move.

Bernard Sharratt offers just such a text. Allusive, elusive, aleatoric, spoofing and kidding, kibitzing with style and chutzpah, travelling over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction, *kreuz und quer,* this book also is really only an album, though with a quite un-Wittgensteinian catholicity of records. Of the great wad of thick pages between the two stout boards the bulk consists of *Reading Literary Relations,* a text-book for sixth-formers on Marxist theory and literature, published in 1978 and attributed to

Anne Arthur (pages 47 to 318).[3] Of this more anon. It is preceded by a set of epigraphical citations (an intertextual bonanza), extracts from a semi-fictitious young don's personal journals, the script of a conference paper on Marxism and literary criticism, and a couple of book reviews, one of which (on Raymond Williams) has been lifted shamelessly from the pages of *New Blackfriars*, February 1978 – so *you* wouldn't have to read *that* (pages 35 to 40).[4]

A fair chunk of Anne Arthur's book is the residue or precipitate of Dr Sharratt's Cambridge Ph.D. thesis on working-class autobiographies (Samuel Bamford, Alexander Somerville, James Dawson Burn, and Thomas Frost). The first, superficially more "theoretical" part of Anne Arthur's book includes a weighty post-structuralist-Marxist lecture, the tape of a graduate seminar on George Herbert's dedicatory lines in *The Temple* (1633), and a complete set of sample answers to English Literature final examination papers in Detective Novels. Let it be said now, once for all: Bernard Sharratt has come up with a marvellous script. For the rest, the seminar tape contains one quotation (page 146), upon which the participant places a good deal of weight in the course of his argument. It comes from an essay by "one of Scotland's few authorities on Heidegger", the source of which is however not footnoted: we are able to reveal that the essay first (and last) appeared in this journal, *New Blackfriars*, June 1969. But first it is worth quoting Herbert's beautiful but little-known dedicatory verses:

Lord, my first fruits present themselves to thee;
Yet not mine neither: for from thee they came,
And must return. Accept of them and me,
And make us strive, who shall sing best thy name.
Turn their eyes hither, who shall make a gain:
Theirs, who shall hurt themselves or me, refrain.

The seminar starts off with a short paper by a certain Chris, who concentrates on bringing out the theological theme in the given text: if God *is* responsible for *everything*, then he is also responsible for "literature", and in that case reading literature is reading God's word, etc. She is attacked by Dai who belabours her with T S Eliot's distinction between "philosophical and theological beliefs" and "poetic assent". Dai, in turn, is shot down by LN who (being deep into semiotics from Paris) has to draw diagrams on the blackboard and moves so far away as to become inaudible to the tape recorder. Phil eventually interrupts him and seeks to re-define the mistake that Chris made: her notion of the self is a Cartesian one, a self defined as consciousness, "so that she wants to mean what she says as if meaning were some kind of internal accompaniment of saying, an event in her mental self" – but Wittgenstein, etc. put a stop to all *that*. George brings in "class". Bert then makes his intervention (pages 141 to 166), starting out from the Perry Anderson argument about the absence of theory in British culture at that epoch – Bert remembers as far back as 1968: he sounds gritty, abrasive, downright rude in his treatment of the other participants in the seminar. He is "informed", endlessly eloquent; he must be in his middle thirties and is no doubt somewhat tightly packed into his blouson and jeans, with the hair carefully trained over his high balding skull. (He is not in the least like the photograph on the jacket.)

The Perry Anderson argument,[5] for our purposes here, aimed to show that the trouble with British culture, at least *then*, came from the absence at the centre of any indigenous Marxist theory and (secondly) of the classical sociological tradition. The only intellectual discipline claiming to be in any substantial way centrally critical was the self-styled a-theoretical work of F R Leavis. On the Continent, by contrast, where the trains run fast and the wine is cheap and the coffee is ineffably better, etc. the classical sociological tradition was flourishing and "Western Marxism" fairly bloomed. Following up a remark by Fergus Kerr, however, Bert points out that neither classical Marxism nor classical sociology was (typically he says "were", page 144) at the centre of intellectual debate on the Continent in 1968. In fact Heidegger's work was at the centre – seeping through Kojève's lectures on Hegel (which everybody in Paris had been at), coming out again in Sartre. in the later Merleau-Ponty, above all in Althusser and Lacan. Over in Germany, with Adorno, the up-and-coming Habermas, the heavily theological component (Bultmann, Karl Rahner), it was much the same tale: contestation with Heideggerianism was the order of the day.

Kerr's remark ran as follows: "To put the point provocatively and very schematically: most of what Heidegger can do for one, Leavis does as well or better; or, rather, since it is D H Lawrence whom he makes accessible and draws on, the creative-critical vision in his *oeuvre* is our best equivalent to Heidegger's *Seinsdenken*". What this suggests to Bert's fertile and perceptive mind is that Leavis, with his appeal towards the end to the anti-Cartesian philosophers Michael Polanyi and Marjorie Grene, might indeed have been "doing for" the culture of the islands *roughly* what the provocation of Heidegger evoked on the Continent. There was, perhaps, "a fundamental affinity between Leavis and that real focus of European thought: Heidegger" (page 146).

