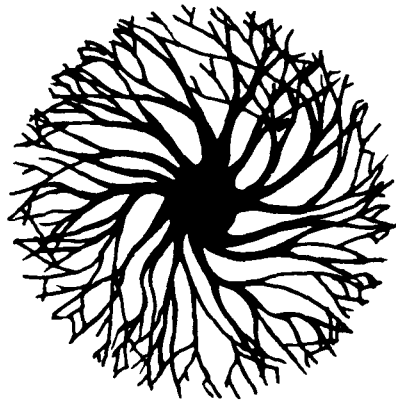


CENTRUM



WORKING PAPERS OF THE MINNESOTA CENTER FOR ADVANCED STUDIES IN LANGUAGE, STYLE, & LITERARY THEORY

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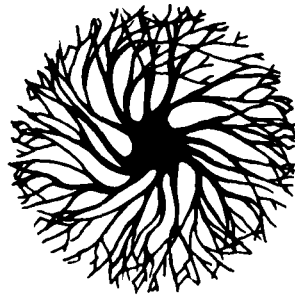
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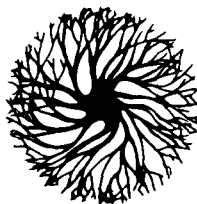
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In Memoriam
W. K. WIMSATT
1907-1975



PREFATORY NOTE

The essays in this issue by *F.E. Sparshott*, *Monroe Beardsley*, and *Ralph Cohen* are versions of papers delivered by them during a conference held at the University of Minnesota on May 28 and 29, 1975, titled "What Is a Literary Theory?" It was jointly sponsored by the University of Minnesota English Department and the Minnesota Center.

The next issue of Centrum will contain a panel discussion by Stanley Fish, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Martin Steinmann, and E.D. Hirsch of the topic "Speech Acts and Literature."

The compilation by Marcia Eaton, "Speech Acts: A Bibliography" (*Centrum*, 2:2 [Fall 1974]) will be updated in future issues. The editors would be grateful for information about relevant books and articles, particularly in languages other than English.

F. E. SPARSHOTT

On the Possibility of a General Theory of Literature

When I was younger and cleverer, and knew much that I have now forgotten, I could afford to have higher standards than I have now. In those days I committed myself in print to the thesis that there could be no such thing as a general theory of art, or criticism, or literature, or other such things, on the ground that a theory is not to be defined by the subject matter to which it relates but by the problem or problems to which it attempts a solution. Literature, for instance, might give rise to many different problems that would require different sorts of inquiry, and hence different theories, to resolve them. Literary theory would thus be a loosely inter-related set of problems and solutions, and the production of a single general theory of literature would reflect a resolve, conscious or unconscious, to limit one's curiosity, and if possible that of everyone else, to some restricted range of questions. That was, if you like, my general theory of theories.¹

I have since come to think that my strictures on theories of this and that were, if not mistaken, at least over-hasty. In fact, I have been spending a lot of my own time excogitating just such a general theory of art. Where I went wrong was in presupposing that the concept or range of phenomena 'of' which the theory was to be provided must itself be in some sense theory-neutral, at least to the extent that the concept in question led an independent, vigorous life before the theorizing began. But that is not always the case. Specifically, the concept of art, in the modern sense in which it is associated exclusively with the fine arts, is a product of deliberate theorizing. There can be a theory of art, just as there can be

[*Centrum*, 3:1 (Spring 1975), 5-22 .]

a theory of the electron, because the term 'art' primarily designates not a range of phenomena but a theoretical concern.

What, then, of literature? Is 'literature' a theory-bound term in the same way that 'art' is? I am not sure. On the one hand, the term itself has a theoretical and outlandish ring to it. When I call something a book or a song or a story, my language makes no strict theoretical demands on what I am talking about: these are simply what we read, what we sing, what we tell, as a matter of course. But if I call something 'literature' I seem to be making some sort of claim for it (or about it, or on it), not merely classifying it: literature is what I read with self-congratulation or self-contempt, what I may get a prize for writing or be despised by scholarly colleagues for descending to. But the theoretical claim embodied in the term 'literature' seems vague; and when someone like Northrop Frye makes the claim precise many of us rebel. The concept does not, like the concept of art and the yet more relevant concept of poetry, have a clear and dignified lineage in the history of Western ideas. 'Poetry' has figured in the thoughts of the best thinkers and the texts of the best writers ever since Aristotle; but 'literature', though on the face of it a more theory-bound term than 'poetry', has a more uncertain history. Or so it seems to me; I have not pursued the matter, since the world abounds in men of learning and discretion who have made these matters their life-work, and I would not take the words or the bread out of their mouths.²

Whatever may be the status of the concept of literature itself, and hence the plausibility of the project of creating a general theory of literature, literary theory is in fact plentiful. One has the impression that every literate intellectual has produced some. An easy explanation for this abundance may be illustrated by reference to a difference of opinion between Plato and Aristotle. Plato complained in his Republic that the professional competence of literary people did not include special knowledge of what they wrote about. In fact, he added, they did not know anything, but made a profession of ignorance. To this taunt, Aristotle rejoined that there was something they did know. They knew exactly what they had to know, namely, how to write.³ It follows from this that when a writer has nothing to write about he can always write about writing. When he writes about anything else he may have to find out about it or fake it, but there is nothing he has to find out about writing, because that is what he already knows ex officio. That is why we are almost surprised when a full-time professional writer fails to put in his two-bits' worth about the nature of literature,

or of whatever sort of book he most easily produces. On the other side, what all passionate readers necessarily have in common is a love of books, so that the books they are most likely to favor collectively will be books about books. They thus provide the writer who writes about writing with that which he loves above all, a steady market. So it is inevitable that wherever there are professional writers and regular readers literary theory will flourish.

That explanation accounts for the quantity of literary theory but bodes ill for its quality. The part of Plato's complaint that Aristotle did not attempt to rebut was that purely literary skill is a skill in using words and not a specialized knowledge of any things that words may be about: it is a skill in making things sound right, an ability to manipulate appearances rather than to tackle problems in the real world. It is to be expected that the theorizing energy of literary persons would present the appearance rather than provide the substance of argument and analysis.

This is very discouraging. It seems we have to expect a mass of attitudinizing verbiage in the place of theory. But things are not quite so bad as all that. Writers do after all know how to write, and what seems to them to sound right when they are writing about writing will probably have something right about it. But we cannot be sure beforehand what that something will be. As T.S. Eliot observed, a poet's ars poetica is never what it may seem to be, a piece of theorizing about poetry.⁴ It will stand in some interesting relation to the poet's writing. Only, we do not know what that relation is. The poet himself may not know or care what it is; and, if he does know, may take pains to conceal it. What he says will be what he needs, wants, feels it right and proper to say. But to be a poet is, among other things, to refuse to consider why one feels it right and proper to say what one says.

Supposing a general theory of literature to be possible, what should it look like? How should we decide that? It might occur to us to try assembling the relevant cliches and see whether they converge or diverge. But we could not tell which cliches were relevant without deciding what literature is--or, what may come to the same thing, what ready-made assemblages of cliches we already have to fit literature into.

So what is literature? How should we decide that? There is an old tradition of answering questions about the nature of

such things as literature by pretending to discuss their origins. The question of origins is not a historical one, though it is sometimes made out to be so: rather, it is an inquiry into the place and function of a human activity in human affairs. There is an analogy here with what we do in interpreting particular works of literature. We come to an interpretation by asking what the author meant in and by his work, not because we are more interested in life than in art but because a literary work is something made and done and can only be understood as something it would make some human sense to make and do. The question of what the author meant is indeed, as Wimsatt and Beardsley argued in their classic paper,⁵ one about the proper description of the work and not about the correct reading of the author's thoughts, but one arrives at an acceptable description only by asking why one would do this rather than that, or do it this way rather than that. And so it is in the more general field of human activities. Literature is not itself a literary work (pace Northrop Frye), but we can only speak of literature on the assumption that it is a kind of human activity, intelligible only through a grasp of why people should engage in such activity. Not why they actually do, for their reasons and motives will be as various as they themselves: if there is literature, it will be used in all possible ways and engaged in for all possible reasons; rather, why they should engage in it. Of all the indefinitely various uses that may be made of literature and reasons for dealing with it, many would have found other objects and outlets if literature had chanced not to exist. But perhaps not all; and this is why we speak of origins rather than of reasons and uses. The question of origins comes to this: if literature did not exist, to fill what needs would it be necessary to reinvent it? or what ineradicable itch would make its rediscovery inevitable? To have an answer to just those questions is to have the sort of basic understanding of literature on which later sophistications and elaborations could build. We must then not be ashamed to raise the question of origins.

Two accounts or myths of literary origins seem worth mentioning. Of these, one places the origin before and the other after that of non-literary language.

The former account is polymorphous and pervasive. One or another form of it has been current in literary and quasi-philosophical circles from the time of Rousseau to that of Heidegger. It will be enough for our present purposes merely to sketch its general character. The myth invites us to imagine pre-linguistic man in the midst of his blooming and buzzing confusion. The first phase in his becoming articulately

human and capable of culture is his discovering that one can evolve gestures, dances and chants, that will be felt to express both his recognition of what is essential to a recurring phenomenon and his attitude to it. What recurs and is symbolized is not an object, as earlier philosophers had supposed, but a significance. The gesture virtually creates what it signifies; but, once made, it can be repeated and thus bestows a definite and fixed meaning on an experience that at the same time becomes itself significantly repeatable. In the fulness of evolution, the corpus of repeated gestures becomes what we know as language. But each of us retains the capacity to mint speech, to originate gestural utterances and thus bring into being new significances. This capacity is what we now know as art. Thus the literary work of art, though made up of ordinary words of ancient coinage in regular grammatical relations, functions as a unified verbal gesture, occasion of an experience repeatable only on repetition of the whole work just as it is, because it is the work that defines the experience. Literary utterance remains the vital and revitalizing use of language, returning it from convention to invention, from merely useful sign to revealing symbol. This account assigns to literature three original uses. Literary utterance is the valuable and creative source of useful and uncreative language; literary works are themselves occasions of specially genuine and authentic experiences; and the practice of literature keeps alive in us the creative and revelatory use of speech itself.

That is one account of the origin of literature. Here is another, less high-minded. It takes man to be not the place where Being dwells and reveals itself, but a sort of brainy rat. Rats keep running around looking into things, and just so people are always trying things out and trying them on, exploring the limits of their brain-cages. What can be imagined will be attempted. What is the origin of art? It is that when people make some useful thing and reflect on what they do they can't help wondering in their rattish way whether it might not be made differently, whether some other less necessary thing might not be made in the same sort of way. Soon we arrive at the root notion of art: the idea of making whatever can be thought of as makable, for the sake of making it. So, in the realm of language, the task of saying what needs saying leads to experimenting with one's verbal tools to test out the limits of the sayable, verbal activity with no other end than to explore the depth and breadth of things to say and ways of saying. And that activity is nothing other than literature itself. This second view of the origin of literature, it will be observed, combines the opening sentence of Aristotle's Metaphysics, that all men have a natural

orientation towards discovery, with the notion of such mid-nineteenth-century psychologists as Spencer that art is a form of playful expenditure of excess energy.

These two notions about the origin of literature are clearly opposed in their view of the nature of humanity as well as in what they say about the relation of literature to everyday speech. In a minute, I will say something about the relations between them; but before doing so I will expatiate on the second, Aristotelian-Spencerian, view, because its implications are less often explored than those of its rival.

Even in conventional societies with stylized ways of life, things are bound to keep going wrong. A useful language must allow for all contingencies: the point of any language has to be that you can say anything in it about anything: you can convey any feeling about, and attitude towards, any event or action involving in any fashion any thing, person, ingredient. Since what is conveyed is mostly news to the hearer, the false and the true are linguistically the same. And since one cannot foreclose on the future, what may come to pass in it and need to be conveyed about it, there can be no linguistic device discriminating the possible from the impossible--one can say that something is possible or impossible, but one may be mistaken or lying. In other words, the possibility of fiction and fantasy is necessarily implicit in the resources of speech.

Nor is the system of language inviolable. Just because it is a system, it can be abused, both by inserting aberrant components in normal places and by inserting normal components in abnormal places or ways. Because the system is throughout a system of meanings, the effect of doing this can never be to obliterate meaning entirely but only to qualify it in some way. Moreover, grammars themselves are systematic methods of variation, and these methods can themselves be used in deviant ways or can themselves be varied; and still meaning is not wiped out. Provided that some recognizable link remains with the basic syntax, accidence, or vocabulary of a known language, some vestige of understanding is possible.

Finally, though the users of different languages fasten on different ways of saying different things about different objects, people learn each other's languages. In a sense, languages incorporate each other as subsystems: one is always being told, in English, what cannot be said in English.

In short, indefinite variability and the preservation of

a measure of intelligibility throughout such variation is a necessary condition of languages, which must be designed to cope with the indefinite variability of life. Nothing can prevent this necessary flexibility from being exploited without urgent occasion, and it is this capacity inherent in all languages that makes literature possible.

But it seems that it also makes literature impossible. The infinite accommodations of language are so much a part of its necessary use that we cannot seal off a privileged domain. No demarcation between the literary and the non-literary imposes itself. This is in fact the most notorious difficulty in formulating a theory of literature. I return to this problem later, but meanwhile I will mention three plausible differentiations.

First, a domain of language could be set apart by its complying with additional sets of conventions or rules: there could be a literary art that was an art of patterned speech. An obvious example is the rules of metric or prosody that define verse. It is easy to imagine a society that recognized an art of verse and no other verbal art. Alternatively, literary utterances could be defined not by their compliance with special extra rules, but by their deliberate deviance from whatever is to be defined as ordinary: by stretching or violating rules, or by complying with rules in unheralded ways. Something of this sort is in the minds of those who would define literary utterance by its use of metaphor, the systematic achievement of meaning through felt deviation from supposed norms.⁶ Metaphoric deviance defines poetry as prosodic compliance defines verse.

A third possibility is that there should be a literary art defined not by its character of compliance with or departure from any set of linguistic norms or expectations, but simply by its use or context. Literary discourse might be any discourse treated as art: that is, not as a mere means of communication but as an object of attention. Any verbal artifact, as such, would then be a work of literature. This is in fact a common way of thinking. There used to be a publication called The Bible Designed to be Read as Literature; and by this was plainly meant that it should be read without regard to liturgical, doctrinal, or devotional use. It is thus that narrative modes may enter into the domain of literature. In the course of making a report vivid, or of making a lie convincing, a narrator may produce something that in itself is so entrancing that the hearers no longer care, for the time at least, whether what they are told is true. Reports and lies shade into novels and tales, and it seems natural to say

that in so far as any spoken or written account seems to its audience to justify this indifference it is being regarded in the way that defines the condition of literature.

It seems then that the rattishness of the human intellect might lead us on from mundane uses of language to literature in at least three ways: by elaborating, by deviating, and simply by transferring the attention from what is spoken of to the speaking of it. These are not exclusive alternatives, but are closely linked. If one starts by thinking of literary utterances as artifacts, things said simply to be attended to as sayings, it seems inevitable that the modes of intelligible variation and elaboration will be systematically explored. What indeed could stop that happening? Conversely, to vary speech in the ways that characterize verse or poetry is to do something that in itself calls attention to what is being done and how it is done, and thus generates the idea of literary utterance as that which deserves attention for its own sake.

Let us now return to the point from which we began to elaborate. We have before us two accounts of the origin and hence of the nature of literature, one retrospective and the other prospective from the point of view of mundane or non-literary discourse. At the origin of such ordinary talk we find an intuitive, formative process that is the creation of language itself; as its aftermath, we find its playful elaboration as an end in itself. These views surely cannot be harmonized or reconciled. But each has its attraction as an account of something that seems undeniably there, to be reckoned with; and it is not easy to think of a reason for confining the name of literature to one at the expense of the other. This may be taken to mean that the nature of literature is irretrievably split, or the notion of literature radically ambiguous. What I want to do now is make two points about this apparent split.

First, the difference between the backward-looking and the forward-looking accounts of literature is no novelty in aesthetic and poetic theory. It comes close to Collingwood's distinction between art and craft.⁷ Art, according to Collingwood, is expression: not the use but the formation of clear concepts and intuitions, a pure creation in which there can be no differentiation of means from ends. Craft, on the other hand, is precisely the excogitation of means to pre-established ends. Is literature as such an art, or a craft? Both, I suppose. There are verbal artists and verbal craftsmen, and both are literary persons. And Collingwood's distinction between art and craft in turn reflects Coleridge's distinction between imagination, the esemplastic power that

produces unified symbols, and fancy, the skill that combines disparate images.⁸ Fancy presupposes analysis, a repertoire of resources and know-how that it takes talent to use with skill; imagination precludes analysis, but calls for genius whose creativity represents a form of growth that is organic and exfoliating rather than mechanical and additive.

A common complaint against Collingwood is that his distinction between art and craft, however clear in principle, is not exemplified in practice, though he himself writes as though it were. Artists know many things that craftsmen know, know them in the same way, and practice them in the same way too. Art and craft are commonly joined in a single operation. Man, let us say, is both rat and Dasein, and commonly both at once. It is not that a human being is a pure openness to Being in peril of miraculously falling to the status of crafty beast or dreary bureaucrat, or a fallen technocrat who may be strangely restored by the terror of death to his destiny of care: the two natures always combine in all of us, in ways that are inextricable and various. And literature is the work of human beings, not of rat or Dasein, artist or craftsman. We are naive and sentimental together; we cannot destroy our innocence or forget our experience. Each of us, after all, grows from nothing. We build our own individual language from nothing in relation to our own inescapably privileged vantage point on the world. But the language we painfully create turns out to be the language already spoken as a matter of course in the world into which we grow. To a person who has learned his own language, the only way back into the creative ground of speech is the way forward into conscious departures from what has become too well known; and the only way forward out of the constriction of everyday language is to recover within oneself the pure original impulse of the creative gesture.

That was one way in which the prospective and retrospective views of the origin of literature might be compared. Here is another. If there is to be literature, there must be some way in which literary language is special. All utterances, no doubt, are to be referred to the single standard of truth. But if literature is to be special some complexity must be introduced into that single standard. We can do this by interpreting truth not as accuracy but as fidelity. Those who look to the creative moment for the origin of literature are free to say that whereas it is required of everyday language only that it be faithful to fact, something more is asked of the literary work. We look to it for faithfulness to 'Being', by which is meant the most fundamental relation of the speaker to whatever is taken to be the most profound reality.⁹

Literature, on this retrospective view, recalls us to what we most deeply are by reminding us of what it is to be a person in a world. But the prospective view of literature, while exempting literature from the bondage of implied and demanded accuracy and fidelity to the banality of facts, finds nothing for literature to be faithful to except the creative impulse, and hence the incipient work itself, which is imagined as making on its prospective author an imperious though indefinite demand.¹⁰ For if the literary impulse is to make words do what they can do but never did before, the future work must figure in its maker's mind as a thing to be made: definite, because to do anything one must set out to do that thing and no other, but undefined because the demand that defines the task of making something that shall be essentially new can only be the demand that one respond to whatever is suggested from time to time by the inchoate work at whatever stage of its development it may have reached.¹¹

It may be that these apparently contrasting fidelities, to original Being and to incipient creation, converge. Heidegger says somewhere that language is the home of Being. Whatever that may have meant to Heidegger, what it means for us at this juncture is that fidelity to Being must cash out as fidelity to something uniquely to be said. Both fidelities thus converge in their different ways on the word itself, on what can be said in only one way because its value lies in its profound fidelity to that which has no existence outside language itself. So the fidelity of literature is that an utterance be faithful to itself: that is, its fidelity lies in the literary utterance having the status of a text.

Up till now, I have been avoiding the notion of a text. With its introduction, we make a new departure. Someone once told me that the philologist Martin Joos defined a literary text as any text that a society required to be preserved without any linguistic change. I do not wish to know when or why he said it; it is enough for me that I was once present when another student of linguistics quoted him to this effect, to the great scandal of the literary scholars present. I have carefully preserved my ignorance of Joos's meaning so that I could imagine for his words a meaning of my own. I note two points in the definition. First, a social decision is called for. Literature is a public category, and its primary significance is the public recognition of a special status for a certain class of utterances. The second point is that the recognized status is one of ex

officio unalterability. But why should an utterance be exempt from change? Presumably because the distance between what is said and the saying of it has been reduced to zero: the utterance is to be taken as in Coleridgean terms a symbol and not a sign, something that at least in part and in some fashion is itself what it signifies.

