The 'Third Realm'

THE ‘DOUBLE’ EXISTENCE OF ‘THE POEM’

The 'third realm'\(^1\) is a way of conceiving the poem as being both independently 'there' and 'there' as a product of discussion. The 'third realm' is what distinguishes 'literary-critical analysis' from mathematics, scientific ... philosophico-logical [or] biographical, psychological descriptions'.\(^2\) Leavis expands his idea of literary critical analysis as follows:

Analysis ... in so far as it aims at establishing a favourable judgement, is the process of justifying the assumption that a poem which we take to be a real poem stands between us in what is in some sense a public world. Minds can meet in it and there is so essential a measure of concurrence as to its nature and constitution that there can be intelligent – that is, profitable – differing about what precisely it is. It is neither merely private, nor public in the sense that it can be brought into a laboratory, quantified, tripped over, or even pointed to – the only way to point to particulars in it is to put one's finger on given spots in the assemblage of black marks on the page – and that assemblage is not the poem. The poem is a product and, in any experienced actual existence, a phenomenon, of human creativity the essentially collaborative nature of which it exemplifies in diverse distinguishable modes. And yet it is real.\(^{\text{(TL & O, p. 36)}}\)

Analysis seems to be a combination of aesthetics and epistemology; the former because it is concerned to establish 'a judgement' and the latter because it is concerned to establish the reality of the poem and how the reader comes to know that reality. Literary criticism, on this definition, is an attempt to synthesise the various faculties that have been separated by the advent of modernity.

G. Day, Re-Reading Leavis
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However, there are a number of problems with Leavis’s description of the ‘third realm’. One of these has already been mentioned and concerns the ambiguity of the poem being ‘there’ and not ‘there’. Logically, the poem would have to exist prior to minds meeting in it and this is implied by the fact that the poem is ‘real’ and ‘stands between’ readers in ‘a public world’. At the same time this is clearly not the case because the poem is a ‘product’ of ‘human creativity’.

The poem’s ambiguous status is further underlined by its not being identified with the ‘black marks on the page’. These have to be converted into a poem through an act of creation. The ‘poem’ thus has a ‘double’ existence as ‘raw material’ and ‘finished product’, an analogy which again highlights the notion of productive labour at the heart of Leavis’s criticism. The existence of ‘black marks on the page’ also gives the ‘poem’ a ‘thing’ like quality which is at odds with the view of the ‘third realm’ as ‘the collaboratively created human world’ (italics added). In the former capacity, the ‘poem’ presents the reader with ‘the difficulty ... [of] deciding what kind of thing it is’, a different process from establishing it through creative collaboration. The ‘poem’s status is thus rendered even more ambiguous; it is at once something ‘there’ but alien and something that does not yet exist.

As something ‘there’, the ‘poem’ is ‘seen’ – that is how Leavis is able to describe it as ‘black marks on a page’. But the collaboration that establishes the poem is, of its nature, an ongoing process and so the ‘poem’ is never sufficiently ‘there’ to be ‘seen’. It is discussed, apprehended and, ideally, realised but it is not ‘seen’. Nevertheless, in his disputes with other critics Leavis resorts to metaphors of sight to establish his case. Thus, a key term in Leavis’s criticism refers more to the ‘black marks on the page’ than to the critical act of converting them into a ‘poem’. The analogy of sight for reading was something he himself was uneasy about.

It will be noted by the way how inevitably we slip into the visual analogy, the type and model of objectivity being the thing seen ... and, further, that there is the significant linguistic usage by which to ‘see’ is to understand (‘I see!’).

Criticism never quite succeeds in establishing the poem for although there is ‘a measure of concurrence’ about it there is also a ‘differing about what precisely it is’. Another aspect of the poem’s ‘double’ existence is evident here. Simultaneously, it is identical and non-identical to itself, raising the question of how minds can ‘meet in’ a