Literary Critical Theory and the English Education Specialist

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I must start with a disclaimer. I am not a specialist in literary critical theory. I am, however, interested in it, have dabbled in it enough to have developed an instrument to test what undergraduates in teacher training programs know about it. This seems to have been enough, not to qualify me to submit this paper, but enough to have gotten me an invitation to submit it. Therefore, if much of what I have to say seems elementary and obvious to you, I apologize for it, but I myself am just discovering what may already be obvious to you.

Perhaps the first thing to acknowledge is that there is no such thing as a critical theory. There are theories, all of which in some way or other contradict each other. No two critics even within the same school agree in all detail with each other. Within the group commonly classified as New Critics, T. S. Eliot disagrees with I. A. Richards about the nature of the creative act. John Crowe Ransom disagrees with Cleanth Brooks about the "structure" of a poem. René Wellek and Austin Warren disagree with I. A. Richards about the "mode of existence" of a work of art. And they all would disagree with Northrop Frye, in his Anatomy of Criticism, relegates New Criticism, as W. K. Wimsatt puts it, to the "wintry cellar" of criticism.

If one were so inclined, one could easily despair of what some have called "the chaos of criticism" in our time, since theoretical critics do not seem even to agree on what the word criticism means—much less words like genre, form, structure, and the like. So each creates his own private lexicon; each builds his own special system. There are biographical critics and psychological critics and typological critics and textual critics and mythological critics. You name it; it probably exists.

It was surely this sense of disorder which prompted Northrop Frye to construct his Anatomy on the assumption—or perhaps the pious hope—that criticism is a science and, as a science, consists of an organized body of knowledge whose principles, though not entirely known at present, once elucidated would form a coherent and comprehensive theory of literature, uniting what appear to be the most disparate of critical theories and practices.1

We all like a tidy universe. We would all like to have an established authority in criticism. But I think it is highly unlikely that we will get one for some time. And because we have no such center we will continue to have among us the town criers who periodically announce the ruin of Pompeii. Destruction

was proclaimed with the advent of theories of structural and transformational grammars, but we have learned to live with them—even to profit from them. And this brings me to a second point.

Rightly or wrongly, like it or not, critical theories have influenced our teaching of literature in the secondary schools ever since English has been a bona fide subject in the curriculum, and they will continue to do so in the future. It would not be difficult, I think, to document the relationship of moralistic criticism (later to be known as the New Humanism) to practices in the secondary school just before and after the turn of the century. The identification of the study of literature with a cultural and social elite, with the development of intellectual and moral leadership is surely evident in the continuing recommendations by the Committees on Uniform College Entrance Requirements of that period: All secondary school youth should read Silas Marner, Ivanhoe, Julius Caesar ... you can supply the rest.

Of course, the moral approach to literature was an ancient and most honored one even before there was such a thing as secondary school English. Moral interests are so basic to man that it should not surprise us that the concept of literature as a criticism of life, as a record of the "best that has been thought and said," should be such a mainstay of secondary school programs in the twentieth century.

The questions of literature's ability to make propositional statements, to yield truths, to inspire belief became central issues of the New Criticism. They became issues because of a need by these critics to take literature out of competition with philosophy, science, history, and ethics. The issue became one of justifying poetry, as Murray Krieger puts it, "by securing for it a unique function for which modern scientism cannot find a surrogate."2

We all now know the direction that this justification took: an attempt to find a unique function for poetry through an aesthetics of autonomy. With it came T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative" and W. K. Wimsatt's "intentional" and "affective" fallacies. "Aesthetic distance" and "complexity" became criteria for good poetry. For a while one dared not open his mouth about literature for fear of being cast into hell for committing "the heresy of paraphrase."

New Criticism or formalism, as it is sometimes called, made substantial contributions to our understanding of the intrinsic qualities of literature, and I wish to return to these later. I only wish to point out here that the New Critics were not altogether successful in establishing an objective theory of aesthetic value for literature, and that we now seem to be witnessing the birth of another New Humanism, not altogether unlike what reached a peak of emphasis in the thirties in this country. The instituting of high school courses in the humanities, the recent establishment of a national endowment for the humanities, the demand from some quarters that the NCTE sponsor bigger and better humanities conferences—all suggest a return to considerations of moral value, to literature's content value.