The definition of literature that I am attributing to Joos seems not to fit all the ways we think of literature. There are at least three sorts of texts that we require to be preserved ad litteram, and for three very different reasons. Literary texts are only one. The others are sacred texts and legal texts. Sacred texts are not to be changed because what is sacred is precisely what must not be disturbed by profane hands or mouths. Besides, such a text has divine authority. We may not be sure just what it authorizes, but whatever it does authorize it authorizes by saying just what it says. Our interpretations must not introduce modifications into the text because its authority is independent of and higher than ours. With legal texts the case is somewhat similar--not surprisingly, since a sacred text is likely to be a vehicle of divine law. We use legal texts and documents as authorities: we may not be certain what they intend or how the courts will take them, but their authoritative status requires that whatever they do mean is something that can be meant by these words and not other words. We must know what the law is, what the contract was, or civilization will totter. Actually of course we never know either of these things with precision, as Shylock discovered when he stumbled on the definition of 'flesh'; and if civilization were to totter we should be grateful, since what it mostly does is roll howling and vomiting in the gutter; but at least we can know what the law says, and hence know with the utmost precision what it is we don't know.

Legal and sacred texts alike are inviolable because we need them as authorities: text has priority over meaning, which must be definable only as what the words say. But there is no human business for which literary texts are authoritative, no practical reasons for upholding any canon of interpretative availability. Their textuality is of a different order. It is the utterance itself as a meaningful entity, and not the range of its permitted meanings, that is the object of our interest. It was perhaps to safeguard this distinction among inviolable texts that I.A. Richards updated the old romantic theory of the nature of literature to say that while scientific and similar texts have descriptive meaning, a literary text is to be construed as having only emotive meaning: we prize it for 'itself,' which is to say for its effects on

our feelings and not for what it tells us.¹² But this distinction seems to make the division in the wrong place. A literary text remains a text, its structure remains syntactic and semantic, it is a tissue of meanings that exists only through being understood. Even if it is possible to draw a line between understanding and feeling, which many have denied, that line will not serve to separate literary from non-literary uses of texts. What was or should have been meant was rather that in reading a text as literature one prescinds from the question of veracity, and to some extent from that of logical consistency: the text is judged not by its relation to any reality beyond itself, to which it must allude or conform, but by the quality of the reality that it is and the reality it implies. The relevant world is the world of the work itself. Thus we are led rather to the sort of analysis of the literary work that Roman Ingarden proposes,¹³ in which the primary and inviolable text subtends as it were a hierarchy of structures on any or all of which, in isolation or interrelation, the reader may dwell: a phonemic structure of sounding verbiage; a syntactic structure of articulate energy; a systematic way of evoking a world through selected aspects; and finally the world itself that all the words evoke.

Thus far, things are working out quite well. A basis for a literary theory seems almost to be forging itself without the need for hard decisions. Literature can be construed as a level of discourse that carries us back to the original ordering of inarticulate experience, and forward to the limits of experimental intelligibility, and in either case is manifested in works that have the status of authoritative and inviolable texts in which the verbal actuality serves as focus or fulcrum for a ramified complexity of levels and kinds of meanings of which we can only say that whatever is possible is possibly relevant. Literature is discourse comprehensively valued and fully charged and laden. Literary theory could be carried forward from this point by enumerating, classifying, ordering and evaluating what is possible to linguistic symbolism; and it seems not too hard to guess at some of the directions such explorations must take.

Unfortunately, however, things are not so pleasantly simple as we have made them out to be. Like all works of art, literary works are caught up in an ambiguity that forces aesthetic and literary theory alike in two directions. If a literary utterance is one in which what is said is the focus of interest, the literary work is taken to be a sort of object, open to the same sort of tripartite analysis that

is routinely applied to works in all the arts. There is the body of the work, the felt presence whose sensuous immediacy has a primacy that cannot be taken away by any reflection because in itself it defines the realm of the aesthetic. Then, as a second level, there is the analyzable structure, the aesthetic form; and, as a third, the expressive or emotive character whereby the work stands for and evokes a subjective world of feeling. Literary works are as susceptible to analysis of this form as other works of art--in fact, the relevance of such analysis could reasonably be held to be the defining characteristic of works of art as such. It is true that in the literary work the bodily presence seems to become equivocal, in that a literary work is made up of words, and words are inherently meaning-bearers, so that a literary work is from the beginning a tissue of meanings and the sounding quality of the work has a status that is notoriously equivocal. But this is seldom taken to be a serious difficulty: the work is experienced as having a presence as well as a structure and a significance, and we can rest there.

What gives rise to the ambiguity I spoke of is that every work of art also has the quite different character of a communication, not an object in the world but a passage in the conversation of mankind. If we say that because a literary work is an utterance attended to for its own sake it therefore takes on the character of an object, we make too hasty an inference; for our main reason for saying that it was uttered and attended to for its own sake was to contrast it with speech used for a practical end that might in principle be served by other means. It does not follow immediately that the utterance should be treated as an object rather than as a saying or singing by someone to someone, as when we talk for the sake of talking. And the very aspect of a literary work that renders its corporeal presence questionable, the irreducibility of its meaningful verbal substance to a sound-stuff describable in material or sensuous terms alone, is what makes its alternative status as communication so inescapably evident.

The dual character of a work of art, and a fortiori of a literary work, as artifact and as communication, has often embarrassed aesthetic theory because the two aspects seem not only antithetical but mutually destructive. To treat the work of art as artifact is thought to encourage an aestheticism that consigns art to moral triviality and frivolity.¹⁴ To treat it as communication, as Tolstoy wanted to do, is thought to deny the nature of art itself, to drag art down from the contemplative heights where it belongs to the realm of the

merely prudential; to dissolve its proud autonomy in a subjective mishmash of understandings and misunderstandings. Yet it seems impossible to deny that a work of art, and a work of literature, must have this double character. It thus becomes a prime task of literary theory, as of general aesthetics, to find a way of coping with this duality, of reconciling the two conflicting characters of the work. Fortunately, by the time the deepening of the historical consciousness made it apparent to the learned world that this problem existed, the beginnings of a way to handle it had been worked out in an adjacent domain, that of the interpretation of sacred texts. An analogous problem existed there, for there too an autonomous and unchanging somewhat, logos or kerygma, was indistinguishable from a complex communication among mutually uncomprehending and incomprehensible writers and readers. At least they had a word for it, and it is comforting to name one's troubles. The name, of course, is hermeneutics.¹⁵

Thus far, then, things are still not too bad. Literature as art and craft, as originative and elaborated utterance, as type of uttering and as inviolable text, may still admit of a coherent and even unified theoretical treatment. But now I must really foul things up by introducing considerations of a radically different order. A literary text is to be preserved unchanged. But to be an inviolable text, a text must first be a text. That is, presumably, something written. Should we not have defined literature in a quite different way, as utterance having the characteristics of written language? Etymologically, at least, literature seems to go with literacy and letters. A man of letters might be just that. We are so habituated to writing that we often forget how enormous the difference is between the written and the spoken word. Grammar, the Greek grammatike, is originally the science not of language but of written language: the very articulation of speech into words and syllables depends on an understanding of language based on the written word. The pace of written language is different, because the use of redundancy is different; the syntax is different, as transcripts of tapes reveal. The very notion of what constitutes identity of utterances may change, as appears from A.B. Lord's studies of the oral epic in Yugoslavia¹⁶: the concept of word-for-word sameness seems to be a product of records in which that identity can be shown and provided with a criterion. And what matters most for our present purposes is that a written text ceases to be entirely utterance and necessarily becomes artifact: once

written, it becomes something that can be shaped and edited; and, because it can be, must be. Though some people talk rather as they write, and others write rather as they talk, and although the amanuensis always and the tape-recorder lately have done something to heal the breach, it remains true that writing is not at all the same thing as talking.

It is a fact of usage that anything written down may in some contexts be called 'literature'. We mostly speak as if that were a mere unfortunate equivocation; and the fact that I could talk so long about literary theory without giving that usage countenance suggests that that may be all it is. But is it really so clear? I have recently had the rather odd experience of acting as a judge in a literary contest in which the books entered fulfilled no formal requirement other than that of being neither fiction nor verse. They ranged from cookbooks to biographies, from guidebooks to theses in economics. The assignment of judging their relative merits was obviously an absurd one. Yet in practice it proved not to be absurd. All were verbal artifacts. All the authors had faced the same problems of ordonnance, of verbal decorum, of conveying information and interest. In fact, each author in his own way had faced the problem, had wrestled with the appalling task, of making a book. Where were those famous distinctions between art and craft, between the authentic and the everyday, and all the rest? One made them indeed, but not between works; within each work. Which was more important: what united all these books as literary artifacts, or what divided the literary works of art from the objects of utility among them? Of course one has to ask, important to whom, and for what? Any professional writer knows that for theoretical as well as practical purposes he may find himself aligned with different groups of professionals on different occasions and in relation to different issues. The concept of literature as bestowing on some writers and writings and withholding from others a definitive dignity overriding all other distinctions is one that in my profession as writer, as opposed to my calling as theorist, I find essentially ignorant and peculiarly offensive. If literary theory is to be the theory that there is literature and this is something other than the business of writing, it may be that literary theory rests on a mistake.

Where, at the end of all, does this leave us? We have considered four candidates for the one position of the root idea of literature: literature as originative language, as exploratory language, as valued language, and finally as

written language. The first three may be interrelated well enough, as we have seen; but the last, though it has an inextinguishable rightness and place of its own, can be connected with them only through the contingent and adventitious fact that it is by writing that texts are best identified, elaborated, and preserved. What does that mean for the theory of literature? It is not clear; and the reason it is unclear is what I began with, that the theoretical status of the concept of literature is unsettled, and it is not clear what fundamental purpose or purposes literary theory is to serve. Perhaps my intolerant youthful pronunciamento about the impropriety of general theories of this and that was after all not so far off the mark. There is a set of theoretical and practical problems relating to the preparation and transmission of written texts as such. There is another set of problems relating to the mutual comprehensibility of speakers and hearers, of writers and readers, and the status of what is written or said as intermediary. There is another set of problems relating to the distinction between uses of language that take language for granted and those that make language itself the object of concern. Obviously these sets of problems are interrelated in practice, and solutions adopted in one area will have implications for other areas. But what the relations between these sets of problems should be is not a theoretical issue. It is rather a matter for practical decisions. What we agree in saying here will reflect what we collectively want to do, how we choose to arrange our lives. And of course in our pluralist society there is no prospect of our all agreeing about that. Therefore the idea of a general all-purpose theory of literature on which all reasonable people could be expected to agree is chimerical from the start. Whatever purports to be such a theory can only be a manifesto.

I could stop there, but I like a story to have a happy ending. It is not after all true that we do not know what purpose literary theory is to serve. Northrop Frye has explained it very well.¹⁷ It is to provide a rationale for the teaching of literature. Departments of literature exist, and must reach a measure of agreement on what they are to teach. It is essentially a curriculum problem. What is to be read by what students at what age, and how are they to be taught to read and discuss it? That is the real problem for literary theory--the only real problem, because there is no other context in which such questions become urgent; and the practical, pedagogic, social, and ideological constraints it imposes are so stringent that professors of literature can

theorize with no sense of strain. The problem of literary theory is exclusively one for those professors, of whom I am not one. They deal with it very capably, and with all the confidence in the world.

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NOTES

¹F. E. Sparshott, The Concept of Criticism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 2-4.

²The Oxford English Dictionary suggests six meanings for 'literature', as follows:

- (1) literary or generally bookish culture, c.1400-1850;
- (2) the profession of man of letters, c. 1780-1880;
- (3) literary production, since 1812;
- (4) literary production of aesthetic quality, since c. 1875;
- (5) the literature of a subject, since c. 1860;
- (6) any printed matter, since 1890--but the OED's supporting quotations mention the usage only to complain of it.

³Plato himself had said this earlier: Protagoras, 312D.

⁴T. S. Eliot, 'From Poe to Valery', Hudson Review 2, 1949-50, 333-4.

⁵W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy', in Wimsatt's The Verbal Icon (New York: Noonday Press, 1958), pp. 3-18.

⁶Note that I specify felt deviation from supposed norms. It is a matter of indifference whether a neutral criterion for literalness of meaning can be given: the point is that what is deemed metaphorical is so deemed because it is deemed to deviate.

⁷R. G. Collingwood, Principles of Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

⁸S. T. Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ch. 13. Cf. J. R. de J. Jackson, Method and Imagination in Coleridge's Criticism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 109-21.

⁹This jargon of 'Being' and Dasein is taken from Martin Heidegger. It cannot be given any precise interpretation, but prettily indicates a hankering after the simple life.

¹⁰Cf. Mikel Dufrenne, Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 31-5.

¹¹Cf. Monroe C. Beardsley, 'On the Creation of Art', Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 23, 1965, 291-304.

¹²I. A. Richards, Science and Poetry (London: Kegan Paul, 1935).

¹³Roman Ingarden, The Literary Work of Art (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 29-33.

¹⁴Cf. Leo Tolstoy, What is Art? (London: Oxford University Press, 1930); and H.G. Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode (Tuebingen: J.C. Mohr, 1960).

¹⁵The logic of our argument might lead us to expect analogous aid from canons of legal interpretation, but the aid is not forthcoming, because the legal need is primarily for consensus and not for defensible canons of correctness and a rational discussion of the limits of interpretation.

¹⁶A. B. Lord, The Singer of Tales (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

¹⁷Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 7-18.

MONROE C. BEARDSLEY

What is a Literary Theory?

To begin with, I think anything that deserves to be called a "theory" must at least explain something. We can only have a theory of X if X is some range of phenomena--objects, events states of affairs, or whatever--whose properties present themselves as something to be accounted for. The theory itself will contain explanations only of general or recurring features of X's, such as their tendency to congeal on exposure to air. But its principles will be available for the explanation of singular facts about X's--that is, for answering questions such as "Why did this X congeal?" In the case of literature, the general features are, I take it, such things as style, narrative, rhyme, meter, symbol, metaphor. And the first thing we ask of a theory of literature is that it provide explanations of such phenomena, and principles that are helpful in explaining particular instances of them.

Perhaps it is puzzling to speak of explaining style or narrative. Part of what I have in mind can be clarified with the help of an expression that has figured in the philosophy of history: there is such a thing as "explaining how" something is possible or came to be. How was it possible for Hannibal to cross the Alps? How was it possible for Watergate to be covered up so long? The connection between explaining how and explaining why is in dispute: I am inclined to regard the former as a special case, or partial performance, of the latter. At any rate, a theory of literature is supposed to explain (say) how narrative is possible: what features of language, what rules or conventions, what logical or ontological framework of concepts and principles, enable us to tell a story--and, indeed, account for the fact that one discourse is a narrative and another is not. Moreover, the same explanatory principles should help the critic explain differences in quality between narratives by different writers--in degree of continuity, in pace, in dramatic intensity, etc.

Thus a literary theory is to be distinguished from practical criticism by its generality--but also, I think, by its system. One might work out plausible accounts of, say, style and metaphor and narrative structure, relying on quite

independent principles and concepts, but a literary theory would have something to say about how these phenomena are connected; it would introduce basic principles, of a high level of generality, that enter into the explanation of a variety of phenomena. Of course we do not know a priori that this can be done, and I do not mean to be dogmatic. I am only describing, in a sketchy way, what I think we should look for in a literary theory. Some distinction between basic principles and others logically derived from, or dependent on, them seems to me the minimum requirement for explanation that is not only reasonable but systematic.

What pulls together and organizes a literary theory is its central and necessary concern with two fundamental questions, which may be put roughly in this form:

- (A) What is literature?
- (B) What is good literature?

No body of propositions, I think, can rightly claim to constitute a literary theory unless it contains answers to these questions.

The first question is, of course, a multiple one--it reaches out in at least three distinguishable directions, each of which deserves consideration on its own in any reflection on the nature of a literary theory. We have in fact at least three major questions, concerning (1) the discrimination, (2) the proper ontological assignment, and (3) the universal and fundamental features of literary works.

(1) One thing we want to know when we ask about the nature of literature is just how literary works are distinguished from everything else in the world, and of course most especially their coordinate discourses or texts that are not literature. To be uncertain about this is to be uncertain what is the class of X's to which our literary theory is supposed to apply, and by reference to which the theory is supposed to be confirmed. I do not propose to rehearse again the issues over "essentialism" that have ravaged the aesthetic landscape, as well as others, in recent decades, and left behind as many muddles as liberated flies among a by no means pacified philosophic community. Our familiar literary terms have their ambivalences, so a literary theory has to make some terminological decisions, though there seem to be some conceptual restraints.¹ If we take "literary work" as denoting a class of which lyric poems, prose fictions, etc., are subclasses, then it cannot be satisfactorily marked off from other discourses except with the help of objective criteria.

If "literary work" is short for "literary work of art," some reference to intention will have to be built into the definition. But my main point here is that there is a good deal of leeway in marking out a class of X's to be the object of theoretical literary study. For example, John M. Ellis, in his recent Theory of Literary Criticism, places himself among a growing group of contemporary aestheticians, of whom George Dickie is the most active, who adopt what they call an "institutional concept of art."² According to Ellis, "literary texts are...those pieces of language used in a certain way by the community"--more specifically, they are "used by the society in such a way that the text is not taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin."³

I suspect that the plausibility of this definition rests on its silence concerning some pressing questions: for example, what "taking as" precisely consists in, and what "community" is decisive. It would be tempting, for example, to say that it is the literary community that decides, not just any old group of people--but how could the literary community be identified non-circularly, other than as those who have dealings with literary works? But even if Ellis's proposal were adopted, it would not invalidate the enterprise of constructing a literary theory. So long as there is a comparatively large class of entities whose status as literary works is unquestioned, the other fundamental questions of literary theory can still be asked about them.

(2) When we ask What is a literary work? we may be asking about its mode of being: what sort of entity it is. Some of the choices open here (if we think in terms of an inventory of available ontological categories: object, event, class, kind, property, relation, etc.) may seem too abstract and metaphysical to matter to a literary theorist. And I don't deny that distinct and equally satisfactory literary theories might be constructed on quite different ontological bases--one taking, say, mental events as primitive, the other physical objects and events, like written and spoken words. But I am inclined to think that some of the choices are indeed quite important, and the resulting theory may be seriously marred by a mistake in basic ontological commitment.

It may be useful to illustrate this point by comments on a recent controversy about the status of those meanings that are taken to be the object of critical interpretation. Surely a literary theory must tell us what we are doing when we explicate a poem, and what it can tell us is limited by the range and variety of entities that it admits, or that it

postulates as constituting a literary work. In a very interesting essay in the current issue of Critical Inquiry, E.D. Hirsch has drawn up, perhaps overdramatically, a contrast between two concepts of literary explication. The issue has occupied him for some time, and he has contributed valuably to its articulation and resolution. He presents it (in the context of some arguments about style that I will not take issue with now) as an issue between "conventionalist" and "intentionalist" accounts of meaning. The conventionalist account--that of Austin, Searle, Alston--takes, roughly speaking, the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions to consist in their being governed by rules of various sorts. The intentionalist view--that of Grice and Strawson, and also of Hirsch--takes the concept of what the speaker intends to communicate as basic.⁴ In another very interesting essay, in the current issue of Centrum, Robert L. Brown develops a similar line of thought.⁵ As he says, very forthrightly, "Following Grice, I claim that all language utterances mean what their speakers intend them to mean, no more and no less."⁵ Thus to explicate a poem is to discover the "volative act" of the writer, which determines what the poem is to mean. Of course, our knowledge of linguistic rules will help in this, but we may often have to go beyond those rules to get at the meaning--which is, strictly, a mental state or act in the poet.

There is something puzzling about the expression Brown quotes from a conversation with Grice: unless it makes sense to speak of words as meaning something independently of any intentions, how could we form the intention that words shall mean something? If what an utterance means is what it is intended to mean, then what it is intended to mean is what it is intended to be intended to mean--and so on. But this problem, like others raised and well discussed by Brown, deserve better treatment than I can give it here. My purpose in alluding to this important issue is just to use it as an illustration of the way in which a difference in ontological status accorded to the meaning of a poem could well be reflected in critical practice.

In any case, if the Hirsch/Brown thesis is correct, the objects to be accounted for in a literary theory do not disappear from view; they merely alter their character. But other answers to our question (2) threaten to be fatal to literary theory--though perhaps not for a sort of theory of criticism. In his recent essay, "Wanted: A New Contextualism," Edward Wasiolek reminds us approvingly of the view of Roland Barthes that the literary work is a "void" without "voice," to be filled in and made speaking by the critic, in

any way he chooses--"that a work of art is as many things as one can say it is."⁶ If the work has no properties, no meaning, no qualities, no forms, that belong to it as such, then I suppose there is nothing to study, except--and this is no longer literary study--the history of what critics have said about "it" (though how "it" is identified and re-identified through time, when it is such a bare particular, I don't understand). It is startling to read Wasiolek's remark that

Barthes' infuriating and exasperating use of the word "void" (vide) to describe a literary work is nevertheless the right word, and in one sense it is an expression of humility: an acknowledgement that if there is a truth to be known, we will never know it,⁷ no more about literature than about the world.

