

On austere criticism

Thou shalt not write, in short, but what I choose:
This is true criticism, and you may kiss--
Exactly as you please, or not--the rod;
But if you don't, I'll lay it on, by God! (Byron, *Don Juan*)

Bion lamented how rare it was to come by 'austere criticism' as distinct from 'complacent hostility' or its counterpart 'fantastic admiration' (*A Memoir of the Future* p. 308). He also said we should read both books and people 'with awe' (*All My Sins Remembered*, p. 241) – and again, he did not mean worship, or even approval: he meant with respect for the unknown qualities of the other, and with apprehension of the unknown impact on one's self. 'Awe' and 'austere', in Bion's language of deep punning, are words belonging to the same family - musically linked with 'O', the essence of an emotional situation. I would like to reflect briefly on what he might have meant by 'austere criticism'.

It is a curious phenomenon when a book which is supposedly under review slips off the screen, as it were, and is replaced by another book of the reviewer's fantasy manufacture. Not so much re-view as out-of-view. I think that Bion's idea of 'austere criticism' is linked to his dogged persistence on 'observation'. He regarded it as essential equipment for the psychoanalyst. The poets have always said the same – Wordsworth, for example, wrote in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*: 'I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject'. The message is the same with anybody who is engaged on any serious enterprise: keep looking at all times, even when bombarded with stimuli that you don't understand. It appears simple, yet has to be reiterated so often that clearly it is not as simple as it seems, being fraught with confusion and anxiety.

Is reviewing a serious enterprise? Well, probably not, in the cultural sense. We are all familiar with guidelines – how to jump through hoops, count words, tick boxes, meet deadlines, etc. But serious writers, even of reviews, have other guidelines they can only apply internally. They are the same guidelines as apply to any type of literary criticism. And the guidelines for reading well are analogous to those in, for example, infant observation or psychoanalytic observation in the countertransference: accurate observation depends on self-observation. Once we have noted our paranoid-schizoid confusions, the self-generated projections that obscure our capacity to observe the meaning of the words on the page fade away. This in turn enables our own language to become meaningful rather than a muddy mess. Even a note or a letter is all the better for finding 'the chiefest words' (Emily Dickinson). The right words in the right places – austere criticism.

Does this mean one should be neither enthusiastically appreciative nor severely critical about a book one is reviewing, but only something in between – tediously noncommittal? On the contrary. The telling term ‘austerity’ – unexpected in its context – refers to the self-restraint that is required by good writing, which is precisely what enables a genuine emotional response to form itself.

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