LITERARY CRITICAL THEORY

In a paper read at the NCTE meeting in Honolulu last year, Maxine Greene noted that "the shift has already begun." She illustrated by referring to an article in College English by H. V. S. Ogden, about which Miss Greene said, "He assumes that the study of literature is carried on mainly as a means to the end of 'intellectual, emotional, and moral development of the individual mind.' From an explicitly humanist vantage point, he asserts that 'only a narrow and technical knowledge' can be gained through study of works of literature perceived as 'constructs integrated into self-contained wholes."

Miss Greene went on to say that the value plight of the younger generation and our cultural situation at large promote an approach to art that will justify its study for its intellectual and moral values. But she also warned that such an approach represents a return to extrinsic considerations and that the "specter of didacticism lurks behind it" and "threatens once again . . . the integrity of literary art forms."

This same issue emerges in a monograph titled Friends to This Ground—a recent assessment by the NCTE's Commission on Literature on "the particular values in literature and . . . its place in the current swirl of adjustments in education . . ." After identifying some of the various—and seemingly conflicting—claims made for the study of literature, William Stafford writes:

Teachers of English live amidst these arguments and often find it enticing to claim many distinctive values for literature; but when there is need to justify their work in the face of aggressive claims from other subjects, it is tempting to slight the intricate and tentative appeals of art . . . . Au luxious to validate our subject, we have claimed for it a place among the exacting studies presumably stabilized in a realm more secure than the human. But we may have to accept the idea that the human experiences that get play in literature provide its only validation. At this stage of discussion among members of our profession, it is probably impossible to sort out the strands of our confusion.

I think it is possible to sort out some of the strands of our confusion, and this, then, becomes point three: part of our confusion is owing to our willingness to be persuaded by literary critics and educators alike that human experience—the source of validation for literature—must be defined in accordance with some one particular system for examining art's values.

In our willingness to find, once and for all, some justification for literature, we are often tempted to retreat into that blind alley of the dichotomy of form and content. We feel pressed to choose either/or. We somehow believe we cannot choose both/and. But we can, indeed, choose both/and if we are willing to maintain that literature's formal properties are part of the "human experience" of art, too. Surely this is what the past forty years of New Criticism has been about.

But it may have been the New Criticism that a parent had rather bitterly in mind when he said to me recently: "If you guys should decide to teach sex in

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4Ibid., p. 7.
4William Stafford, Friends to This Ground (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p. vi.
6Ibid., pp. 17, 19.
the schools and if you do it the way you teach English, within five years you'll have a foolproof method of birth control. There just won't be any interest in sex any more."

To be sure, the New Criticism is in part responsible for our nonhumanizing approaches to literature; but, like the ancient dualism of form and content, the New Criticism reached a theoretical dead end. It has never been able to solve the problem of how poetry, as a totally unique and autonomous verbal construction, can be both referential and nonreferential. Our concern with its referential character, with what we usually call its "content," should not make us retreat, however, to the view that literature consists of some content—economic, political, ethical—which is embellished and ornamented like a birthday cake. New Criticism, if it has done anything, has shown us the integral relationships between form and content. It has given to us some indispensable concepts for examining literature: tone, point of view, symbolism, texture, irony, and the like.

And, after all, what are theories for if not to provide hypotheses, to map out a terrain, and to establish methods of inquiry? Theoretical systems are constructs which allow the critic to investigate some aspect of literature and to pass along those insights that are yielded up. We need not accept as final a definition of literature or a statement of its unique value that may accompany some one system. In fact, no one theory fully accounts for literature and our experiences with it.

But, of course, it is not sufficient for us merely to recognize that there exists a plurality of valid kinds of criticism, each of which employs some special methodology. We must know the theories and methods well enough to use them in our training of English teachers and in our own research. It is to these last two points that I wish to devote the remainder of my paper.

First, the problem of using criticism in the training of teachers. In a methods course we are always concerned with an ends-means relationship, and we want our potential English teachers to be so concerned. One way we can do this is by showing how, at the outset of any class discussion of literature, the kinds of questions asked limit and define what is to be, or what can be, known about the literature under discussion. And further, these questions automatically imply some conception of literature and its values which teachers, by the very nature of the teaching-learning process, pass along to their students.