If this is humility, give me arrogance: it is the voice of the dogmatic skeptic who asserts that we know now that we can never know.

(3) When we ask, What is a literary work? we may already have a satisfactory definition, but wish to know what other properties literary works universally, or normally, possess. Roman Ingarden has, I suppose, come as close to anyone to working out a comprehensive and systematic literary theory, and one of its most original and striking elements, the stratification model of literary works, is an answer to the question I have just formulated. His four-stratum model, now forty years old, is becoming increasingly well-known through the recent English translation of his book, The Literary Work of Art, though there are alternatives. For example, Nicolai Härtmann had a seven-stratum model, based on his hierarchical metaphysics; and Wolfgang Iser, who has compared Härtmann with Ingarden, has proposed a nine-stratum model that combines the two schemes.⁸

There is a difference among these enterprises: Iser aims to provide a set of categories into which everything usefully and truly sayable about a literary work can be sorted, even though not all literary works contain creeds, ideologies, etc. (his level 9). But Ingarden's four strata are supposed to apply to every literary work: there is always, he would claim, a "world of the work," with represented objects, scenes, persons--however vaguely and indefinitely they may be projected, and however obscure or ambiguous their properties and activities. Ingarden, as I read him, does not make this proposition true by definition alone; it becomes

testable by suppositious counter-examples drawn from current avant-garde works, if they qualify on other grounds as literature. For example, if "concrete" poems are indeed poems, and also literary works of art, some of them would appear to lack at least one of Ingarden's strata. They project no world. But of course Ingarden's scheme could be loosened and complicated to take account of some deviant or abnormal varieties.

I'm not arguing either for or against Ingarden's scheme; it provides illuminations, and it has its difficulties. But I think the question it answers is an important one for literary theory: what do literary works have in common, or have characteristically? For example: should we take every literary work to have an implicit speaker, an implied reader, a theme or themes?

My question (B) above was: What is a good literary work? And my position here may be even more questionable than some of what I have said so far. I don't even mind putting the idea in terms of explanation: an adequate literary theory will explain in general what makes one poem better than another, and thereby provide principles that a critic can use in explaining why, say, "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is a better poem than "The Vision of Sir Launfall." But I don't insist on being allowed to beg too many questions here; I don't rule out a literary theory that explains why no poem can be better than any other, or that includes a coherent doctrine from which it follows that my question (B) cannot even be asked. What I won't countenance-- or at least recognize as constituting a theory--is a doctrine that fudges the issue, that shunts it aside as not worth discussion.

The practice of literary critics, I believe, provides a firm prima facie case for distinctions and gradations of literary value among literary works; and I take this as a sort of datum for literary theory, though (as I have suggested) rebuttable by strong countervailing arguments. How much we should require of a literary theory in the way of accounting for this datum is (in my mind) open for discussion. At the very least, I should think it is up to a literary theory to tell us what sorts of reason may relevantly be given in support of positive or negative value judgments: or, in an alternative formulation, what features (at least in certain contexts) count as merits or defects in literary works. The absence of any direct and serious effort to address himself to this problem makes Northrop Frye's literary system a seriously incomplete literary theory. Perhaps his

well-known and often-quoted remarks in the "Polemical Introduction" to The Anatomy of Criticism have been misconstrued; in his "Letter to the English Institute," a propos of the Institute's symposium on his work, he says:

I have never said that there were no literary values or that critics should never make value-judgments: what I have said is that literary values are not established by critical value-judgments. Every work of literature establishes its own value...⁹

But it is hard to understand what this antiestablishmentarianism entails; surely there is a rather irresponsible play on senses of the word "establish" here. In one sense, the work makes-exist its literary value; but to make-known its literary value is the task of the careful critic who has, and will share, his reasons for judging as he does. The only thing that can, so to speak, furnish or underwrite those reasons is sound literary theory.

I am strongly tempted to add a further condition on answers to my question (B), though it may again beg a question that should be left open. Someone might offer a sort of "institutional" answer to the question, analogous to one of the answers to question (A): a good literary work (at time t) is whatever is said to be good, or accepted as good, by the literary community (at time t). We don't want to know what people call good, but what is good--unless, of course, it can be shown that these are one and the same. Absent such a showing, I expect a literary theory to connect discriminations of value among individual literary works with a general account of what gives point to the whole literary enterprise. What good is literature? we may ask. That is, what function does it have in culture and society? Certainly an answer to this question, if it can be had, would make the most satisfactory foundation for comparative judgments that one work is superior to another qua literature.

I come now to a final question about the nature of literary theory--in the idealized form in which I am discussing it. It has to do with the character of the propositions that compose such a theory--or at least with the more basic propositions, from which others are logically derived. Like any theory, a literary theory has two aspects (which, admittedly, may not be neatly distinguishable): (1) its empirical or material foreground and (2) its conceptual or categorical framework. In the first aspect it is, broadly speaking, science; in the second aspect, philosophy. There is much that

needs to be said, and much that is still to be thought out, about this distinction, but I shall only be able to make some sketchy remarks about the foreground and framework.

The most-discussed question about the empirical part of literary theory has to do with the kind of propositions it consists of: are they solely or primarily psychological, or linguistic, or what? An instructive parallel controversy about the status of music theory has been raised by Leonard Meyer in his recent book, Explaining Music, and by Alan Tormey in his penetrating review of this book.¹⁰ Meyer thinks of music theory as consisting of explanatory laws, which critics use in explaining particular musical events (why the composition at a given point has this feature rather than that). But as Tormey points out, he wavers on the nature of these laws, sometimes describing them as connecting types of tonal relationship with the responses of experienced and sensitive listeners, sometimes as having to do with "the relationships among and between musical events, not the responses of individual listeners." In a friendly letter, Meyer has remarked to Tormey, "I don't see how one can escape from building a theory of music upon some sort of theory of human cognition and response." But I think this must be carefully guarded to be said either about music theory or theory of literature.

Part of the guarding consists in a distinction between two sorts of psychological generalization (whether or not strictly a law; and I don't want to get into that at the moment), and a parallel distinction between two sorts of explanation involving literature. If we ask, say, why a certain poem was so popular or why a certain novel moved people to tears, we are clearly after reader-responses. The answers to such questions will depend on what we may call "reader-response generalizations." But neither these generalizations nor the explanations that they permit have anything to do with literary theory. The other kind of explanation--which I call critical explanation--is internal to the work: it explains how regional properties of the work depend upon its more localized properties. All instances are debatable, but I should offer one for clarification, aiming to make it neither too simple nor too elaborate:

The intense poignancy of Arnold's "Dover Beach" is (partly) explained by the way in which the speaker's initial contrast between the sight and sound of the sea parallels and foreshadows his contrast between the apparent goodness of the world and its real,

irremediable evils.

Now I do not suppose that this critical explanation can be set out in neat deductive-nomological (or "covering law") form. Yet I do suppose that among the truth-conditions (though not necessarily the confirmation-conditions) of this explanation is a proposition that connects, in a general way, the intensification of the poignancy of a melancholy moral reflection with the addition of an appropriate parallel from nature. Some such empirical principle might be shown to be operative in a range of nature poetry.

Thus (to simplify rather considerably) I suggest that there are general inter-level truths about the dependence of regional properties of literary works upon comparatively local ones. Irony, wit, tension, tragic quality, etc., are explainable in terms of specific features of language and plot. Writers discover and exploit such conditions, critics discern and articulate them. And literary theory, in its aim at comprehensive understanding, should collect, sort, and systematize them, subsuming them when possible under inter-level principles of greater generality, which yet escape triviality. Among them might be principles like the gestalt principles that Meyer has made such good use of in his writings on musical style.

I do not have to commit myself here on the question whether the laws of linguistics are a species of psychological law. In any case, such laws will evidently form a central part of the empirical content of an adequate literary theory, since they will enter into the explanation of those notable and recurrent phenomena I referred to earlier, such as style and metaphor. And since a literary theory must include a theory of the interpretation of literature, it is inescapably involved with linguistics. Perhaps there has been recently a "schism between linguistics and literary studies," as W. O. Hendricks has written, in an effort to bring the two into reconciliation.¹¹ I don't know that his proposed neologism, "stylolinguistics," is needed for this purpose, but his strictures against a purely additive or atomistic view of literary explanation are apt.

That in a literary theory which is not empirical I have labelled "philosophical framework," hoping thereby to escape being called fully to account. I have already suggested how ontological considerations may enter into the formulation of a literary theory, and I take it as a philosophical task to determine what sorts of ontology are available for such purposes. It seems very clear, as well, that other branches of

philosophy--notably, theory of value, theory of knowledge, philosophy of language--are equally involved. But I don't try to say here exactly what role they play--aside from insisting that some of the questions a literary theory is supposed to answer are, at least in part, inescapably philosophical, or presuppose philosophical principles or schemes. We cannot be confident we know what good literature is, though perhaps we can in a weaker sense know that particular works are good, without a reasonable and systematic theory of what goodness is in general.

But my main purpose in touching, however lightly, on this theme is to make a farewell gesture of rejection to certain forms of pluralism in what may be called literary meta-theory--i.e., the theory of literary theory (which is my subject here). Suppose we grant that one ingredient of a literary theory is its conceptual framework, and that there may be some room for choice of alternative frameworks, and that there is therefore a decisional element in the process of constructing a literary theory. Then it becomes tempting to say that all literary theories (or the chunks and fragments of literary theory that we now possess) are basically noncognitive, that they are on an equal basis, and we don't have to choose between them, but should embrace them all, however diverse--not of course as true (what use have we for such old-fashioned words?), but as convenient, illuminating, even plausible. That's what I mean by pluralism in this domain. But such a temptation is not, I think, to be yielded to. It is not the whole story to say we can regard literary works as self-expression, if we will, or as imitation, or as presentational symbol, or whatever. Granted that the rejection of some of these sorts of theory in favor of others would involve philosophical decisions; still, even among decisions, some may be more rational than others. And nothing we now know precludes us from continuing to seek a unified theory that will rest on sound philosophical foundations and will be adequate to the whole range and variety of phenomena subsumed under the term "literature."

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NOTES

1Cf. "The Concept of Literature," in Frank Brady, John Palmer, and Martin Price, eds., Literary Theory and Structure:

Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973).

²Cf. George Dickie, Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), ch. 1.

³The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), pp. 42, 44.

⁴E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Stylistics and Synonymity," Critical Inquiry 1 (1975), 574-77.

⁵Robert L. Brown, Jr., "Intentions and the Contexts of Poetry," Centrum 2 (Spring 1974), 58.

⁶Edward Wasiolek, "Wanted: A New Contextualism," Critical Inquiry 1 (1975), 637.

⁷Ibid., 638.

⁸Wolfgang Iser, "Stratum, Structure, and Genre; Interrelation of the Terms," Publications of the University of Tokyo (Language and Literature Series) 9 (1973), 153-64.

⁹Murray Krieger, ed., Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism [selected essays from the English Institute], (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966), p. 29.

¹⁰Leonard B. Meyer, Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973); Alan Tormey in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 33 (Spring 1975), 351-54.

¹¹W. O. Hendricks, "The Relation between Linguistics and Literary Studies," Poetics: International Review for the Theory of Literature, 11 (1974), 5-22.

MARJORIE PERLOFF

"Literary Competence" and the Formalist Model

One of the consistent aims of Structuralist theory has been to refute the Formalist doctrine that literary language is intrinsically different from ordinary language, and that, accordingly, the object of literary study is, in Roman Jakobson's words, "not literature itself but literariness, that is, what makes a given work a literary work."¹ In repudiating this claim, Tzvetan Todorov has argued that since, for example, "a certain type of lyric poetry has more rules in common with prayer than with a historical novel of the War and Peace variety," the meaningless "opposition between literature and nonliterature should be replaced by a typology of various types of discourse."² In his recent Structuralist Poetics, in my view the most intelligent and comprehensive treatment of the subject we have so far, Jonathan Culler, following Todorov, Roland Barthes, and Gerard Genette, observes: "the fact that a text is a poem is not the necessary result of its linguistic properties, and attempts to base a theory of poetry on an account of the special properties of language seem doomed to failure."³ As an example of such failure, Culler cites Cleanth Brooks' equation of the language of poetry with the language of paradox--an equation Culler finds unsatisfactory because "one can find similar tension in language of any kind" (p. 163).

"The essence of poetry," according to Culler, "lies not in verbal artifice itself, though that serves as a catalyst, but more simply and profoundly in the type of reading . . . which the poem imposes on its readers" (p. 164). And that type of reading is largely determined by what the Structuralists have called literary competence. Culler explains that this term is derived from Chomsky's notion of "linguistic competence," which may be defined as "the explicit representation, by a system of rules or norms, of the implicit knowledge of the language system (langue) possessed by those who successfully operate within the system" (p. 9).

By analogy, literary competence is "the ability to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and

meanings"; it is "a set of conventions for reading literary texts" (p. 118). For a literary utterance has no objective status; it has meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader has assimilated, and which, for that matter, implicitly governs the stylistic choices the author of the text has made. For "To write a poem or a novel is immediately to engage with a literary tradition or at the very least with a certain idea of the poem or the novel" (p. 116). Even when a writer intentionally subverts the conventions of a given genre, that genre still provides the context within which his activity must take place. Indeed, as Julia Kristeva puts it, "every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts," and "a work can only be read in connection with or against other texts, which provide a grid through which it is read and structured by establishing expectations which enable one to pick out salient features and give them structure" (p. 139).⁴ In these terms, any work can be made intelligible if one invents appropriate conventions. "If a difficult work later becomes intelligible," says Culler, "it is because new ways of reading have been developed in order to meet what is the fundamental demand of the system: the demand for sense" (p. 123). Thus Ulysses and The Waste Land--works that once seemed hopelessly strange--strike undergraduates of the 1970s as perfectly "normal" because they have been conditioned to accept the particular conventions that are operative.

One might note, at this point, that if we accept Culler's theory, questions of aesthetic value become irrelevant. If any work can be rendered "intelligible" by the application of the appropriate conventions, there is no such thing as "good" as opposed to "bad" art. But leaving aside the knotty problem of value--a problem too complex to discuss here--I should like in this paper to take a look at the practical applications of Culler's Structuralist Poetics, to see what happens when we do, in fact, read a given poem according to "a rule-governed process of producing meanings," rather than as a self-contained verbal message whose aesthetic function is its dominant.⁵

Structuralists have done relatively little work on poetry, probably because the lyric presents fewer possibilities for typological analysis than do narrative or drama. Culler tries to remedy this situation by devoting a whole chapter to the lyric, in which he isolates three conventions or codes that govern our interpretation of poetry.

The first is "Distance or Impersonality." A poem, he argues, is not the specific speech act of a real individual but the fictional representation of such an act, removed from

real time and place. Accordingly, the reader must pay close attention to "deictics," the orientational features of language (i.e., first and second-person pronouns, anaphoric articles, demonstratives, adverbials of place and time, and verb tenses, especially the non-timeless present), for it is these features that force us to create a fictional situation in which a given poetic speech could occur (p. 165). Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of a Jar," for instance, gives but a single deictic to work with, the "I" of the opening line:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill . . .

Adequate interpretation of this poem will depend upon the reader's proper construction of a poetic narrator who could responsibly be the agent of this particular action: placing a jar in Tennessee. Or again, in reading the octave of Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," we note the preponderance of anaphoric definite articles (the great wings, the staggering girl, the thighs caressed, the dark webs, etc.) and must accordingly construct a reference for them, must take into account the implications of making the event of the rape into such a static scene (p. 166).

The second fundamental convention of the lyric is what Culler calls "the expectation of totality or coherence" (p. 170). We expect ideally to account for everything in a poem and prefer explanations that best succeed in doing this. Thus Todorov speaks of reading as "figuration" in which one attempts to discover a central structure or generative device which governs all levels of the text" (p. 172).⁶ Culler further relates "the intent at totality of the interpretive process" to the Gestaltist law of Prägnanz, "that the richest organization compatible with the data is to be preferred" (p. 174).

The third convention or expectation governing the lyric is that of "significance." "To write a poem is to claim significance of some sort for the verbal construct one produces, and the reader approaches a poem with the assumption that, however brief it may appear, it must contain, at least implicitly, potential riches which make it worthy of his attention. Reading a poem thus becomes a process of finding ways to grant it significance and importance" (p. 175). However trivial a given poem may seem, we must supply a function to justify it.

These three codes--impersonality, coherence, significance--

oddly recall the New Criticism, which used precisely the same vocabulary. I say oddly because of course New Criticism is the Structuralist's bête noire. But there is a real difference between the two theoretical frameworks. The New Critic, we recall, had specific criteria for "distance" or "coherence" or "significance"--for example, irony for Brooks, metaphoric density for Wellek and Warren, the poem as miniature drama for Reuben Brower--which he applied to a given poem. Not all poems could meet the standard, and it was the critic's task to see which poems were, in fact, "coherent" and thematically rich. The Structuralist, on the other hand, assumes that any poem can be found coherent and significant if we apply the correct rule-governed process to it. The goal, in short, is not judgement of aesthetic value but reasonable interpretation and generic classification.

The concept of literary competence thus allows us to be more open and flexible about poems than we used to be in the heyday of the New Criticism. "One need not," Culler observes, "struggle to find some objective property of language which distinguishes the literary from the nonliterary but may simply start from the fact that we can read texts as literature, and then inquire what operations that involves" (pp. 128-129). This argument sounds very sensible, but I have two basic reservations.

First, I would argue that the Formalists--at least the Russian Formalists if not always the American New Critics--did take into account the role of the reader in the poetic process. Viktor Shklovsky, the father of Russian Formalism, insisted as long ago as 1917 that there is no such thing as "art" divorced from the perception of it. Indeed, perception plays the crucial role in his poetic. "Art," according to Shklovsky, "exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony....The technique of art is to make objects 'un-familiar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself."⁷

The Formalists repeatedly insisted that poetic language is distinguished from ordinary language not by any single device--say, imagery--but by the perception of its structure.⁸ And that structure can be perceived only by placing a given literary text in relation to other texts. For, as Shklovsky said in a 1919 essay on plot devices, "The form of a work of art is determined by its relationship with other forms existing prior to it....New form comes about not in order to express

new content but in order to replace an old form that has already lost its artistic viability."⁹

This statement sounds precisely like Julia Kristeva's definition of "intertextuality" cited earlier: "A work can only be read in connection with or against other texts...." The Formalists did not, then, ignore the role of convention or of reader expectation when they argued that literary language is distinct from ordinary language. On the contrary, the concept of defamiliarization or making it strange would be incomprehensible if the critic did not bring his "literary competence" into play. The account of Natasha's visit to the opera in War and Peace, for example, seems so intensely "defamiliarized" only because we recognize how very different it is from the typical description of a night at the opera--whether in Tolstoy's day or in our own.

Structuralism thus owes more to Formalism than is generally conceded even by those, like Culler, Todorov, or Robert Scholes, who take pains to show how the later movement evolved out of the earlier one. But secondly, and more important, I wonder whether actual Structuralist readings of a given poetic text do in fact represent an advance over the kind of analysis performed by the Formalists or even by the despised New Critics.

Let me take as my example William Carlos Williams' famous little poem about the plums:

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

In his discussion of the code of significance, Culler cites "THIS IS JUST TO SAY" as an example of a poem that has

no thematic importance if we regard it as an ordinary verbal artifact, a poem that can be understood only if we supply a new function to justify it. If this poem were written out as a prose note and left on the kitchen table, it would simply be a nice gesture, but when we see it set down on the page as a poem, we deprive it of its pragmatic and circumstantial functions, and bring the convention of significance into play. "Given the opposition between the eating of the plums and the social rules which this violates, we may say that the poem as note becomes a mediating force, recognizing the priority of rules by asking forgiveness, but also affirming, by the thrust of the last few words, that immediate sensuous experience also has its claims and that the order of personal relations (the relationship between the 'I' and the 'you') must make a place for such an experience" (p. 175).

Let us compare this reading of Williams' poem to an earlier, New Critical, reading published in Charles Wheeler's The Design of Poetry (1966). Unlike Culler, Wheeler regards "THIS IS JUST TO SAY" as an autonomous work with a key design, and he submits that the text itself should furnish all the evidence the critic needs. He begins with description:

The form of "THIS IS JUST TO SAY" could not be simpler. The poem is composed of two declarative sentences, without punctuation, arranged vertically into three stanzas. Its thirteen lines (the title must be counted as integral with the poem) do not depart from the diction or the word-order of ordinary language. The relative clauses in the first and second stanzas are a little awkward and overexplicit, as they might be in an extemporized note, and the divisions of the lines are what might well have resulted from the writer's having been forced to use a narrow slip of paper for his message--perhaps one torn from a note pad. The stanzas, as stanzas, owe their existence to some minimal influence of literary tradition, yet they also coincide with natural breaks in the flow of thought. The only rhetorical device of any consequence is the parallelism in the last two lines. The "just" in the title seems quite appropriate to these modest results.¹⁰

Since Wheeler here admits that the language of Williams' poem looks perfectly ordinary, we might conclude that he will

dismiss it as a non-poetic utterance, of no further interest to the Formalist critic. But, on the contrary, Wheeler now goes on to show that what looks natural is in fact designed to look natural. The very absence of rhyme and meter, he argues, is intentional, for recurrent sound features would make the "Note" look too studied and calculated.