The ugly side of both Leavis-Lawrence and Heidegger needn't detain us at this point – although of course the odious corollaries must never be ignored.[6] The immediate context of Kerr's remark should, however, be recalled. There was first an observation: "One commonly finds that foreigners who read only our philosophers, and expect of them what they look to their own philosophers for, conclude that our culture has got irretrievably into the hands of positivists, and that we are totally unaware of the meaning of what has taken place". Nobody working in philosophy in Germany (say) in the 'sixties could have been unaware of the importance of coming to terms *philosophically* with the "positivism" in their culture, or its equally deleterious contrary: Heidegger's writing, one way or another, had placed *that* on the common agenda. It might have to be acknowledged that in Britain, by contrast, philosophical work showed little or no sense of the problem: the Perry Anderson argument, at any rate, dismissed "ordinary language" philosophy along such familiar lines. Kerr's contention, then, was to the effect that the Leavis literary-critical tradition, backed as it was by D H Lawrence's *oeuvre,* "with all its undeniable vulnerability", nevertheless provided the wherewithal for us to "become able to identify and explore the deep meanings of our experience, and sometimes to resist and reverse the positivist interpretations of it". There follows immediately the claim that the Leavis-Lawrence corpus could "do for one" the same sort of thing which others found (or anyway sought) in Heidegger's work: namely, release from the grip of "positivism".

Now, while I should (perhaps naturally) be reluctant to say that there is *nothing* in that contention, it certainly seems to require explication and revision.

What is it, anyway, that needs to be done for one? Is it possible to have it without *some* professedly and professionally *philosophical* work? Was such philosophical work so completely absent from the British cultural scene in the 'sixties as the Perry Anderson argument assumed?

After famously resisting the idea for many years, from the challenge issued by René Wellek in 1937 onwards, F R Leavis in the end did come round (in *The Living Principle,* 1975, if not before) to acknowledging that there is a "knowledge of the development of philosophic thought from Descartes to Polanyi which is essential to their thinking" – the thinking, namely, of literary students (page 29). By his own account, he apparently got to Polanyi's work via stumbling in a second-hand bookshop in Cambridge upon Marjorie Grene's book, *The Knower and the Known,* written when she was teaching in Belfast and first published in 1966. For Leavis, the book is "an essential stand-by and a classic" (page 30). That sounds a grand claim; in fact, for the Common Reader, and certainly for students in neighbouring disciplines such as literary studies or theology, it is hard to think of a more illuminating and useful account of what philosophy is about. She has held a chair in philosophy in California for many years now; but no one familiar with what is going on in philosophy would think of her work, or that book, as in any degree "essential". This is no doubt partly because, in her work on the philosophy of science, she has been drawn to biology rather than physics and behaviourist psychology (the dominant Russell-Quine paradigms). Her long-standing interest in Merleau-Ponty and others in the Continental tradition will not have helped, at least until quite recently. Above all, however, her choice of Michael Polanyi's work as the *terminus ad quem* of the history of philosophy since Descartes marked her as a maverick. While his work, particularly the Gifford Lectures he gave in Aberdeen in 1952/53, may well be far more rewarding reading than much of the standard *legenda* in current philosophy, there is really no prospect of establishing its importance or even of finding it a space in the development since Descartes – not, at least, so long as the work of Wittgenstein remains available.

This is the irony. Marjorie Grene never refers to Wittgenstein's later work in her book – but Leavis, living in Cambridge and enjoying (or enduring) some kind of friendship with Wittgenstein himself, from 1929 onwards, was as immediately attracted by her advocacy of Polanyi as he was put off by personal discussion with Wittgenstein. The Leavis memoir[7] of their relationship is moving, funny, characteristic, instructive, and revelatory of both men. The thought of Wittgenstein's once coming up to Leavis and saying – "without any prelude": "Give up literary criticism!" might have been a *New Yorker* cartoon; it couldn't have been foreseeably true. Certainly the reason that Leavis gives – that Wittgenstein had been influenced by King's high table gossip and the like – seems out of character. But on the central question that preoccupied the two all their lives there was clearly insuperable misunderstanding. Finally, Leavis was just too natively "English". Attacking "linguistic" philosophy, which he assumes to be "Wittgensteinian" (*The Living Principle*, page 13), Leavis writes thus: "English is a subtle language; its literature is very rich, and its continuity stretches over centuries, starting long before the great seventeenth-century change; so there is point in saying that for the English-speaking philosopher the fullest use of language ought to be its use by the creative writers of his own time, and he needs to take full cognizance of this truth". His conviction that Wittgenstein's interest in literature had remained "rudimentary" would only have been deepened if he had known of his self-confessed incapacity to understand Shakespeare (see remarks between 1946 and 1950 in the miscellany recently published under the bizarre title *Culture and Value*). Leavis even doubted Wittgenstein's capacity to take creative writing in his native German with appropriate seriousness. He was evidently unable to appreciate the simple dramatic kind of writing which Wittgenstein invented quite consciously for his purposes: "I should very much like my abundant punctuation marks to delay the speed of reading. Because I should like to be read slowly" –[8] but if that principle of interpretation is not always respected by his best translators it is no wonder that some one as unsympathetic as Leavis should have failed to understand what Wittgenstein was at.