The key to an understanding of the poem is, Wheeler argues, its tone--that is, the dramatic situation it establishes between the speaker and the addressee, evidently a husband and wife. Readers may object that the poem itself does not provide positive proof that the "I" is a husband addressing his wife--the two could be lover and mistress, or just good friends or, say, homosexual lovers--but actually it doesn't matter because the poem's stress is on the intimacy and perfect understanding of the two people in question.

How is this tone of intimacy established? The husband, Wheeler notes, is not an ordinary raider of iceboxes, for the word-choice, lineation, and flat rhythm of the poem establish a rather unusual situation. We can understand what that situation is if we begin by trying to substitute or add certain things. Suppose, for example, the poem had a fourth stanza:

I will try
to control myself
a little better
from now on.

In the context of the first thirteen lines, this statement is patently ridiculous because the speaker is neither contrite nor humble. One does not have the sense of someone who is trying to reform. Anyone who tells his wife that he has eaten the plums because they were "so sweet/ and so cold" must be assuming that his wife will understand his feelings.

Or again, suppose the third stanza were changed to

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
so nutritious.

The tone would be wholly undercut. For one thing, the Gilbert-and-Sullivan rhyme ("delicious"/ "nutritious") jars with everything that has come before, for the poem seems to have made a rule that rhyme will not be permitted, and the sudden introduction of rhyme in the last stanza therefore violates the text's coherence. Then too, the speaker does not otherwise

seem to be the type who eats plums because they are nutritious, so this particular word is ridiculous in the context.

What is that context? The "I" has evidently come home late. His wife has just as evidently gone to bed and must be asleep so that he leaves the note pinned to the icebox door. The icebox, moreover, is her province: she is the one who decides what to save for breakfast. Yet he opens the door, sees the plums, and can't resist eating them. Realizing that she will miss them in the morning, he jots down his little note.

And what sort of person must the wife be? She is evidently a good provider or the plums would not have been there to begin with. She is not, however, a fanatical menu-maker, or the note would never appease her for their loss. The note, in other words, tells her what she has surely surmised already; it makes clear that husband and wife are very intimate, that they understand one another.

The opening line (or title)--"THIS IS JUST TO SAY"--is self-deprecatory, a kind of verbal clearing of the throat. The first stanza announces the deed, not bluntly (substitute "I ate the plums") but with superfluous circumstantiality since she obviously knows where the plums were. The husband who speaks is, in other words, just pretending to explain his action. The second stanza has the same tone. The word "probably" is unnecessary as far as the message goes, for there is no real doubt as to why the plums were being saved, but it would be tactless for the speaker to claim absolute knowledge of his wife's motives by saying or implying "certainly." "Probably" has a nice air of resignation, as if to say, "Well, you know me, that's the way I'am"; or "That's the way things happen around here." Then the speaker makes the direct plea "Forgive me," followed by the justification which is, we should note, patently absurd, for he offers no reasons other than the sheer pleasure eating the plums brought him, and he doesn't really need or even want forgiveness. The implication is that his wife will understand his pleasure and share it--the plums were, after all, "so sweet/ and so cold." The last two lines are, in fact, an invitation to her to participate vicariously in his experience, to enjoy it with him. The poem is thus much more than an icebox note; it is a delicate tribute from man to wife, a tribute to their intimacy, their tacit understanding of one another, the closeness of their union.

Now let us go back to Culler's interpretation. Like Wheeler, Culler finds in Williams' poem a certain tension

between social decorum and instinctual pleasure; the poem, he says, recognizes the priority of rules by asking forgiveness but affirms the validity of immediate sensuous experience in personal relationships--here between the "I" and the "you." Yet he maintains that "THIS IS JUST TO SAY" is only a poem because it is set down on the page as a poem, that there is nothing inherent in its language that makes it "poetic."

I believe that Wheeler's reading can be used to refute this claim. For although Williams' casual little poem has no striking images or symbols, no prominent figurations of sound, its language is not, after all, "ordinary." The "Note" is not, finally, a note anyone might pin on the icebox door, for its implications are, as we have seen, quite special. The poet defamiliarizes language, makes it strange, in two ways. With respect to ordinary discourse, defamiliarization is the result of the lineation process itself; the division of the text into line units demands, as Culler argues, a special response from the reader. With respect to poetry, on the other hand, Williams defamiliarizes the text by his studied casualness--the absence of rhyme and meter, the odd lineation, the jagged line-breaks emphasizing function words like "in" and "which," the lack of punctuation, and so on. And not only does the poem avoid metrical recurrences; it also avoids, with great care, the inclusion of words and phrases that might throw its tone off balance: for example, "nutritious," or "which you might have been saving," or "I ate those plums," or "Now don't get mad!" A real-life note-writer, we might posit, would say either more or less; the fictional note-writer says just enough so that the sense of conjugal intimacy, warmth, and good humour come through.

I would myself like to propose a compromise solution to the dilemma posed by the two rival readings (Structuralist and Formalist) of "THIS IS JUST TO SAY." Wheeler's reading is accurate and helpful so far as it goes. Yet Culler's analysis, however similar the results it yields, does point up the importance convention plays in the reading of poems. To a Victorian reader, for example, "THIS IS JUST TO SAY" would no doubt have seemed wholly meaningless and absurd. Structuralist Poetics is thus extremely valuable in showing that no poem can be read properly without taking into account the nature of reader expectation and response.

My quarrel with Culler is not, then, with the concept of literary competence, which seems to me entirely valid, nor with his commentary on Williams' poem, which is not, it turns out, all that different from the more detailed New Critical analysis made by Wheeler. What I do find troubling is the Structuralists'

out-of-hand dismissal of the Formalist distinction between literary and ordinary language--a dismissal made all too often without giving the rationale behind that distinction a real hearing. It is, after all, fairly obvious that the language of poetry is not equivalent to, say, the language of paradox; in refuting this simplified version of Cleanth Brooks' literary theory, Culler is, I think, tilting at windmills. But if we broaden our notion of literariness in the light of early Formalist theory, if we take literariness to be not just the use of tropes or rhetorical figures or meter, but quite simply as any deformation of language (and, incidentally, lineation is in itself such a deformation) that plays against the conventional norms of ordinary speech, the Formalist definition of poetry as language that is somehow extraordinary is perhaps still the best definition available.

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NOTES

¹Cited by Boris M. Ejkenbaum, "The Theory of the Formal Method," in Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), p. 8. Subsequently cited as Matejka.

²"The Notion of Literature," New Literary History, 5 (Autumn 1973), 15-16.

³Structuralist Poetics, Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 162. All subsequent references to Culler run on in text.

⁴See Julia Kristeva, Semiotiké: Recherches pour une semanalyse (Paris: Seuil, 1969), p. 146.

⁵See Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant" (1935) in Matejka, p. 82.

⁶See Todorov, Poétique de la prose (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 249.

⁷Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press,

1965), p. 12.

⁸See Shklovsky, "Potebnja," Poetika (1919) as cited by Boris Ejxenbaum in Matevja, p. 14.

⁹Shklovsky, "The Connection of Devices of Plot Formation with General Devices of Style," Poetika (1919) as cited by Ejxenbaum, p. 17.

¹⁰"The Poem as Design," in The Design of Poetry (1966); rpt. in Perspectives on Poetry, ed. James L. Calderwood and Harold E. Toliver, (New York: Oxford, 1968), p. 307. What follows is a paraphrase of Wheeler's argument; see esp. pp. 312-314; 317-320.

RALPH COHEN

Literary Theory as a Genre

My argument in this paper shall be as follows: literary theory is a literary genre. In consequence of this, literary theory has generic continuity, while undergoing changes in its parts and functions. It is interrelated with other genres in terms of parts and methods, and it is analyzable with them as a member of a group, movement, or period. By considering literary theory as a genre, I mean to eliminate the following as redundant or meaningless questions: Is literary theory nonhistorical? Is literary theory cumulative? Is literary theory modeled upon scientific theory? Is a literary theory verifiable? Is literary theory possible?

To write a theory in words, in contrast to writing it in mathematical formulae, is to identify theory as a form of discourse. Literary theory is a kind of writing, a genre, a literary form that seeks to provide us with a procedure for understanding problematic areas, not particular works, in literary study. As such, it resembles as well as differs from philosophic discourse, historical writing, narrative writing, scientific explanation, poetry of various kinds, though it can contain proverbs, epigrams, lyrical passages, mathematical formulae, and varied levels of diction and rhetorical procedures. The phenomenon of interrelation of parts is characteristic of all literary forms that extend beyond the sentence. The specific aim of a literary theory is to theorize about literary forms, including itself, in all their varied relations to each other, to the author, audience, and society.

A literary theory need not provide solutions to problems in a logical sense; rather, it provides ways of understanding problems. Logic is used to avoid errors in coherence or consistency, but it need not be the central technique for persuading readers to grasp conventions, perceive relations, or consider the problem as worthy of their attention. This is done by teaching the reader, by encouraging him to make connections among works and within works, to recognize structures, and to understand how literary works function. It is because a literary theory uses these techniques of analysis

and persuasion that it contains historical references, descriptions of the reader and examples of his responses, irrespective of the particular problem under investigation.

I have deliberately used the words "need not be" because I do not wish to deny that a literary theory may make logical procedures central. But such a theory is merely one of a number of possible ways to use the genre. It is neither especially privileged nor always appropriate.

As a form, literary theory is history-bound. It is tied to its time by its aim or function in relation to the problems it proposes to explain or understand. Now this is not a view that is widely held, theory being considered by some critics as a logical rather than a literary procedure which may use logic. Consider the following statement of John Ellis in his 1974 book, The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis: "Literary theory is, in part, first and foremost theory; the literary theorist is, or should be, first and foremost a theorist among other kinds of theorists. In large measure, their aims and methods are his. He must understand what critics are doing to be able to function properly; but he must perform the job of a theorist, not that of a critic. The performance has much more in common with that of other theorists in other fields of theoretical inquiry than with that of critics. I do not wish to be misunderstood on this point. . . . What I am asserting is that theory itself (not criticism) is a matter of logical analysis. As such, logical analysis cannot be contrasted with any other kind of input into literary theory (e.g., modern linguistics); it must be uniquely at the center of literary theory."1

This statement equates literary theory with logical analysis. But this is a reduction of what all literary theorists do, including the theorists who are supposedly confined to logical analysis. Take, for example, the claim that literary theory is a matter of logical analysis. On what logical ground is such a claim made? Surely there is no logical ground for assuming that literary theory ought to be based on logic, since the claim itself is a matter of belief, or, as John Ellis might say, a matter of reasonable inference from the premise of logical analysis. But theory, or what critics call theory, as it is practiced by Aristotle, Longinus, Hume, and Wordsworth is not a matter merely of logic, nor is logic at the "center" of these theories any more than it is at the "center" of any argument that uses rhetoric, logic, and other arts of persuasion.

Two explanations are called for at this time. One is

that I use the term "theory" to refer to what critics call "theory," exploring their reasons for such naming. This means that critics can and do disagree about what is to be so called. I treat such disagreements by explaining or illustrating the particular limits involved, my aim being to understand what critics do when they advocate a particular version of "theory."

The second explanation has to do with what I mean by "discourse" or "form of writing." Literary theories are written; they present an organized body of thought about writing. Such theories refer to works, present a way of conceiving them, and elicit from the reader a response both to the theories as art and to the theories as content. A literary theory, therefore, is always more than the logic it employs.

If "theory" is a form of writing, it is inevitable that the process of generic form-change must also apply to form-change in theory-writing. Aristotle, Longinus, Hume, and Wordsworth wrote literary theory, and although parts of their theories were often the same, the functions and connections differed. By neglecting the fact that theorists write in literary forms, John Ellis endows theory with an implicit yet unchanging single, logical function. Also, although theorists in literature share some of the methods and aims of theory-writers in the humanities and even some in the social sciences, they share relatively little with theory-writers in the mathematical and physical sciences.

The identification of literary "theory" with modern views of scientific theory is not only anachronistic; it rests on a misconception of the kind of proof a scientific theory offers and the confirmation that a literary theory offers. Ernest Nagel distinguishes three components in a scientific theory--and he is referring to the physical sciences: (1) an abstract calculus that is the logical skeleton of the explanatory system; (2) a set of rules that in effect assign an empirical content to the abstract calculus; (3) an interpretation or model of the abstract calculus.² The empirical data to which the abstract calculus applies does not depend on any historical situation as it does in literary theory. The validity of the scientific theory based on repetitive duplication cannot be applied to literary theory. And the model which is an interpretation of the abstract calculus does not correspond to the model in literary theory, because the latter has no equivalent for the abstract calculus but is, rather, a purely historical and heuristic procedure.

Meyer H. Abrams in his essay on theorizing in the arts criticizes the limitations of the idea of literary theory as developed by the analytic philosophers and offers his own views of theory:

Some observations are in order about what Aristotle does, as against what a number of analysts assume that, as a critical theorist, he must be doing:

(1) The whole of the Poetics, according to the criteria of the analysts, counts as theory and not as applied criticism, for its basic statements are all generalizations about the arts, or about a class of art such as poetry, or about a species of poetry such as tragedy and its typical elements, organization, and effects; Aristotle refers to particular works only to exemplify or clarify such general statements. Of this theory, however, definitions certainly do not constitute a major part, but are used only briefly and passingly, as a way of introducing one or another area of investigation. And the body of the theory does not consist of an attempt--whether vain or successful--to support and "prove" the definition. It consists instead of putting to work the terms, distinctions, and categories proposed in the initial definition (which are supplemented, in a way consistent with this definition, as the need arises) in the analysis of the distinctive elements, organization, and characteristic powers of various kinds of poetic art.³

Meyer H. Abrams is quite right in arguing that "definitions certainly do not constitute a major part" of the Poetics and are merely used to introduce one or another area of investigation. But the muddle of the logical analyst goes further, for he neglects to differentiate the making of statements from their function in a particular discourse. And even Abrams, who describes what Aristotle does accurately, does not discuss the aim of Aristotle's theorizing. Aristotle's theorizing is directed at recognizing that all types of learning are a form of imitation, and he wishes to distinguish artistic imitation from other human acts of imitation and within artistic imitation to distinguish among the various kinds. The process of theorizing, in this example, is to provide a way of conceiving of works of art as distinctive objects of imitation. It is not an attempt to establish the basis for a theory of the passions or of the spectator's response or of the nature of artistic knowledge. And yet the Poetics, despite its specific function, includes parts that refer to the passions,

to the spectator and reader, and to artistic knowledge.

Literary theory as a form invokes general principles of behavior to explain readers' responses to literature. It can seek to persuade the reader to pursue the argument by calling attention to the privileged knowledge of art. It can initiate inquiries of a particular kind, because the critic wishes to trace the artistic context of general human principles; whatever choice of problems the critic makes, it is not a logical, but a historical one. Thus remarks, definitions, or arguments may be subordinated in one theory, but may become the dominant inquiry of another. Why this is so is a matter of critical and historical change; and the shift in critical problems cannot be explained as a matter of logic, nor are the logical processes involved "central" to the formulation or the development of the formulation.

As an example, I wish to trace the relation between Aristotle's incidental hypothesis of the pleasure in imitation and its dominance in the theories developed by Hume and Wordsworth. My purpose is to demonstrate the nature of continuity of parts and the difference in their function. This will serve as an example of generic continuity.

In his discussion of imitation, Aristotle points out that there is universal "pleasure felt in things imitated."

3. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. 4. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. 5. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, "ah, that is he." For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.⁴

This explanation of pleasure in imitation is connected with a discussion of the origin of poetry, and it is ancillary to Aristotle's analysis of poetry and the kinds of imitation. But in Hume's discussion of tragedy, the problem of the pleasure in tragedy (which is an imitation) becomes the inquiry itself. For although Hume grants that man takes pleasure in

imitation, his explanation of how dead bodies provide pleasure in painting is based on a psychological principle which he considers primary: the conversion of passion. And it is this principle which, without denying that pleasure in imitation is a factor, becomes predominant and alters the relationship of parts and functions in Hume's theory.

It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy. The more they are touched and affected, the more are they delighted with the spectacle; and as soon as the uneasy passions cease to operate, the piece is at an end.⁵

Hume builds on the remarks of L'Abbe Dubos and Fontenelle on this subject, thus relating his theory-writing to contemporary discussions of the problem. But he finds their conclusions insufficient to clear up the dilemma. He offers, therefore, the hypotheses that "all the passions, excited by eloquence are agreeable in the highest degree, as well as those which are moved by painting and the theatre."^{5a} Hume's explanation of the conversion of pathetic circumstances into pleasurable ones rests on a theory of the transformative power of artistic expression in tragedy. Hume confirms his "theory" by giving instances from everyday life, for the principle he discovers in art is neither extraordinary or paradoxical; it is, he assumes, a principle of human nature. And he provides examples to argue the converse of the principle--i.e., if the subordinate passion is not converted into the dominant, then the dominant grows in intensity. Hume takes his examples from Cicero's oratory, Lord Clarendon's History, and incidents in life so that the explanation of tragedy is but one instance of a principle operative in artistic and nonartistic, dramatic and nondramatic actions that involve sublime or intense passions.⁶

Hume's argument of artistic predominance in tragedy does not apply to lyric poetry or to other imitative literary works that can be called "beautiful." These lack the intensity to create the linguistic dominance achievable (though not always achieved) in tragedy. The failure of Hume to establish a theory of artistic conversion is not a matter of logical inference, but the commitment to a theory of the passions that contemporary knowledge sanctioned. It should be pointed out, moreover, that the applicable range of subject matter of a theory is dependent on the claims the theory makes. Thus, for Hume, "tragedy" refers to those works that are artistically successful; the tragedies that do not move the reader and do not give pleasure are unworthy of consideration within the framework of his theory.

Hume's purpose is to demonstrate that art, like life, is governed by common principles of the passions, and tragedy is distinguished merely by having a context--the procedures of imitation, eloquence, organization, etc.--which serves to make the psychological principle operate with greater force. Hume is not interested in arguing how, in any particular drama, the language of tragedy serves to support his claim. His theory functions to explain why people surround themselves with art that deals with painful subjects, why they find "pleasure" in tragedy; it is the role of art in human life that is important to Hume because in a theory in which disinterested benevolence or utility serve as a moral guide, art is valuable only if it can be of use or can reinforce men's ability to convert suffering or pain into pleasure.

In that section of the 1800 Preface in which Wordsworth turns to the "general grounds" (or theoretical grounds) of his argument about the nature of poetry and the poet, he declares that the "Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him . . . as a Man."⁷ This principle of pleasure is defined as that complex of emotions which men have in contemplating objects, acts, and men and which excite in them sympathies that are accompanied by an overbalance of enjoyment.

We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure. We have no knowledge, that is, no general principles drawn from the contemplation of particular facts, but what has been built up by pleasure, and exists in us by pleasure alone. The Man of science, the Chemist and Mathematician, whatever difficulties and disgusts they may have had to struggle with, know and feel this. However painful may be the objects with which the Anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge. What then does the Poet? He considers man and the objects that surround him as acting and reacting upon each other, so as to produce an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure; . . . ⁸

Wordsworth defends the use of meter by referring to the testimony of ages (the norm of readers) who find that meter improves the pleasure that coexists with it. Wordsworth refers to the "theory" he is developing and remarks that he

would, if he were providing a systematic defense, argue that metrical pleasure is based on a general principle of mind, "namely, the pleasure which the mind derives from the perception of similitude in dissimilitude. This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds, and their chief feeder."⁹

Wordsworth's theory of the origin of poetry can be seen as related to this principle, for the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings is different from feelings recollected in tranquillity. The tranquillity gradually disappears and the emotion that overflows "is qualified by various pleasures." In this particular passage Wordsworth provides a quite different function for the Humean problem:

I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.¹⁰

Wordsworth shares with Hume the belief that art and life are governed by common principles; both insist on the importance of pleasure. Hume's theory rests on a distributive view of the passions--each passion operates singly and contrary passions may be related but they are not fused. Hume's view of predominance is not a fusion but an overpowering, the subordination of one passion to another. But Wordsworth accepts the complexity of passion, and his theory makes possible a fusion that Hume cannot manage. He relates the mixed pleasures to the language and action of common men. What he has done, therefore, has been to declass Hume's theory and to provide an alternative based on a more complex hypothesis.

The function of his theory as Wordsworth saw it was to enlarge the sensibility of his readers by demonstrating that exciting poetry could be written about ordinary people and actions. Thus the important contribution of Wordsworth's theory was its reconsideration of the role of depth percep-

tion, conscious and unconscious--of the submergence of feeling, of the widening and declassifying of the audience and subjects of poetry, and of the complex interrelation, the deepened fusion of pain and pleasure.

With regard to the feature that I have been tracing, it seems appropriate to inquire whether these theories are valid. To what extent is Hume's view of tragedy or Wordsworth's view of the origin and writing of poetry still acceptable? Hume's view of tragedy takes too elementary a view of passion so that its ambiguous nature, including the ambiguity of "pleasure," is overlooked. Hume tends to posit an elite audience that is unchanging, though he acknowledges that its capacity for responsiveness can change. Indeed, it is apparent that the response to literary works changes, as witness Hume's dismissal of Bunyan. But Hume was dependent on an inadequate theory of the passions, and on a view of cultural change that was undeveloped as a theory. His statements about changes of taste were lodged in a body of generalizations about unchanging responses and the exceptions to such responses. His theory was an impressive contribution to a theory of tragedy in his time, but his psychology and his belief in a static norm of responders has not been sustained by later study. Wordsworth's depth procedure in describing the origin of poetry and in explaining the complexity of emotion has endured successfully. It has been transposed into contemporary psychological theories without serious distortion. His theory of poetic language, however, was refuted by Coleridge in Wordsworth's lifetime, and his principle of similitude in dissimilitude was too naive to win support as a principle of the human mind.

I hope that these examples have made clear the cumulation as well as the change in an aspect of literary theory, and that it has removed any question about the historicity of literary theory. Some features of literary theory can survive much longer than others, as Aristotle's method of distinctions has been disengaged from the limited views of art to which Aristotle restricted it.

But if one wishes to inquire not about cumulation, but about the aim of a good critical theory, the answer can only be historical: to provide a reliable understanding of the problems the theorist raises. This can be an understanding of why relations function as they do within a work, or between works, or between works and audience, society, or creator. Such an understanding is subject to the same testability as other forms of discourse which are written at the same time. And a theory is reliable for so long as its ex-

planation of the available data meets the criteria for adequacy of argument. To claim that all literary theory has a single aim is to make the same mistake as those who attribute to literary theory a single method. Meyer H. Abrams writes: "This is the primary service of a good critical theory, for in bringing us, with new insights and powers of discrimination, to individual works of art in their immediacy, it enhances our appreciation of the only places where artistic values are in fact realized."¹¹ But a theory leads to insights into a system; not into specific qualities of particular works. These may occur, but they are incidental to the process of theorizing.

The idea of influence or tradition, when applied to a theory of genre, implies continuity within the reworking of earlier forms of the genre. The attempt of the Cambridge Platonists to write a Platonic philosophy or of the neo-Aristotelians to write theory in accordance with the Poetics is an activity that is tied to history. These later applications are inevitably directed at readers with different experiences of methods, aims, language, and theory from those of the original audiences. In seeking, for example, to apply the method of past writing to the present, there is an inevitable distortion. Past uses of a form can be valuable to present critics only if they understand that, to make them viable, they must consider the changes the forms have undergone. It is thus self-evident that the process of theorizing, the manner in which the aims of theory are selected and the kind of evidence needed to support these do change despite the continuity of particular features. Theorizing always involves subordinating individual instances to a general principle, analyzing how classes of works or groups of features can be understood.

A literary theory proceeds by theorizing, by exploring the bases of particular problems--not how a literary passage means, but the nature of literary meaning; not how a particular passion is raised, but the principle governing the raising of the passions in literary work. Theorizing is the procedure that characterizes literary theory as a genre and it provides a basis for distinguishing between this genre and others. Certainly this process can include parts from other forms just as Aristotle notes that "all the elements of an epic poem are found in tragedy; but the elements of a tragedy are not all found in the epic poem."¹² Analogously, one might say all the parts of literary criticism are included in literary theory, but those of theory are not all included in criticism. That parts of theory appear in other literary forms is to be assumed. In fact, it seems reasonable to ar-

gue that every literary work, not merely literary history or literary criticism, will assume some generalizations that are theoretical, make some use of inference, analogy, and examples.

But the making of assumptions which underlies any kind of writing cannot in criticism be identified as an implicit theory. Theory is a way of writing itself, quite distinct from that of criticism. But even if this argument is rejected, a critic's assumptions must not be confused with the quality and significance of the statements he makes. He may assume a particular kind of audience or a particular theory of imitation, but the actual writing defines what he says. Unless one is prepared to claim that all writing is inherently theoretical, the words are in no necessary relation to theoretical assumptions. Indeed, a critic's assumptions can be religious or psychological or philosophical without being systematic. Such assumptions or points of reference are not theorizing nor are they literary theory; they are incidental parts of historical or critical writing. Still, a number of critics have argued that to have parts of theory is to have a literary theory.

René Wellek declares, "no criticism or history is possible without some set of questions, some system of concepts, some points of reference, some generalizations."¹³ Tzvetan Todorov writes that "no literary scholar can avoid adhering to some theory of literature. The very use of descriptive terms, whatever they may be, implies one, in spite of protestations to the contrary."¹⁴ The statements speak confusedly of a "system of concepts," "some theory of literature." The argument for this position was put most effectively by R. S. Crane:

The reference of any critic's statements, general or particular, to the things he professes to be talking about is mediated, in the first place, by the special framework of concepts and distinctions which, out of all others that might be, or have been, thought relevant to the things in question, he has chosen for one reason or another to employ. . . . it follows that, before we can judge fairly of either the meaning or the validity of any critical statement, we must first reconstruct the underlying and often only partly explicit conceptual scheme in which the statement appears.¹⁵

To reconstruct a conceptual scheme that is often only partly explicit is to assume that "partly explicit" implies "fully explicit." To avoid fictionalizing, such reconstruction

must clearly distinguish statements that are to be taken as hints for a theory from those that are merely strategic or trivial. Moreover, these theorists accept the premise that all practical critics have conceptual schemes, even if they do not know that they have such schemes. I do not wish to discuss the idea of unconscious theorizing, but even if such theorizing were examinable, it would still be necessary to differentiate between a construction of a scheme by someone other than the critic and the presentation of a literary theory by the critic himself. How is one to discover whether the construction is indeed the "scheme" that was implicit, since more than one scheme can be derived from fragmentary evidence. The perplexities of this procedure can be seen in "The Theoretical Foundations of Johnson's Criticism" by W. R. Keast, an essay often used as an example of this criticism at its best.¹⁶

Mr. Keast undertook "a recovery and restatement of Johnson's theory of literature and criticism and of his critical method. . . ."17 But, as he acknowledges, Johnson did not have either a theory of literature or of criticism; to "recover" it is to "invent," not to "discover," it. Johnson posited certain critical principles in discussing particular works--that these constitute a "framework" rather than some ad hoc working principles is what Mr. Keast sought to demonstrate. Mr. Keast proceeds by selecting phrases and sentences and converts these into generalizations about the nature of literature. Johnson, in the "Preface to Shakespeare," declared that "Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination."¹⁸

The "real state of sublunary nature," as the poet's object, does not, in itself, constitute a general principle for Johnson. The imitation of reality does not apply, even in the drama, to the punishment of the innocent or to irreligious actions such as that of Hamlet refusing to slay the king at prayer lest he go to heaven. The attempt to construct a generalization about reality from Johnson's work must be hedged by reservations which do not indicate the level of generality that can be sustained nor how Johnson would see reality in the drama in contrast to reality in any other literary form.

The theorist who seeks a framework for the practical critic must make certain distinctions not only about critical

language, but about levels of generality, about the range of forms discussed. He must be able to distinguish commonplaces from general statements that imply a theory, recognizing the particular problems to which such statements refer. Johnson's acceptance of general human nature was a critical commonplace, and Johnson did not seek to provide evidence for its existence, just as he did not provide evidence for his idea of the common reader. It is one thing to interpret Northrop Frye's essays on Shakespeare in terms of his general theory, another to do as much for Samuel Johnson who has no such theory. Practical critics make theoretical statements in the act of analyzing particular works, but a discussion of a poem is neither an explicit act of theorizing nor an implicit act of theorizing.

In our time an effort has been made to convert all critics to theorists, even to convert all poets to theorists. If every poem is about the writing of poetry, then the premises of poetry are implicit in every poem. For the first time in the study of literature, critics have insisted that there is a "need" for theory. In 1949 René Wellek had written, "Literary theory, an organon of methods, is the great need of literary scholarship today."¹⁹ And in 1957 Northrop Frye wrote: "Criticism seems to be badly in need of a coordinating principle, a central hypothesis which, like the theory of evolution in biology, will see the phenomena it deals with as parts of a whole."²⁰ And in a recent essay Tzvetan Todorov has pointed to the shift from studies of individual works to an emphasis on theory or "a coherent body of concepts and methods aiming at the knowledge of underlying laws."²¹

Why do these critics find the need for literary theory especially great at this time? The institutionalization of literary study has made it necessary to pass on a body of knowledge, and without an agreed upon systematization of such knowledge, the transmitting can only be haphazard. It is significant that the call for literary theory occurs at a particular historical moment, implying the need for a scientific or systematic theory. Thus previous theories are considered, in this sense, as pretheoretical. This historical moment has resulted in a very wide variety of speculative "literary theories," each of which seeks to move beyond particular works to some general principles governing the processes of writing. The need for theory at this time is the need for theory to inquire into writing itself--into its social and personal powers. Theory looms more important than other kinds of writing because it self-consciously analyzes itself and other literary works; parts of theory can now be found in fiction, poetry, and other literary forms. Its attempt at system construction is, in this procedure, an attempt to become the supreme fiction.

But the call for the "need" for literary theory does not call such theory into existence. What it does is to draw attention to such study, for Northrop Frye has admitted that "the main principles of [this theory] are as yet unknown to us."²² In order for it to begin to be known, the theorist must inquire into certain initial principles, one of which is whether theory is a form of discourse and, if so, what type of discourse it is. This I have tried to answer; then the term "theory" itself as applied to literary study seems to be used in at least two different ways: theory of literature and literary theory.

A theory of literature, which is what Northrop Frye and Tzvetan Todorov refer to, is a theory of all possible writing. It is a theory, the body of facts for which is not yet known. To theorize about genres, for example, is to theorize about genres in western literature, not all literature. To theorize about all "literature" is to presuppose some definition of literature that is historical or universal. Such theorizing can be understood as speculation about knowledge rather than the attempt to understand knowledge already possessed. To illustrate that a comprehensive theory of literature is committed to huge generalizations that are based on belief rather than knowledge, I offer as an example Ralph W. Rader's effort:

The specific aim of a comprehensive theory of literature, then, would be to conceive and render explicit the objective basis of our tacit experience, accepting the task of accounting for all the general discriminations just indicated as well as of specific problematical facts that have come to be associated with particular works.²³

Now a theory which undertakes "to conceive and render explicit the objective basis of our tacit experience" is aiming to remove empirical relativity of judgment by claiming that there exists, tacitly, one fixed and fundamental judgment. It is clear that such a criticism seeks to provide coherence among diverse responses, especially among literary disagreements, by assuming that "our perception of literature is not fluid and subjectively indefinite but in some fundamental sense fixed and objective."²⁴ Thus this comprehensive theory begins with a personal commitment to a view of human nature and judgment, and accounts for diverse discriminations by reference to this view. Such theories must exist as speculations. But literary theory, which relates to a limited set of facts about examinable literary data, is the kind of theory that has existed and does exist, and I have described some of its

features. And among these one can point to areas of agreement without invoking absolutes.

One of the consequences of treating literary theory as a genre is that it provides a method for considering the areas of agreement in widely different theories without neglecting the grounds of disagreement. In dealing with Aristotle, Hume, and Wordsworth I sought to explain how literary theory functioned diachronically. I wish now to analyze two contemporary literary theories in order to illustrate how they function synchronically. The theories I have selected are the reader's response theory of Hans Robert Jauss and the semiotic theory as developed by Jonathan Culler in Structuralist Poetics.

Jauss begins "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" by reference to Formalist and Marxist theories that he finds limited because of their neglect of the reader. For him, the reader is an active agent in shaping the communication of the literary work: "If the history of literature is viewed . . . as a dialogue between work and public, the contrast between its aesthetic and its historical aspects is continually mediated."²⁵ Jauss sees as the function of his study the revival of the history of literature by the aesthetics of reception, a revival of which will illuminate "our present literary experience" and provide a more adequate basis for understanding past literature.

The concept of reading is central to his theory, and reading is redefined as a dialogue between work and reader. By "reader" Jauss means a "receptive reader, the reflective critic," though Jauss grants that other kinds of readers have different sets of expectations which do not involve dialogue. A receptive reader has a set of expectations, from his previous understanding of the specific genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, from the contrast between poetic and practical language. Such expectations are formed in part by the conventions of genre and style. The author, too, possesses these expectations and he predisposes the reader by certain strategies, signals, allusions. Thus works provide a continuous horizon setting and horizon changing that in turn affect new works, and the reader finds that a work satisfies, disappoints, or surpasses his expectations. Jauss offers a series of discriminations which define and clarify these distinctions. He is aware that not all works of a genre survive changes in the horizon of expectations, and he offers some hypotheses about such works. The changing horizon also makes it possible for Jauss to attack the sociological view that art is a mere reflection of its time because such a premise neglects the active role of readers.

The aesthetics of reception becomes essential to understanding past works because it presents a reconstruction of the original horizon of expectations; how the original readers understood the work. It thus makes clear the different bases for understanding past and present works since a past work, without such reconstruction, does not reveal itself to the modern reader.

Jauss concludes with the society-forming function of literature. The aesthetics of reception can lead the reader to a new perception of his environment and to an openness to experience. It can help him surmount the boredom of everyday experience. It can even alter his moral consciousness.

Jonathan Culler begins his study, like Jauss, with a review of linguistic critics who seek to apply linguistic procedures to literature. Culler takes from them the necessity of conceiving the study of literature as a system of rules and conventions which makes meaning possible.

Studying signs which, whatever their apparent "naturalness," have a conventional basis, he [the critic] tries to reconstruct the conventions which enable physical objects or events to have meaning; and this reconstruction will require him to formulate the pertinent distinctions and relations among elements as well as the rules governing their possibility of combination.

The basic task is to render as explicit as possible the conventions responsible for the production of attested effects.²⁶

Culler shares with Jauss the procedure of indicating the limitations of a group of critics beyond whose conclusions he wishes to move. And he shares, too, the hypothesis about the systematic nature of theory. Culler, however, derives his idea of system from the model of the analysis of language, whereas Jauss takes his from phenomenology. However, the range of the two systems varies. Jauss is providing a system for the study of literary history whereas Culler is providing a theory of the lyric and the novel, and, more speculatively, a theory of fictional forms.

Both critics agree that the concept of reading is central to their enterprise. Jauss analyzes reading in terms of the expectations of the reader; these expectations are built into the literary work by the author who provides clues to expectations but also can defeat them. These "expectations,"

encountered in dialogue by the reader, include conventions, but they also include the reader's preparedness to find unexpected ways of dealing with the work. Jonathan Culler writes of "conventions" although he also uses "expectations," but he includes in "conventions" the expectation of significance in a work, metaphoric coherence, and, indeed, all possible aspects of the literary work. Genres are for him sets of expectations. "The conventions of poetry, the logic of symbols, the operations for the production of poetic effects, are not simply the property of readers but the basis of literary forms."²⁷

Although Jauss and Culler agree upon the function of the reader and his use of conventions, Culler seeks to make the reader's competence testable. This test, it turns out, is precisely what defined the reader to begin with, a knowledge of poetic conventions. Other readers, adds Culler, would find a substantial part of their own interpretation in that of any competent reader. Jauss's reader is identified as perceptive, but the function of his reader is limited by his horizon. There is no competent reader who can read a past work without a reconstruction of its horizon, and every reader governed by a different horizon inevitably reads differently.

This historical consciousness of Jauss gives a different function to the features of agreement and distinguishes his theory from that of Culler. So, too, the relation of a text to society provides another basis for distinction. For Culler sees the work, at least on one level, as a reflection of society, and Jauss resists this view of art, arguing that a valuable literary work has a society-forming function.²⁸

Each of these theorists moves in his own direction--Jauss in discussing literary evolution and the special nature of literary as compared with general history; Culler in his discussion of the structures of the lyric and the novel. Both deal with individual works only as examples for theoretical procedures: a study of literary history in terms of aesthetics of response, or a study of particular genres such as the lyric or novel in terms of linguistic structures governed by conventions.

Hans Robert Jauss's theory answers the question, why literary responses function as they do; Jonathan Culler's theory answers the question, what forms the basis for the literary structures of the lyric or novel? Both theories agree upon the primacy of the reader and the role of conventions; but they imply a study of the reader that moves beyond the mere discipline of reading just as a study of conventions entails

a knowledge of how conventions begin and where they come from. These theories still reveal the limits within which their conceptions develop. A reader needs not merely the experience of books, but the experiences which make books accessible and valuable. To attribute to literature the power to change the reader's consciousness is to ignore the relation of reading to action, to the other pressures which shape the mind at any one time. And as for a theory of conventions, the combination of conventions that form a genre merely isolates the different genres. What is needed is to interrelate them as well. Moreover, conventions change, and if this is granted, then what is needed is a theory that will explain why conventions change in the order in which they do.

Thus two different contemporary literary theories can be seen to share premises about the manner of making distinctions, offering examples, proposing models, generalizations, and definitions. But in doing so they also share certain limits of theorizing--due to the beliefs on which theories rest, the hypotheses of selection, the nature of the problems, and the reasons for theorizing.

To conceive of literary theory as a genre is to recognize that its functions are conditioned by previous theoretical writings and present knowledge. Thus, although the varied versions of modern theory--as logical analysis or aesthetics of response or structural conventions--have different links to past writing, synchronically they share a method of proceeding, a process of theorizing in terms of functions and of problems. Not to conceive of literary theory as a genre is to render such writing a matter of unrelated or *ad hoc* discourse about related subjects, that is, unrelated, *unconnected* theories about related subject matter. The first step to establish literary theory as a systematic study is to consider it as a form of discourse related to other forms of discourse but with a history of its own. It is itself a form of writing and a particular analysis of forms of writing. To acknowledge this is to accept its historicity, and, by doing so, make possible a study of literary theory as a coherent, continuing, yet changing, activity.

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NOTES

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- ⁶Ibid., pp. 31-36 passim.
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- ⁸Ibid., p. 26.
- ⁹Ibid., p. 34.
- ¹⁰Ibid., pp. 34-35.
- ¹¹Abrams, p. 22.
- ¹²Poetics, p. 51.
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- ¹⁶Critics and Criticism, pp. 389-407.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 392.
- ¹⁸"Preface to Shakespeare, 1765," Johnson on Shakespeare, ed. Arthur Sherbo, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson (New Haven, 1968), VII, 66.

¹⁹Wellek, p. 8.

²⁰Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 16.

²¹Todorov, p. 154.

²²Frye, p. 11.

²³"Fact, Theory and Literary Explanation," Critical Inquiry,
I (Dec. 1974), 249.

²⁴Ibid., 248.

²⁵New Directions in Literary History, ed. Ralph Cohen
(Baltimore, 1974), p. 12

²⁶Structuralist Poetics (Ithaca, 1975), p. 31.

²⁷Ibid., p. 117.

²⁸Jauss, p. 36ff.

ANDREW J. MCKENNA

History of the Ear: Ideology and Poetic Deconstruction

La vie personnelle, l'expression, la
connaissance et l'histoire avancent
obliquement, et non vers des fins ou
vers des concepts.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signes, 1960.

In the Phaedrus Plato ascribes the force of great poetry to a "form of possession or madness [manía]": "But if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with time be brought to nought by the poetry of madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found" (245a, trans. R. Hackforth). In the Renaissance this association of poetry with madness was to become a commonplace. It was a notion taken up seriously again by Romantic poets--among them Nerval and Hölderlin--in the nineteenth century before it became the subject of a loosely articulated but nonetheless scientific hypothesis in the twentieth century with Freud. Subsequent research in linguistics and psychoanalysis has revealed the formal and functional similarity between mechanisms of unconscious ideation and certain stylistic techniques of "la vieille rhétorique." Condensation and displacement in jokes, dreams, and the discourse of schizophrenics operate transformations of meaning and form similar to those of metaphor and metonymy in literary discourse. The further articulation of psychoanalysis as the science of the unconscious is ineluctably bound up with the dynamics of poetic expression and with modes of discovery proper to poetic discourse. I shall consider certain aspects of the prehistory of this convergence before going on to speculate on its significance for the human sciences in the future. Variations on the thematics of the voyage in Descartes and Baudelaire will serve to illustrate this otherwise unwieldy topic: the ambiguous status of poetry in Western thought, and the very philosophical status of ambiguity.