They never understood that they were allies in the struggle against the same adversary. Leavis early identified Bertrand Russell as the very antithesis of all that he stood for himself. He expressly attacks Russell's dismissive way of referring to Wittgenstein: "He had no glimmering of Wittgenstein's immense superiority to him as a person – as a centre of life, sentience and human responsibility". He knew that Russell and Wittgenstein had worked together as far back as 1912, when the former was already forty and the latter twenty-three years of age. In 1935 Wittgenstein attended the annual Aristotelian Society meeting specifically to hear Russell's paper on "The Limits of Empiricism". Leavis, late in the day, had to turn to Marjorie Grene's book to find out how to identify and combat that "Cartesian dualism" which "must be exorcized from the Western mind". He clearly never realised that, throughout the years in which they frequently met in the streets of Cambridge, Wittgenstein was at work on an album of strategies, an exemplification of stratagems, precisely for that purpose – and, much of the time, specifically against Bertrand Russell. But that brings us to the great difference between Marjorie Grene's work, or Michael Polanyi's, valuable as it certainly is, and Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (first published in 1953, two years after his death). It is one thing to write historical essays about the iniquitous effects of the Cartesian/positivist dilemma into which the so-called "Western mind" has strait-jacketed itself. It is quite another matter to provide, as Wittgenstein surely does, an endlessly imaginative course of practical lessons that go on exposing the unsuspected ways in which one is radically under the spell of the dilemma. For Wittgenstein doesn't just expound and refute Russell, Moore, William James, Schopenhauer, Frege, etc. but above all he keeps returning to what he is himself tempted to say. It is one thing to refute opinions of which you have never felt the deep attractiveness. That skill is easily taught, it is only too common in philosophy faculties and journals – which is what puts serious people off the subject. The real skill, on the other hand, and none can teach it better than Wittgenstein, is the ability to hear the myths and illusions by which you are yourself tempted, and to destroy *those*. "Wittgenstein can take all the sides himself", so Leavis recalls somebody complaining. There has rarely been, since Plato's dialogues, a philosophical work-text that remains a closed book until the reader learns the tempo and thus enters the slow and deep process of self-discovery: "Work in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more like work on oneself. On one's own perception. On how one sees things. (And what one desires of them)".[9]

We need, in short, to reconsider what Wittgenstein was attempting to do from 1929 onwards. *One* way of approaching this question is to look again in particular at his long debate with Bertrand Russell. To see how deeply and critically Wittgenstein explored the charms of that philosophy of Logical Atomism which he once shared with Russell is to begin to recognize the strength of a certain Hegelianism against which they were reacting. The question may then be raised, in a new context, of D H Lawrence's opposition to Russell. It should be possible, after that, to compare the Leavis-Lawrence case against Russell with Wittgenstein's one. We should then be able to return to the original question of how we are to be released from the spell of that Cartesian/positivist dilemma which marks modern Western culture. It will turn out that a disciplined reading of literature is not enough; some *philosophical* work is required. If this was available in Britain in the 'sixties after all then we shall have to raise the question again of what Heidegger (say) ever did, or could have done, to liberate us from positivism – in comparison, that is to say, with what Leavis-Lawrence on the one hand and Wittgenstein on the other hand have offered.

[*To be continued*]

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1 *Reading Relations* by Bernard Sharratt. Harvester Press, 1982. pp 341 £18.95

2 See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 1977, pp 142 ff

3 Get it? An Author, A. N. Other

4 B Sharratt has signed the following contributions to *New Blackfriars:* on Coleridge, April and May 1970; on the theology of marriage, February 1971; on Foucault, June 1972; on Seamus Heaney, July and August 1976; on "Metaphor and Metaphysics", reviewing Brian Wicker's story-book, October 1976; and finally on B Hardy and R Williams, February 1978.

5 "Components of the National Culture", an essay first published in *New Left Review*, 1969

6 See F Kerr: "Odious Corollaries in D H Lawrence", *Blackfriars*, October 1961

7 First published in *The Human World*, a now defunct periodical, the 18-page memoir is now more accessible in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, edited by Rush Rhees, 1981.

8 *Culture and Value*, edited by G H von Wright, translated by Peter Winch, 1980, p 68

9 Ibid. p 16 (written in 1931).