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Up until the seventeenth century in France the linguistic sign maintained an intimate bond with the world, by virtue of its enigmatic opacity which required its own interpretation. As a result of what Michel Foucault calls a "coupure épistémologique," language lost its material density to become a transparent medium of representation.² It ceased to be an object of exegesis to become a neutral instrument of analysis. Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in France, language was called upon to represent reality, and it could do so reliably to the extent that it was invested with no substantial reality of its own. From the preamble of the Grammaire Générale de Port-Royal we read: "La Grammaire est l'Art de parler. Parler est expliquer ses pensées par des signes, que les hommes ont inventés à ce dessein."³ The very notion of a "grammaire générale" valid for all languages presupposes that language is predicated on some notion of universal logic and that the audible, material differences within a language, as those between languages foreign to each other, are arbitrary, conventionally in-significant. Language is not a sound system here, but a set of logical relationships of things and activities to the verbe "être" (Donzé, p. 29).

The consequences of this epistemology for poetry have been the subject of ample discussion, then as now.⁴ The great lyrical tradition of the Middle Ages and of the sixteenth century in France was followed by a steady decline in the next two centuries. As long as language was denied any immanent reality of its own, tropes, meter, and rhyme would alternately be viewed as an ornament or an obstacle to the clear presentation of ideas. Verse was, in Voltaire's notorious phrase, "la difficulté vaincue." A point was reached in the writings of Houdar de La Motte (1672-1731) where the very legitimacy of poetry was contested. By mid-eighteenth century, the quantity of texts devoted to the subject of poetry was in inverse proportion to the quality of verse being produced at the time. The educated public possessed certain convictions or intuitions as to the beauty of poetry--they could hear it--but no notion of language which could justify its existence or its continued production. Diderot and Rousseau are exceptions to this tendency, and stand out as prophets of modern poetry in France. It is significant that their theories evolved through an intense experience of music and of profound social alienation. The research of Michel Foucault reveals that at the very time that language is made the neutral instrument of the thinking subject, madness is excluded, ex-communicated from the community of reasonable thought and productive conduct.⁵ Mental and literary institutions, asylums and academies, owe their existence to the same ideology of productivity. Diderot's

Encyclopédie is a monument to this ideology, but Le Neveu de Rameau undermines the entire edifice.

The moral and epistemological quest of Descartes, whose thinking is markedly present in the Grammaire Générale, reflects these transformations in a variety of respects. In the Discours de la méthode he describes his way of emerging from the forest of conflicting dogmas and opinions by proceeding along a straight line:

Ma seconde maxime était d'être le plus ferme et le plus résolu en mes actions que je pouvais, et de ne suivre pas moins constamment les opinions les plus douteuses, lorsque je n'y serais une fois déterminé, que si elles eussent été très assurées. Imitant en ceci les voyageurs qui, se trouvant égarés en quelque forêt, ne doivent pas errer en tournoyant, tantôt d'un côté, tantôt d'un autre, ni encore moins s'arrêter en une place, mais marcher toujours le plus droit qu'ils peuvent vers un même côté et ne le changer point pour de faibles raisons, encore que ce n'ait peut-être été au commencement que le hasard seul qui les ait déterminés à la choisir: car, par ce moyen, s'ils ne vont justement où ils désirent, ils arriveront au moins à la fin quelque part, où vraisemblablement ils seront mieux que dans le milieu d'une forêt.⁶

The voluntaristic "coup de force" by which Valéry has characterized the institution of the cogito is clearly articulated in the firmness and resolution of Descartes' "morale." However arbitrary in its origin or destiny, its determination will be as straight, right, and clear as the shortest distance between two points. The effort of the will is conceived on a geometrical model. Doubt and disputation are resolved by a simple rule of thumb.

But Descartes' option for geometrical verisimilitude, by which epistemological rectitude and rectilinearity are identified, is not entirely the consequence of resolute single-mindedness. It coincides with the ascendancy of visual perceptual models in the seventeenth century, which was itself overdetermined by measurable advances in the related sciences of optics, astronomy, geometry, and geography, as well as by the massive proliferation of books since the middle of the previous century. These are doubtless significant factors contributing to the "coupure épistémologique" discussed by Foucault. The primacy of vision in Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy is exercised at the expense of oral-acoustic experience, which was the primary order of the senses until the seventeenth century in Europe.⁷

Thus the spatial figure adopted by Descartes is as significant for the acoustic experience it excludes as for the visual model it follows. The nearly alexandrine rhythm of Pascal's famous lament, "Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinies m'effraie" (Pensées, ed. Brunschvicg, No. 206), is one with the author's complaint against the silence of a spatialized universe, against the neutralized, devocalized universe of modern science.⁸ Pascal's notion of an infinite "dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nullepart" (No. 72) is reminiscent of an earlier cosmology, which was reckoned in musical figures--the "harmony of the universe" and the "music of the spheres." By contrast, Descartes' physics is, as Foucault remarks, a mathesis of light and dark (Histoire, p. 263). The straight path of the Cartesian voyager reenacts the myth of the Sirens in Odyssey XII, in which Ulysses must stop the ears of his crew and lash himself to the mast in order to resist the call of the Sirens beckoning the ship to abandon its appointed course. In his elaborate meditation on this episode Maurice Blanchot rightly identifies the call of the Sirens with "l'invitation des profondeurs" and "les puissances irréelles" emanating from "la région mère de la musique."⁹ This is precisely the realm of experience suppressed in an instrumentalist notion of language based on the primacy of vision and which must literally turn a deaf ear to the enchantments and ambiguities of sound in pursuit of its intellectual goal.

The cognitive nature of oral-acoustic experience was rediscovered in nineteenth century romantic poetry. It was the experience, in the case of Baudelaire for instance, of the poet's nostalgic research in Renaissance poetics and cosmology which coincided with the poet's visceral reluctance to march to the beat of the bourgeois humdrum. The sonnet "Correspondences" remains the most articulate and demonstrative refutation of the Discours de la méthode, and has come to serve as a program for nearly all modern poetry. This is because it could awaken its audience to the properly cognitive dimension of the poetic practice of language. In the Baudelairean voyage man's horizontal passage through nature is intersected, transversed by a vertiginous barrage of sounds and images, so that nature is perceived at the outset as supernatural:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles:
 L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent

Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
 Les Parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.¹⁰

Just as the "obscures paroles" here are the antithesis of the philosopher's "clear and distinct ideas," Baudelaire's poem, together with the theories which complement it, provides a dramatic antithesis to the Cartesian itinerary. The deductive passage from spirit to matter in Descartes--from "res cogitans" to "res extensa" in the Meditations (II)--is reversed as we proceed inductively through the experience of language from matter to spirit. The confusion of distant echoes, as realized in the repetition of nasal and long "o," composes the "unité" of the first two verses of the second stanza. We move from sensation to idea, and back again, as the unity encompasses the vastness of night and day--a coincidence of opposites suggesting the infinite expanse of correspondences: ". . . tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum dans le spirituel comme dans le naturel, est significatif, réciproque, converse, correspondant."¹¹ This is so much the case, so evidently the real fact for Baudelaire, that in his essay on Wagner he quotes the first two stanzas of his poem to serve as proof in lieu of further explanation of his conviction that "la véritable musique suggère des idées analogues dans les cerveaux différents." Before quoting he continues:

D'ailleurs, il ne serait pas ridicule ici de raisonner a priori, sans analyse et sans comparaisons; car ce qui serait vraiment surprenant, c'est que le son ne pût pas suggérer la couleur, que les couleurs ne pussent pas donner l'idée d'une mélodie, et que le son et la couleur fussent impropres à traduire des idées; les choses s'étant toujours exprimées par une analogie réciproque, depuis le jour où Dieu a proféré le monde comme une complexe et indivisible totalité.¹²

Baudelaire's interest in the illuminism of Swedenborg, Fourier, and others is anti-rationalistic and thereby implicitly anti-Cartesian, but it is not simply irrationalist nor any kind of "mystique." Illuminism offered Baudelaire, as it did to varying degrees Nerval, Balzac, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and the Surrealists, an alternative to positivist science, which for all its discoveries concerning the world and concerning man could not account for the initial experience of knowing, feeling, and signifying the world. In place of the subject-object antinomy essential to the scientific thinking of his time, Baudelaire developed a properly dialectical mode of thought capable of relating meaning and matter. The poet's role is that of translator of these relationships: "Or qu'est-ce qu'un poète (je prends le mot dans son acception la plus

large), si ce n'est un traducteur, un déchiffreur? Chez les excellents poètes, il n'y a pas de métaphore, de comparaison ou d'épithète qui ne soit d'une adaptation mathématiquement exacte dans la circonstance actuelle, parce que ces comparaisons, ces métaphores et ces épithètes sont puisées dans l'inépuisable fonds de l'universelle analogie, et qu'elles ne peuvent être puisées ailleurs."¹³ The theory of language in Baudelaire is at the same time a theory of knowledge. It is only being tested as such in this quarter of our century.

Freud's own challenge to the cogito originates in part from a poetic experience of language, as it was communicated in the discourse of mental patients and dream narratives. Through his evenly poised attention ("gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit" is a kind of methodical anti-doubt) to the deliberate speech of the conscious ego and to the paradigmatic network of "visual and acoustic memory traces" which emerge from the "syllabic chemistry" of the unconscious, Freud discovered the oblique processes of unconscious ideation.¹⁴ This attention to the materiality of language is common to both Renaissance and to nineteenth century poetics in France. It is a disposition necessary to the proper reception of poetry, which plays at once on the several dimensions of language.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes: "Ce que nous avons appris dans Saussure, c'est que les signes un à un ne signifient rien, que chacun d'eux exprime moins un sens qu'il ne marque un écart de sens entre lui-même et les autres. Comme on peut en dire autant de ceux-ci, la langue est faite de différences sans termes, ou plus exactement les termes en elle ne sont engendrés que par les différences qui apparaissent entre eux."¹⁵ Logical discourse depends upon the relative stability of these differences, upon the void neutrality of the "écart" which separates one term from another. By playing along the material surface of language, and by playing it off against its non-material dimension of meaning, the poet's game is to scramble these differences, to expand, contract, exaggerate, or nullify them, to fill the "écart" with infinite semantic resonance, according to the prescription of Jules Laforgue in "Complainte de Lord Pierrot":

Inconscient, descendez en nous par réflexes;
Brouillez les cartes, les dictionnaires, les sexes.

Laforgue's formula may be taken to announce the program of the Surrealists, but it also describes concisely the polymorphic perversity of the Freudian unconscious, which is a vertical

plunge by linguistic and affective reflexes as opposed to the ascent or perhaps surface progress of consciousness by conceptual, logical reflection. A fine play on words, a magnificent pun, a poem and a prophecy at once.

The Surrealists in France greeted Freud's writing with such enthusiasm because they found in Freud a scientific hypothesis for insights and discoveries which, from Baudelaire and Nerval through Rimbaud and Apollinaire, formed a powerful tradition of poetic theory and practice. Freud confirmed their surest intuitions about language, and if he did not exist, the Surrealists would have invented him. Freud's rebuff of the Surrealists on the other hand, as well as his regular tendency to reduce the creative writer to the realm of pathology, reflect a fundamental and generic contradiction in his interpretive enterprise, a contradiction which continues at the center of debate in the human sciences which owe so much to his discoveries.

The binary oppositions by which a culture consolidates and codifies its experience depend upon the relative fixity of its signifieds. As a rule, we remain, or think to remain, in the strictly conceptual order of the signified in which the phonemic vicinity of words is disregarded for the sake of semantic equilibrium and continuity. The alternative, as Rimbaud indicates in "la lettre du voyant," is some or another form of madness: "Il faut être académicien,--plus mort qu'un fossile,--pour parfaire un dictionnaire, de quelque langue que ce soit. Des faibles se mettraient à penser sur la première lettre de l'alphabet, qui pourraient vite ruer dans la folie!"¹⁶ The logic of binary discrimination is basic to the formulation of ideologies, "Weltanschauungs," and cultural paradigms by which a society closes around itself in some form of coherent identity. Option for one term of antinomy in a debate, a theological conflict, or philosophical dispute against its equal and opposite alternative does not disturb or threaten the system within which the options are posed. As Sartre has shown with respect to Baudelaire, whether one prays to God or to the devil, one does not challenge a vision of the world as bounded by powerful spiritual forces. And too, whether one argues for poetry against science, or vice versa, one does not challenge a notion of reality which separates truth from beauty, which isolates aesthetic and cognitive realms.

If, however, we proceed systematically along the order of the signifier--homonyms, puns, but also poems--if we experiment with the material along with the conceptual character of language, we escape the dualisms imposed by culture.

For we escape the hierarchical ascendancy of the signified upon which the social order is founded. We bypass the anti-nomies because we elude their ideological--which is to say, ideocentric--premises. We operate a displacement of its categories, we undermine the coherence of its oppositions by demonstrating the polysemantic excess and overflow of their semiotic boundaries. The task which Jacques Derrida assigns to contemporary philosophy in the name of "Dissémination" also serves to describe poetic creativity in this respect: "Si on ne peut résumer la dissémination, la différence séminale, dans sa teneur conceptuelle, c'est que la force et la forme de sa disruption crèvent l'horizon sémantique."¹⁷ The traditional status of the poet in France as outcast, pariah, etc. from Villon to Artaud is justified in terms of his potentially subversive activity, which is nonetheless indistinguishable from certain goals of scientific advancement.

In his own scientific quest for general enlightenment and liberation Freud had no license to explore freely, indefinitely and creatively the dynamics of linguistic ambiguity. He necessarily perceived his task as opposite to that of the poet, whose evocative art largely consists in such condensations, displacements, and overdeterminations as Freud discovered in jokes, dreams, and mental illness. Freud concludes his article on "The Antithetical Sense of Primal Words" by saying that "we should understand the language of dreams better and translate it more easily if we knew more about the development of language."¹⁸ Thus Freud would translate out of symbols and figures into some form of logical discourse. The poet would translate into figures and symbols relationships which prevailing systems of logic and classification cannot accommodate or comprehend. One of the things learned about the development of language in Freud's own time is its fundamentally metaphorical character, in terms of which the poet enjoys a kind of hermeneutic ascendancy.¹⁹

Having fairly early in his career demonstrated that the conceptual order of the signified is compromised by the visual and acoustic dynamism of the signifier, Freud seeks nonetheless to employ a neutral, "objective" language to represent the sense of the ambiguities which are the subject of his discourse. His instrumentalist practice of language is contradicted by the theory it articulates, while at other times the compulsion for logical rigor and systematic coherence, too often modelled on classical physics, has a cloturing effect on the poetic dynamics of his own writing process. The author of the Ego and the Id is himself frequently caught in a classical double bind, which consists of contradictory imperatives from the therapist and from the

writer.

That Freud's resistance to a certain kind of poetic language was only partially successful is the platform and postulate of Jacques Lacan, who is engaged in elaborating the symbolic discourse of the Freudian text in the name of a (hotly debated) "retour à Freud" in psychoanalysis. Lacan's own prose is often so much more allusive than explanatory, so hermetic and indirect as to discourage all but his most sympathetic readers. It may be said of him, as Baudelaire says of the poet, that "il exprime, avec l'obscurité indispensable, ce qui est obscur et confusément révélé" (O.C., p. 704). But Lacan is only an extreme instance of a general tendency among certain writers in the human sciences who seek, deliberately or intuitively, to escape the language of representation, with all its ideological implications. Such writers have recourse to various styles of discourse which, to the extent that they are irreducible to a series of declarative propositions, and frequently untranslatable, have more in common with the evocative, suggestive language of poetry than to that of logical, analytic prose.

Thus Claude Lévi-Strauss occasionally has recourse to non-discursive elements in the elaboration of his thinking. The fragility and relativity of classificatory systems and the ambiguity of the language that sustains them is evoked by the picture of the wild pansy ("pensée") on the cover of La Pensée Sauvage, thereby creating an emblem or Renaissance-style "blason" in which the visual, acoustic, and conceptual experience of his (French) readers is invoked simultaneously. The orchestration of myths in Le Cru et le cuit according to a variety of musical forms ranging from rondeau to fugue is intended to present material whose serial or thematic organization could not fail to be arbitrary and misleading. The isomorphism of the language of music and the language of myth--both untranslatable--is partially based on Baudelaire's conviction the "la musique suggère des idées analogues dans des cerveaux différents."²⁰ Where Baudelaire sought to "transformer ma volupté en connaissance" (O.C., p. 1215), it appears that Lévi-Strauss' achievement is to transform "connaissance en volupté." This is not mere French "préciosité" on his part, but flows from his belief that these analogies have a "fondement objectif en deça de la conscience et de la pensée" (Le Cru et le cuit, p. 35). Lévi-Strauss continues a tradition, inaugurated by Baudelaire in France, which recognizes the indivisibility of aesthetic and cognitive realms. In Tristes Tropiques he writes: "L'espace possède ses valeurs propres, comme les sons et les parfums ont des couleurs et les sentiments, un poids. Cette quête des correspondances

n'est pas un jeu de poète ou une mystification...; elle propose au savant le terrain le plus neuf et celui dont l'exploration peut encore lui procurer de riches découvertes." Lévi-Strauss' inspiration, he declares in Le Cru et le cuit, is "déterministe et réaliste" (p. 35). "Tout bon poète," writes Baudelaire, "fut toujours réaliste" (O.C., p. 636).

Such devices are strongly reminiscent of the literature of the sixteenth century, which had a lively sense of the material opacity of language, and in which there was no hard distinction between science and poetry. We encounter them again in the writings of Jacques Derrida, who deliberately exploits all the phonemic and semantic ambiguities of language in communicating his philosophical project of "dissémination": "Nous jouons ici," he says at one point, "bien entendu, sur la ressemblance fortuite, sur la parenté de pur simulacre entre la sème et le semen."²² At times he is given to manipulating the scriptural surface of the page, as well as the pagination of his text, in his effort to deconstruct the horizontal, rectilinear spatialization of thought which has been the predominating tendency since the seventeenth century. This is particularly the case in Marges de la philosophie (Minuit, 1972), in La Dissémination (Seuil, 1972), and most recently and most flagrantly in Glas (Galilée, 1974), in which we find what Francois Laruelle calls "la parodie transversale d'une organisation de la page."²³ There is a heavy debt to Mallarmé for this, but there is also a strong precedent for it in Villon, Marot, and Montaigne.²⁴

Baudelaire describes his attitude to science in a manner which appears to encompass the problems which philosophy poses to itself:

Ah! malgré Newton et malgré Laplace, la certitude astronomique n'est pas aujourd'hui même si grande que la rêverie ne puisse se loger dans les vastes lacunes non encore explorées par la science moderne. Très-légitimement, le poète laisse errer sa pensée dans un dédale enivrant de conjectures. Il n'est pas un problème agité ou attaqué, dans n'importe quel temps ou par quelle philosophie, qui ne soit venu réclamer fatalement sa place dans les oeuvres du poète.²⁵

It is in virtue of its conjectural dimension that Baudelaire insists on "le caractère extra-scientifique de toute poésie" (O.C., p. 711), which is not a product of observation or ratiocination but springs from the imagination, "La Reine des Facultés": "Comme elle a créé le monde (on peut bien dire

cela, je crois, même dans un sens religieux), il est juste qu'elle le gouverne. Que dit-on . . . d'un savant sans imagination? Qu'il a appris tout ce qui, ayant été enseigné, pouvait être appris, mais qu'il ne trouvera pas les lois non encore devinées. L'imagination est la reine du vrai, et le possible est une des provinces du vrai. Elle est positivement apparentée avec l'infini."²⁶ The play of language in Derrida's writings seems inspired by a similar orientation: "La dissémination, . . . pour produire un nombre non-fini d'effets sémantiques, ne se laisse reconduire ni à un présent d'origine simple . . . ni à une présence eschatologique. Elle marque une multiplicité irréductible et générationnelle."²⁷ To the extent, therefore, that certain writers in the human sciences seek to continue their poetic predecessors, and find in poetry the model rather than the topic of their discourse, it seems no longer legitimate to speak of "le caractère extra-poétique de toute science."

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NOTES

¹Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, "L'Inconscient: Une Etude psychanalytique," in Le Langage et l'inconscient (Desclée de Brouwer, 1967).

²Les Mots et les choses (Gallimard, 1966). See Préface and chs. II-IV.

³In Roland Donzé, La Grammaire Générale et Raisonnée de Port-Royal: Contribution à l'histoire des idées grammaticales en France (Francke, 1967), p. 48.

⁴Margaret Gilman's classic study, The Idea of Poetry in France: From Houdar de la Motte to Baudelaire (Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), contains invaluable references on this topic.

⁵Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique (Gallimard, 1972). Cf. "Première Partie," chs. II-IV, which should be read in tandem with those of Les Mots et les choses.

⁶E. Gilson ed. (Vrin, 1964), p. 79. "My second maxim was to be as firm and determined in my actions as I could be, and not to act on the most doubtful decisions, once I had made them, any less resolutely that on the most certain. In this matter I patterned my behavior on that of travelers, who, finding themselves lost in a forest, must not wander about, now turning this way, now that, and still less should

remain in one place, but should go as straight as they can in the direction they first select and not change the direction except for the strongest reasons. By this method, even if the direction was chosen at random, they will presumably arrive at some destination, not perhaps where they would like to be, but at least where they will be better off than in the middle of the forest." (L. Lafleur trans. [Bobbs-Merrill, 1956], p. 15).

⁷Robert Mandrou, Introduction à la France moderne (1500-1640): Essai de psychologie historique (Albin Michel, 1961), ch. III.

⁸Walter Ong, Ramus: Method and Decay of Dialogue (Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), ch. XIII and The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (Yale Univ. Press, 1967), ch. II.

⁹Le Livre à venir (Gallimard, 1959), p. 10.

¹⁰ Nature is a temple whose living colonnades
Breathe forth a mystic speech in fitful sighs;
Man wanders among symbols in those glades
Where all things watch him with familiar eyes.

Like dwindling echoes gathered far away
Into a deep and thronging unison
Huge as the night or as the light of day,
All scents and sounds and colors meet as one.

(Richard Wilbur trans., in The Flowers of Evil, M. and J. Mathews eds. [New Directions, 1963], p. 12).

¹¹Oeuvres complètes (Gallimard: Pléiade, 1961), p. 704.
"...everything, form, movement, number, color, perfume, in the spiritual as well as in the natural world, is significant, reciprocal, converse, corresponding" (L. and F. Hyslop trans. in Baudelaire as a Literary Critic: Selected Essays [Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1964], p. 238).

¹²O.C., p. 1213. "Besides it would not be ridiculous in this connection to argue a priori, without analysis and without comparisons; for what would be really surprising would be that sound could not suggest color, that colors could not convey a melody, and that sound and color were unsuited to translating ideas, things always having been expressed by a reciprocal analogy since the day when God created the world as a complex and indivisible whole" (L. and F. Hyslop trans., op. cit., p. 199).

¹³O.C., p. 705. "Now, what is a poet (I am using the word in its broadest sense) if not a translator, a decipherer? Among the best poets, there are no metaphors, comparisons, or epithets which are not adapted with mathematical exactitude to the particular circumstance, because these comparisons, metaphors, and epithets are drawn from the inexhaustible storehouse of universal analogy and cannot be found elsewhere." (L. and F. Hyslop trans., op.cit., p. 239).

¹⁴The Interpretation of Dreams. These formulae are to be found in vols. V, p. 507 and IV, p. 297n. respectively in the Standard Edition.

¹⁵"Le Langage indirect et les voix du silence," Signes (Gallimard, 1960), p. 49. "What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs. Since the same can be said for all other signs, we may conclude that language is made of differences without terms; or more exactly, that the terms of language are engendered only by the differences which appear among them" (Richard McCleary trans., Signs [Northwestern Univ. Press, 1964], p. 39).

¹⁶Oeuvres (Garnier, 1960), p. 347. "You'd have to be an academician--deader than a fossil--to complete a dictionary in any language whatsoever. Weak minds, beginning to think on the first letter of the alphabet, would quickly hurl into madness" (My trans.).

¹⁷Positions (Minuit, 1972), p. 61. "If one cannot summarize dissemination, seminal difference [sic], in its conceptual tenor, it is because the force and the form of its disruption break through the semantic horizon" (R. Klein trans., in Diacritics, Vol. II, No. 4 [Winter, 1972], p. 37).

¹⁸Standard Edition, vol. II, p. 161.

¹⁹Cf. "The Power of Metaphor" in Ernst Cassirer's Language and Myth, trans. Suzanne Langer (Dover, 1946), which was first published in 1923. Jacques Derrida elaborates a more thorough and precise case for language-as-metaphor in "La Mythologie blanche," Marges de la Philosophie (Minuit, 1972).

²⁰Le Cru et le cuit (Plon, 1964), "Ouverture," pp.34-35.

²¹(Plon, 1955). This quote is taken from the 10/18 edition, n.d., p. 103. "Space has its own values, just as sounds and perfumes have colours, and feelings weight. The search for such correspondences is not a poetic game or a practical joke...; it offers absolutely virgin territory for research where significant discoveries are still to be made" (J. and D. Weightman trans. [Atheneum, 1974], p. 123).

²²Positions, p. 62. "Here we are playing, of course, upon the fortuitous resemblance, upon the purely simulative kinship between seme and semen" (R. Klein trans., op. cit., p. 37).

²³Francois Laruelle's review of Glas, "Le Style di-phallique de Jacques Derrida," appears in Critique, No. 334 (March, 1975).

²⁴Tom Conley, in his paper "Image-Sign and Surface in French Poetics (1480-1540)," given at the meeting of the Midwest Comparative Literature Association, April, 1974 (Univ. of Minnesota), has brought these manipulations to light in Villon and Marot. For Montaigne, see his "The Page's Hidden Dimension: Surface and Emblen in Montaigne's Essais," Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Vol. VII (Spring, 1974), 13-25.

²⁵O.C., p. 710. "Ah, even today, in spite of Newton and in spite of Laplace, astronomical certainty is not so great that reverie cannot find a place for itself among the vast lacunae still unexplored by modern science. Very rightly the poet lets his thought wander in an intoxicating labyrinth of speculations. There is not a problem that has not been discussed or attacked, no matter when or by what philosophy, that has not inevitably come to demand its place in the works of the poet" (L. and F. Hyslop trans., op. cit., p. 244).

²⁶O.C., p. 1038. "Since it has created the world (this can really be said, I believe, even in a religious sense), it is only right that it should govern it. What do people say ...of a scholar without imagination? That he has learned everything that could be learned from what he was taught, but that he will not discover laws that have not yet been conceived. Imagination is the queen of truth, and the possible is one of the provinces of truth. It has a definite relationship with the infinite" (L. and F. Hyslop., op. cit., pp. 181-182).

²⁷Positions, p. 62. "Dissemination,...by producing a non-finite number of semantic effects, does not allow itself to be reduced either to a present of simple origin...or to an

eschatological presence. It marks an irreducible and generative multiplicity" (R. Klein trans., op. cit., p. 37).



REVIEWS

Irvin Ehrenpreis. Literary Meaning and Augustan Values.
Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1974. Pp. 119. \$6.75.

This engagingly contentious, opinionated book deals with English literature of the period 1660-1760, but the issues it raises should be of interest to those who--like the reviewer--are not specialists in the period. Mr. Ehrenpreis thinks recent critics are inclined to view Augustan literature through the distorting perspective of modern literary theory, which overvalues irony, indirection, suggestion, and organic form. When the critics fail to find these qualities in a work, they are apt to be either hostile or patronizing. But when they do manage to find them the situation is often worse, since the process of finding involves wrenching, pulling, and squeezing the Augustan text in order to make it conform to the modern criteria. What is common both to the disparagers and praisers of Augustan literature is a tendency to see explicit statement in a literary work as a symptom of the author's incompetence. The Augustans, Mr. Ehrenpreis notes, had no such scorn for explicitness and generality and they did not think that a poem should not mean but be. Nor does this require any apology for them on our part; they are, he argues, at their best when they are unabashedly generalized and assertive.

In making this judgment, Mr. Ehrenpreis seems to be correcting his own earlier position, as expressed in his book Swift: the Man, His Works, and the Age (1967). There he said that "the great Augustans speak best by indirection . . . when they are most affirmative they are least splendid" (v.2, p. 289). But let us look at the argument of the present volume.

The main substance of the polemic is delivered in the first half of the book, in a chapter on "Explicitness and Augustan Meaning" and another on the concept of the literary persona. The second half of the book is devoted to "applications"--discussions of poetry by Pope, Young, and Gray and

remarks on Gulliver's Travels--though there are analyses of specific works in the polemical chapters too. I found the first section of the book more pointed and urgent, so I will concentrate on it here.

Mr. Ehrenpreis begins by cataloguing and illustrating several varieties of modern critical strategy, each of which represents a "flight from explicit meaning." He shows how the old-fashioned scholarly cultivation of allusions, influences, echoes, and sources of a text has come to subserve a more new-fangled concern to demonstrate the ambiguous richness of works, even though the work in question may not invite the reader to be aware of its sources. Sometimes the resonances can even get in the way, as for example when Martin Price dwells on Miltonic echoes in Absalom and Achitophel despite the fact, as Mr. Ehrenpreis points out, that Dryden's royalist, anti-Puritan biases render such associations inappropriate. The "echoes" may indeed be there, but it is better in this case not to be aware of them. The practice of allegorizing Augustan texts as many-tiered complex structures is a second method by which respectable depth can be attributed to works which might otherwise seem all too plain. A third technique, which Mr. Ehrenpreis terms "the last expedient of a despairing commentator," is the ironic interpretation: here the seemingly overt but perhaps plati-tudinously conventional moral position of the author is rescued for modern taste by being treated as a satiric mockery of the conventional moral position.

Such misinterpretations of Augustan literature are frequently defended on the grounds that the work in question becomes more "interesting" as a result. But paradoxically, this means of enhancing the value of literary works leads to a blurring of literary values, as Mr. Ehrenpreis shows. For one thing, the forcing of alien ironies and implications on a text, far from making it seem richer, may only raise embarrassing questions about the author's effectiveness in doing what the critic says he was trying to do. If echoes of Paradise Lost are truly fundamental in Dryden's satiric poem, what prevented Dryden from actualizing them more clearly and satisfactorily? If Mr. Primrose is not actually the moral spokesman of The Vicar of Wakefield, but a target of rich satiric irony--as Robert Hopkins has argued--then why is Goldsmith's satire so ineffectual that hardly anybody picks it up? In the second place, a confusion of literary criteria results when critics make a habit of rationalizing inconsistencies and disproportions that may be genuine deficiencies as triumphs of complexity and difficult beauty or as manifestations of the self-validating organic unity of the work.

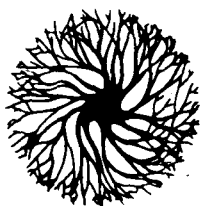
Organicist literary theory, Mr. Ehrenpreis suggests, takes a defiant lack of interest in common sense, logical consistency, and verifiable truth as literary criteria, and it makes a kind of self-deceiving casuistry into the norm of critical method: "Modern criticism is not so clumsy that it cannot dispose of the judgment that a poem is badly written. There are two approved techniques for smothering literary faultfinders. First, one says the author meant to do what he did. Second, one says the style is mimetic or expressive, and it peculiarly suits the meaning." Students are now routinely taught to assume that each work before them is a masterpiece, so that their job is to rationalize this prejudgment by demonstrating how apparent dissonances and obscurities are really contributions to the self-justifying organic pattern. Ask if the work makes sense or says anything valuable and you are likely to draw the indulgent smile reserved for the philistine.

The concepts of persona and mask have proved especially useful instruments in this casuistical process. Mr. Ehrenpreis argues that although Swift and Pope make elaborate use of personae, these writers are not read properly unless we recognize the determinate authorial self behind the personae. However much the view of life expressed may be refracted through multiple indirections of mask and voice, this view is there and demands to be taken seriously as a statement about the world. As often employed by modern criticism, the concept of persona becomes a way of effacing the world-view and personality of the author, insinuating that it is never the author who speaks, only some "dramatically" presented and safely ironized character or some dancing of perspectives. In consequence, moral and esthetic immunity is conferred on writing--a gesture which seems to elevate literature but actually trivializes it, since it makes no difference what the writer says. The heads-I-win-tails-you-lose circularity that becomes standard in critical discourse is also trivializing. The dramatic speaker in any work must always utter statements "appropriate" to himself. "Transparently," Mr. Ehrenpreis says, "such analysis carries us around in a circle. If we deduce the intention of a poem from the attitudes implicit in the sentiments of the poet, we shall invariably discover that the speaker of the poem has sentiments appropriate to its purpose."

Mr. Ehrenpreis argues that the meaning of any text is finally dependent on the authorial "inner being" which controls the work and assumes responsibility for what it says and is. "In order to understand any literary work," he writes, "we must view it as a transaction between us and that inner being. If the writer tells a story, we must ask what he (not his emanation) intended to express through its action."

"Unless we treat the material as indicating, however indirectly, what the author believes and is, we do not discover the meaning of the work." In the wake of the influence of Continental criticism--Derrida, Foucault, DeMan, etc.--on the more trend-conscious American academics and graduate students, this insistence of the "inner being"--the "origin" or "presence"--that informs a text comes as refreshingly non-"posthumanist." This new trend of thinking pompously congratulates itself on taking the "risk" to do without any self behind a text, as if there could be any possibility of risking anything once there is no longer any self to be risked.

Clearly, then, a great deal more is at issue in Mr. Ehrenpreis' book than the critical misrepresentation of a period of English literature. The assumptions which are responsible for the misrepresentations are symptomatic of a more widespread confusion about literary criteria and about what literature is supposed to do, regardless what period one is concerned with. It is a confusion which literature departments refrain from talking about, one supposes, only because it is so profound that nobody has any idea what can be done about it. But the confusion is not limited to literary intellectuals. Lying behind the critics' "flight from explicit meaning," Mr. Ehrenpreis suggests at one point, is a flight from determinate selfhood that pervades our entire culture. We fear explicit statements because we fear having to declare ourselves, and instead of doing anything about our confusions of identity, we congratulate ourselves for them by making the infinite experimenting with roles into an approved style. "During an age when the notion of the self is collapsing like the notion of the soul," Mr. Ehrenpreis writes, "the concept of persona enables us to cling a little longer to a substantial ego." In other words, the concept of persona permits us to lay claim to a sort of ego without having to take responsibility for it. Mr. Ehrenpreis does not suggest that we can or should try to go back to being eighteenth-century personalities. But in a period which sees the most popular critics in competition to advance the most irresponsibly antinomian and privatizing theories of literature--literature seen as "a world elsewhere" haunted by "the anxiety of influence"--his defense of the public virtues of the Augustan literary mind, its willingness to say and be something determinate and to speak for mankind, not just the private self, is a message that we can use.



Stanley B. Greenfield. The Interpretation of Old English Poems.
Routledge and Kegan Paul: London and Boston, 1972. x + 188 pp.
\$8.25.

Professor Greenfield's book is an attempt to provide some critical guidelines for the interpretation of Old English poems. The need for such a book, as he sees it, is acute, because of the way Old English poetry has become the battleground of warring factions, the first trumpet-calls of the New Criticism echoing faintly now against the heavy artillery of the new "historical" criticism, while, as various skirmishes run their course on issues of metre, diction and oral-formulaic composition, the menacing batteries of descriptive linguistics are wheeled into position ready to blow all to kingdom come. Greenfield does not think that the truth is likely to emerge from such a situation, though on the other hand he has no intention of making any new sets of rules. The first and most sober warning he takes from the proliferation of universal theories of interpretation is that there are no universal theories of interpretation, that "poems" must be the object of consideration, as his title indicates, rather than "poetry," and that the truth will emerge from a cautious consensus-seeking pragmatism in the attention to the particular rather than from the heady generalizations of universal positivism. Greenfield's pragmatism is well illustrated in the loose construction of his book and of its six individual chapters. He evidently relishes Geoffrey Shepherd's comment that The Phoenix, far from demonstrating a tight and subtly contrived unity, is more like "a verbal circumambulation of a well-known but rather ill-defined moral or spiritual situation" (p. 142), and his own book is a "circumambulation" of some equally well-known and ill-defined crucis in the interpretation of Old English poems. The various interpretative crucis are collected under a number of headings--diction and formula (chapter 2), variation (chapter 3), word-play and ambiguity (chapter 4) and syntax (chapter 5)--but the organization is dictated as much by the form in which the material first appeared in the journals as by the intrinsic demands of the subject, if it has any.

Nevertheless, Greenfield is not entirely content with his own natural pragmatism, and he shows himself anxious, especially in his first chapter, to pursue the possibility of setting up some guidelines for the interpretation of Old English poems, if not any systematic theory of interpretation. In this first chapter, which is quite ambitious, he weaves his way between the Scylla of "historical" criticism and the Charybdis of "linguistic" criticism to an interim theory of "expectations and implications" to which he refers frequently in subsequent pages. The "expectations" are those that impinge upon a particular poem, especially expectations created by genre, and the "implications" are those generated by the limitations imposed upon those expectations by formal relationships within a text (pp. 27-8). There is much allusion, in this opening chapter, to the influential book by E. D. Hirsch, Validity in Interpretation, but it is not clear that the book is of much help to Greenfield, except in so far as it chimes with his own pragmatism in providing consolation to the individual enlightened reader (such as Dr. Spock once provided for a generation of child-rearers) that he at least is more likely to be right than the theorists. Hirsch's more specific recommendations, such as his emphasis on the importance of the expectations appropriate to a genre, prove to be of dubious value here. The difficulty in Old English poetry is in knowing what constitutes a genre, and Greenfield points out that genre must be constantly redefined to elicit what Hirsch calls "intrinsic genre" (p. 14), a process that can only end, for many of the most important Old English poems, with genres consisting of one poem. The important first step in interpreting The Wanderer and The Seafarer, for instance, is to disentangle them from the expectations of a common genre. This is an advance, but not quite what Hirsch had in mind. In fact, Hirsch's methods, whatever value they may have for later literature, are radically defective for Old English poetry, not because it is in an ancient language (a system of hermeneutics ought to work equally well with any literary language) but because of the smallness of the sample. The controls over expectation and response in matters of genre and verbal connotation are simply not available on the scale that is needed to make valid generalization possible. What use is the most elaborate hermeneutic apparatus to the discussion of poems so fragmentary and enigmatic as The Battle at Finnsburh (pp. 45-51) or The Husband's Message (pp. 145-54)? Even for such a long poem as Beowulf we lack constantly the opportunities for comparative reference as to genre, form, style and verbal meaning which are the very heart of the understanding of a literary language and of any theory of interpretation.

Greenfield, despite his flirtation with hermeneutics,

seems to recognise this, as I have suggested, and his methods of weighing and testing interpretations in the chapters of analysis are mostly based on old-fashioned appeals to common sense and ad hoc literary judgment. His interpretation of lofgeornost in the last line of Beowulf, for instance, as an epithet favourable to Beowulf is based on a rejection of the only objective evidence that is available, namely, the evidence of pejorative use provided by other occurrences of the word, and the acceptance of the argument from "expectations of context" (p. 43). To put it plainly, a word means what we think it must mean in the light of the way we read the whole poem--even though the whole poem consists only of words whose meaning we may construct in exactly the same way. The rejection of the comparative evidence of word-usage is further justified by a reminder of the dangers in "assuming a monolithic semantic field for the whole province of Old English diction" (p. 43). In other words, the only method we have of educating the meaning of a word, that is, to refer it to its role in the semantic patterning of the language as a whole (allowing for the distinction of prose and poetry, as here), is to be discarded if the meaning so educed is contrary to what we think it ought to be in the context under consideration. Greenfield's arguments, considered from the point of view of any theoretical analysis, are riddled with inconsistencies, but at the same time his reading, given the smallness of the sample for lofgeornost and the virtual impossibility of establishing its semantic field, is clearly the right one. The only point I am making here is that his case is based not on a theory of interpretation but on taste.

At other times, when the nagging preoccupation with a theory of valid interpretation is momentarily set aside, Greenfield accepts the pragmatic necessities of the situation more frankly. He agrees with the statement of Bliss and Dunning, in their edition of The Wanderer, that "literary considerations must outweigh linguistic arguments" (pp. 118-19), suggesting thereby the primacy of individual taste and subjective judgment and providing an interesting parallel to recent developments in textual criticism away from the "scientific" use of the stemma. Elsewhere, he offers a series of tentative opinions--"I think both these observations are mistaken. . . . In this case I think we have an enumeration. . . . There is something of a contrast, I believe. . . . What the poet is doing here, I believe. . . ." (pp. 67-8)--which record the exercise of "taste" in its very mode of operation and are at the very opposite extreme from Hirsch's logical and declarative processes. On one occasion he gives the game away, so to speak, by suggesting that the reader looks to theories of interpretation

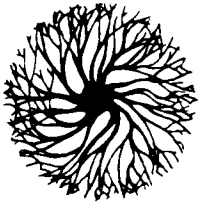
to sanction readings that he has already arrived at by subjective judgment: "This is an attractive reading, and one which seems wholly justified as a legitimate expectation" (p. 91).

This seems to me a very proper way of going about the business of reading poetry, and the only criticism I am offering is of the discrepancy between the methodological discussion of a theory of interpretation and the actual practice of analysis. Very often the analysis itself is of a straightforward grammatical and syntactical kind that could properly be called descriptive rather than interpretative, e.g. "It is at this point, where Grendel is depicted as arriving at Heorot, that the poet brings the monster and the building into lexical, grammatical and metrical union at the centre of the poetic line, Com þa to recede rinc siðian ..." (pp. 126-7). As far as I can see, this remark, which hints at a fine artistic subtlety, simply records that when the poet wants to say that Grendel arrived at Heorot he says that Grendel (rinc) arrived at Heorot (to recede). It is difficult at first to know why a series of examples of practical analysis, most of them of course less innocent and more searching than the one just quoted, but all of them informed by traditional, cautious and sensible ways of thinking about Old English poetry, are surrounded here with so much interpretative theorising. The answer, perhaps, is in what I take to be the underlying purpose of the book, which is to find a base, in some objectively valid theory of interpretation, from which to launch a convincing refutation of the more advanced "historical" criticism. Despite his suggestion that there is a profusion of theories and counter-theories concerning the interpretation of Old English poetry, Greenfield is in fact preoccupied with one theory above all, that which refers Old English poetry to the patterns of thought of biblical exegesis and patristic commentary. The last chapter is devoted to an analysis of the distortions which Greenfield sees as having been produced by this "historicism" in the reading of particular Old English poems, and the point of many passages of analysis in other chapters is to refute similar interpretations. Greenfield's arguments are everywhere persuasive. The pages in which he deals with Huppé's analysis of Judith (pp. 96-100) are particularly decisive, though it is not often that the historical critics give so many hostages, in the form of factual errors (there are such things), to their opponents. Elsewhere it is the tact, good sense and imaginative sympathy of Greenfield's readings that command assent, not any theoretical structure of interpretation which validates what he says. Readers of Old English poetry will always have to face the

fact that they have, in the end, in their special situation, nothing but their particular judgment on particular poems to set against the universal theorists.

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DEREK PEARSALL



Göran Hermerén. Influence in Art and Literature. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975. Pp. xvii + 346. \$15.00.

This book is not a substantive study of cases of influence, nor does it try to fix the role of influence in the development of the arts. Hermerén's perspective is "semantical and logical" (p. 7); that is, he wants to know how clear and how certain critics can be when they talk about influence. Throughout the book, he bases his analysis on passages in which art critics or literary critics are discussing influence, and he intends his analysis to benefit these critics by showing them more precise ways to carry on their discussions. I firmly believe that any critic intending to make a sustained study of influence should read this book. I also think that critics will find aspects of it mildly annoying, and I would like at least to record some issues it leaves for the reader to ponder.

In his long first chapter Hermerén identifies what he regards as a concept of "genuine influence" (p. 89). He distinguishes this concept from others which bear varying degrees of resemblance to it (e.g., copy, imitation, forgery), and he also distinguishes kinds of influence (e.g., positive and negative, direct and indirect). His claim is not that his way of laying things out is the only one possible but that it is clear and coherent. In his second chapter he asks how a critic can support his claims about influence, and he enumerates six necessary conditions for establishing an instance of influence. In his third chapter he considers ways of rating the relative strength of influences and discusses the reliability of thirteen possible measures of that strength. In a short concluding chapter Hermerén reflects on the results of his analysis and glances at other writers on his topic.

Let me supplement this outline of the book by a more detailed account of one portion: I do this to give some sense of how Hermerén proceeds from page to page. In his second chapter he states that the "decisive" requirement for showing that an artist was influenced by another artist or work is that the later artist changed as a result of this contact. Several quotations show that practicing critics actually appeal to this requirement. However, Hermerén finds problems with the notion of change involved. He notes that if an artist had a crisis in his life, an influence might function to keep him working in his original direction: that is, the influence would prevent a departure that the crisis would have otherwise produced. Therefore it would seem that to demonstrate change a critic must show that if A had not had contact with B, then A's work would have been different. But this notion of change would demand that critics assess the truth of a "counterfactual conditional," and Hermerén indicates he is worried by the difficulties that logicians have found in defining truth conditions for statements of this kind. He then turns to possible formulations of arguments to show that change has taken place. The first is: let Y = a work of art; a = an artistically significant aspect of it; X = a work not created by the creator of Y:

(A₁) Y is with respect to a more similar to X than it is to any of the earlier works by the person who created Y.

Hermerén takes three pages to show that this argument is logically independent of a second which initially looks like it:

(A₂) Y is more similar to X with respect to a than X is similar to any of the earlier works by the creator of Y.

(Roughly put, the difference is that A₁ requires that Y resemble X more closely than A₂ does.) Two more variations (A₃ and A₄) are distinguished by comparing Y with all the works that the creator of Y knew, as well as those he created, before contact with X. Hermerén observes that all these argument forms are weakened by the difficulty with the notion of change he noted earlier. After trying to interpret the actual claims of a critic in the light of his distinctions, he concludes his entire discussion thus:

It may appear to be very difficult to show that the requirement of change . . . is ever satisfied.

It is difficult, but the difficulties should not be exaggerated. Here, as in so many other cases we have to deal with probabilities, and in the reasoning pro and con the statement that a change of the requisite sort took place, the arguments (A₁) through (A₄) play, as I have tried to show, an important role. If the arguments are stated fairly precisely, they can in practice be used as partial criteria of whether changes have taken place or not. (p. 256, entire discussion, pp. 245-256)

Again, I describe this section to suggest what "semantical and logical" means here. This concern with the ambiguity of central terms, with sometimes subtle differences between alternative formulations of an argument, with possible objections to these formulations, and with criteria of verification gives the book its character. This is a philosopher very deliberately sorting things out. And in general I believe that he does return more precise tools to the practicing critic. His achievement in this respect is hard to estimate exactly because his final procedural recommendations--as opposed to the lengthy analysis which generates them--are largely those the most cautious critics usually follow. But Hermerén develops his points so carefully that even the incautious should be protected from themselves. There are, too, points where he does not simply ground more firmly the best practice but recommends changes in practice. For instance, he builds a good case for discarding the "assumption of inferiority" (pp. 149 ff)--the assumption that a work cannot be significantly influenced by another decidedly inferior to it.

The paragraph cited above also exemplifies another aspect of Hermerén's procedure that I admire. Having examined the notion of change and the kinds of arguments that can be given for its presence, he concludes by reflecting on how much certainty one can expect in the matter. The book as a whole constitutes such a reflection on the concept and study of influence as a whole. By pressing for the maximum clarity and rigor, he indicates the less-than-perfect clarity and rigor that properly obtains in inquiries of this sort. I'll rephrase the point for clarity myself: I don't mean that he merely gives us an estimate of how much certainty to expect. Rather I mean that by trying to recast the claims of critics in the most rigorous form--for instance, analyzing critics' reasons as necessary conditions in the logician's sense (106ff)--and noting the extent to which they resist this form he is able to locate more specifically than a simple estimate

could the limits of precision in the field.

The method which accounts for the book's virtues is also responsible for the annoyance art critics and literary critics may feel. I realize that Hermerén has a wider audience than these two groups in mind, but they are likely to be a large portion of his readership. His style is straightforward but graceless. There are frequent transitions of the "I have just done A, I will now do B" type that literary people wince at even in dissertations. In fairness to Hermerén, though, I admit that the book is no worse in this respect than most philosophical writing in the "analytic" tradition: a tradition that seems to have decided that exactness is incompatible with felicity. In trying to be thorough Hermerén seems trivial at times. In distinguishing a copy from a model, for example, he notes that if one states each notion as a relation between an earlier work X and a later work Y, the order of the variables is reversed (p. 87): a remark which may interest a logician but whose significance is likely to be lost on a critic. Here, too, the problem is not peculiar to Hermerén but is a sign of a general gap between the concerns of one strain of contemporary aesthetics and criticism of the arts.

My next two comments are not made relative to critics, and they are not really intended to name deficiencies in the book. In fact both issues arise only for someone who takes its analysis seriously. First, it isn't clear how to bring this analysis to bear on others that critical theorists have presented. Hermerén examines an individual critical concept, and he does so independently of any particular view of the arts. Most theorists, however, treat influence in the light of the basic principles of their theories, and these principles determine the importance they accord the notion of influence, how it could enter a critical exegesis, and so forth. It may be that wherever these theorists are dealing strictly with what influence is and how it is detected, we could directly compare them with Hermerén with a view to choosing the strongest position. Yet I suspect that such comparison would be ill-advised since the basic principles these theorists adopt will tend to modify not only the importance they attach to influence but even what they mean by it. Harold Bloom, the current celebrity in the area, obviously doesn't mean the same thing by influence as Hermerén does, and so it would be a mistake to test one man directly against the other. What all this may suggest is the need to supplement Hermerén's effort to isolate a single, central notion of influence by a study of the variety of interests in influence that follow from different critical perspectives.

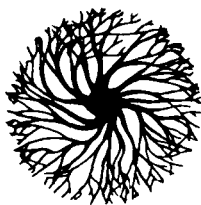
My second comment of the same order: when Hermerén works

from passages in which critics are making claims about influence, his analysis often becomes more refined than seems applicable to his quotations. I am not going back on my earlier praise for his recognizing the rigor appropriate to the subject. My point is that measured against what emerges as the precision that the field might attain, the critics cited are not, taken as a whole, impressive. In the passage I paraphrased, when Hermerén, after working out his distinctions among arguments, returns to the actual claims of a critic, he is unable to tell which version of the argument is being advanced. Something similar happens on several occasions, and one wonders why. Why have critics in this area not sorted things out more completely themselves? Hermerén has no obligation to speak to this question, though given his acquaintance with the field, one can wish that he did address it. I offer a conjecture myself: perhaps at this time the main task of critics writing the histories of art and literature must be to collect data. In other words they are still occupied with the basic job of reconstructing careers, of showing who had contact with whom, when and of what kind. Until critics do recover such information, maybe they cannot be expected, taken collectively, to show sophistication about the logical aspects of their endeavor.

But I don't want to end talking about what else Hermerén might have done: what he did do is important, and I again recommend his book to anyone interested in this subject.

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Marshall Edelson. Language and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975. Pp. xv + 243. \$12.50.

A natural alliance is bound to grow between psychoanalysis and linguistics. Both make much of human language. Psychoanalysis is unique among the many branches of medicine in regarding language as the major manifestation of the patient's symptoms, while linguistics draws no less heavily on human verbal communication in claiming to be the only science of language. Among the psychoanalysts who have come to understand that there is a bond between the two disciplines and who perceive the usefulness of linguistic theory for their work is Marshall Edelson. For those linguists willing to strengthen the alliance from their side, one of the first tasks is to determine what particular linguistic theory should be or has been espoused by psychoanalysts. Edelson has decided that the transformational generative grammar of Noam Chomsky is the most suitable model for psychoanalysis.

Edelson's enthusiasm for Chomskyan T-grammar waxes so great that he is led to consider Chomsky and Freud as congruent thinkers. Chomsky and Freud share an interest in the human mind; they are alike in their postulations of innate psychological structures; they oppose both radical behaviorism and radical taxonomic-empiricist-structuralism; and they believe in the rule-governed creative nature of the human intellect. Since Freud did not develop or acquire access to a unified theory of language, it is especially felicitous for Edelson that this lacuna in psychoanalysis should be filled by a contemporary linguist who can provide a rationalistic and mentalistic approach to language. Edelson's convictions about Chomsky cause him to reject alternative orientations to language theory--such as that of Jacques Lacan, which he finds excessively "structuralist." Edelson appreciates Lacan's reliance on Freud's own examples and discussions, and his recognition of the important role of language in the unconscious, but he finds Lacan to be otherwise out of touch. To the French scholar's style, "prophetic and evangelical," Edelson prefers Chomsky's, "analytic, logical and systematic."

Edelson finds all of the main themes of Chomsky's model of language waiting to be applied and interpreted psychoanalytically--e.g., the creative principle, the notions of deep and surface structure, the rule-governed nature of grammars, and the distinctions between explanation and description. These themes reoccur throughout the three major parts of Edelson's book. The first part is entitled "Prolegomena to a Theory of Interpretation." Part two sets forth the author's ideas on interpretation, linguistic competence and meaning. Part three is given over to an analysis of Wallace Stevens' poem The Snow Man in terms of its syntax, its semantics and its phonological patterns. In several places in his book Edelson argues for an analogy between the structure of music and the structure of language, and he endorses the proposition of Claude Levi-Strauss that both music and myth are surface manifestations of an underlying symbolic structure.

While both linguistics and psychoanalysis make strong claims to a scientific foundation, both are also curiously humanistic. Human symbolic activity, which interests both fields, includes the making of poetry and other types of verbal artifacts; therefore it is inevitable that a three-way interchange be established among linguists, psychoanalysts and literary analysts. Edelson's interpretation of Stevens' The Snow Man is the outcome of his understanding of the need for this interchange, though he disclaims any ability to contribute to either linguistic theory or the analysis of literature. His aim, he says, is eventually to formulate a theory of interpretation in psychoanalysis and test it against clinical experience (p. 2). Yet, what he has written will probably find a warmer welcome among analysts of literature and humanistic linguists.

As a reviewer who happens to be a linguist, I found this book to be both rewarding and provocative. It is rewarding because it shows how a particular theory developed by a linguist might be rendered therapeutically useful. It is provocative because it also shows how woefully even the most sophisticated linguistic theories fail to encompass the complexity of human communication. Edelson's enthusiasm for T-grammar can not hide its particular limitations as a model of language, not even if that model is subdivided into components labeled "grammatical" and "pragmatic" competence. However, before getting into the linguistic questions provoked by a reading of Edelson, let us take a look at the contents of the book in more detail.

Much of the first part is devoted to Edelson's account of the nature of psychoanalytic interpretation. He proposes

that six characteristics distinguish this kind of interpretation: (1) it is empirical, (2) it requires conceptual invention, (3) it is a coherent system of normative principles and canons of procedure rather than a collection of inviolable general laws, (4) it is evaluative, (5) it is context-bound, and finally, (6) it is ad hoc. Reading on through Edelson's prolegomena, one realizes that Chomsky's notion of a finite set of underlying grammatical rules accounting for a great variety of seemingly different sentences does jibe with Freud's insight that events in dreams and parapraxes are the outcomes of the systematic workings of the human mind, even though they may appear disjointed and unordered. Just as the interest in linguistic competence has led linguists to consider seriously the question of what is grammatical and what is not, so can the psychoanalysts conceive of a psychical competence capable of catching what is deviant, that is, apart from the norm, in the analyst's use of symbols.

After insisting that the psychoanalytic theory of interpretation should be no more prescriptive than Chomsky's T-grammar, Edelson goes on to give a concise statement of features of linguistic theory, which should be useful for the psychoanalysts who read his book. He discusses synonymy, anomaly, and ambiguity in sentences, and he goes into the many senses that "meaning" can have beyond its grammatical one. I was especially interested in the distinction drawn between "representation" and "presentation." A representation is related to its meaning by "rules" whereas a presentation obtains its meaning through "resemblance." In other words grammatical usage represents meanings, while the metaphorical use of language is presentational. Representation is secondary process thought; presentation, primary process.

The final two chapters of part two treat the interpretation of transformation and deviance. Edelson discusses seven cases in which linguistic aspects of an utterance combine with elements of its context to produce deviance. For example, a sentence may be grammatically ambiguous while occurring over and over in the same context. Or the same thing may be said the same way in a variety of contexts. The examples provide a working model for the psychoanalyst sympathetic to linguistics and aware of what it can offer him.

Inspired by Chomsky's "ideal" speaker-hearer, Edelson defines the "ideal" use of language as one in which the implementation of grammatical operations does not yield representations exceeding the extralinguistic capacities of the speaker. Departures from this ideal require interpretation by the hearer. As Edelson puts it, "deviance is then the critical occasion for

interpretation" (p. 101). An "interpretative competence" is postulated for the psychoanalyst, incorporating the ability to recognize linguistic deviance and the ability to discover the reasons for this deviance.

Students of literary analysis will be especially interested in the third and final part of this book, in which the author performs an interpretation of Stevens' The Snow Man according to its syntax, its sense and its sounds. Edelson's treatment of the poem is offered as an illustration of the way a psychoanalyst interprets the language used by an analysand. A poem can serve such a purpose well because it shares many of the obstacles to understanding encountered in the psychoanalytic context. Like the literary critic, the psychoanalyst can never make an exhaustive interpretation of any language event. Each must be content with partial interpretations which contribute in their own way to an ensemble which is intuitively correct. Edelson is especially fond of Stevens' poetry because of the poet's long struggle with the relation between imagination and reality.

Edelson's treatment of the syntax of The Snow Man is more in line with the work of Chomsky's earlier period--that of Syntactic Structures--than that of his later Aspects period. The overall presentation is not a very technical one. Kernel sentences are taken as the starting point and elaborated upon transformationally. Focussing on the expression mind of winter, Edelson runs through the many underlying disambiguations it could have, e.g., "a mind made out of winter," "a mind full of thoughts about winter," or "a mind which is identical to winter." In analyzing the sense of the poem Edelson proceeds line by line and discusses what possible meanings each segment could have, much as he would in a psychoanalytic session. He concludes that the poet has achieved a true perception of winter by resisting an immersion in it and not relinquishing his perspective as a human being.

Perhaps the most remarkable section of the book is Edelson's treatment of the sound pattern of The Snow Man. Since the arrangement of consonants and vowels in the poem is reminiscent of a musical composition, Edelson classifies all sounds in terms of their musical impressions. Vowels become "chords," stops are "percussives," and nasals are labeled "hums." A general distinction is made between phonemes which are musical (vowels, glides, liquids--"duophones" in Edelson's terminology) and those which are not (stops and fricatives, for example). The result of Edelson's detailed treatment is a complex orchestration--a musical score--for the poem, which must have been very difficult to set into print.

Despite the rather shallow application of linguistics, I feel that I can recommend the reading of this book. Edelson is a gifted writer, with many provocative ideas. As I came to the end of the last chapter, I imagined myself finally able to sort out the differences in approach to literature properly to be taken by linguists, psychoanalysts, literary critics, and those readers who are none of the above but wish simply to enjoy what they are reading. Linguists concern themselves with the structure of the language and its generation in terms of the writer's knowledge of the grammar, his presuppositions, presumptions and affective state. Psychoanalysts are interested in the text not for its intrinsic structure or value but as a reflection of the state of mind of the one who composed it. Readers who are not linguists or psychoanalysts attempt to make the text part of their personal experience. Finally, literary critics must have all three of these concerns. Of course, I may be wrong or over-simplifying, or both. If I am right, however, literary critics have the most difficult job of all!

The question remains about the adaptability of transformational grammar to psychoanalysis. The principle of rule-governance and the belief in innate, universal elements of language do appear to find useful application in the psychoanalytic setting. But other matters are not so easily transferred. Chomsky's grammar postulates the notion of ideal speaker-hearers. These speaker-hearers are ageless, sexless, and classless. They are nothing more than generators of sentences. It is enough for Chomsky and the other transformationalists who follow him that ideal speaker-hearers behave in accordance with innate grammars. In other words transformational grammars are concerned strictly with representational language. The output of such grammars gives sentences which are entitled to have one or more literal senses but none of the metaphorical ones. Efforts to account for metaphor in a transformational approach have not been very successful.

At most, transformational grammar (as would any kind of grammar) may contribute to the theory of explanation for the psychoanalyst but not to the theory of interpretation. The latter is probably more like a theory of linguistic performance than one of linguistic competence. But even as a theory of competence or explanation, the 1965 Aspects model has been superceded by others such as those of Fillmore and Chafe. The reader may wish to consult one excellent application of Fillmore's case grammar to psychoanalysis, by Robert N. Ross ("Semantic differences in representation of self and others in the speech of two patients," 1975ms., Division of Psychiatry, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts).

Edelson offers a critique of Erikson's view of the psychotherapeutic encounter as having an historical dimension, which recalls the contrast between historical actuality and theoretical correctness drawn long ago by Giambattista Vico (The New Science of Giambattista Vico, translated by T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch, Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1968). Vico sought a science of humanity which would recognize the inevitable involvement of the scientist as a human himself, and would deal with it. Vico understood that the so-called "spectator" theory of Descartes and other rationalists could not work in fields that involve the study of human behavior. The psychoanalyst has to take into account the effect of his presence in the interaction with the analysand. It follows that a linguistics which ignores the pragmatics of language use must fail to be fully useful in any theory of psychoanalytic interpretation. One of the accomplishments of this book is to suggest to the reader just how far grammatically-oriented theories can go in the psychoanalysis of human language.

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