I can remember all too vividly an undergraduate course in Shakespeare where the professor gave to us elaborate statements by D. A. Traversi, Ernest Jones, and Edmund Wilson about what Hamlet "means." Of course, the professor never bothered to tell us how these critics arrived where they did, what assumptions they made, what aspect of the work they were especially concerned with. I left the course hopelessly confused and joined the vast numbers of students who regard interpreting literature as a task second only to explaining the Immaculate Conception.

If we ask questions exclusively about the interrelationships of the language system, how these operate to produce form and meaning sui generis, we are employing some variety of New Criticism. If, on the other hand, we ask
questions about the work's effect on us in comparison to the effect produced by other works of the same kind—not on the basis of the language system, but on the basis of the action that the work imitates—we are probably employing a typological or genre criticism. If we ask questions about the cultural patterns, specific and universal, which are reflected in a work through its recurrent images, we are using an archetypal criticism to derive form and meaning.

Of course, the foregoing statements are gross simplifications of what any one system entails, but they do illustrate what I believe to be the essential rightness of Frye's statement that we do not teach literature directly, only criticism of it, since response to literature is always to some extent personal and private. We may not ever fully and finally answer the persistent question that students ask: "Why study literature?" But criticism may help us enlarge the context in which a satisfying answer may be found.

Our unique responsibility, as methods teachers, should be with showing those teachers-to-be how they can use criticism to make the manifold values of literature accessible to youth. They do this not by subjecting their students to elaborate critical systems and not by slinging its jargon. Rather, they use criticism first, to supply consistent contexts in which discussions of meaning and value may occur; second, to help change wayward and haphazard responses to literature into more systematic and informed ones; and third, to develop classroom strategies for bringing students and literature together.

Let me illustrate this last point by calling your attention to an article which appeared in the English Journal a couple of years ago. The article, by Ben Nelms, is called "Reading for Pleasure in Junior High School." In it, Nelms argues for a legitimate place for the adolescent novel in junior high schools. He further argues that since the same structural patterns and thematic content are present in these more popular novels as are present in those qualitatively superior books that we teach in the classroom, why not use this knowledge to make a connection between the reading that goes on outside of the classroom with the reading that goes on inside? Clearly, Nelms has taken one of the major concepts in Frye's Anatomy of Criticism and applied it to the end of reducing what I believe is the "credibility gap" that secondary school youth sense in English classrooms.

Does our using criticism in this fashion mean the surrender of critical standards? Yes, I suppose it does if what is meant by "critical standard" is some absolute and unchanging value that must accompany experience with particular works of literature. Literature itself changes as the context in which it is read and discussed changes. Recognition of that fact should help our teachers avoid playing with their students that silly game called "rank the poets." Even if you are convinced that your judgment is right and true, and most of us do believe that, Frye points out that as a tactical maneuver it makes little sense to tell students that their judgment is in error. Better that we help them recognize the reasons for which they presently value.

Another question. Does this mean that we must endorse eclecticism? Yes it does, though I prefer the term "perspectivism" since it implies a knowing and systematic choice rather than a random flitting from one framework to another. I submit that our considerations must be wholly pragmatic. For example, I have often thought that Frye's principles could be employed with culturally disadvantaged youth to effect a union between "subcultural" experiences and what we like to think of as the mainstream of cultural experiences. At least it is a hypothesis to test. And it is on that note that I wish to turn, finally, to the continuing and reciprocal relationship between critical theory and empirical research.

We are perhaps unaware that a singular event occurred in critical theory in the 1920's. That event was the wedding of critical theory (or aesthetics) with psychology in the criticism of I. A. Richards, and to it we owe much of what little knowledge we presently have about response to literature. Richards' attempt to develop a theory of criticism which rested on an account of value and an account of communication led him away from traditional aesthetics to a theory grounded in experimental psychology.

In Principles of Literary Criticism, Richards objects to the idea so long held in traditional aesthetics that the experience of art is sui generis because this conception leads one to view the "arts as providing a private heaven for aesthetes" and to a consequent impediment to the investigation of the value of the arts.\(^8\)

Richards tried to locate aesthetic value in the experience of the reader, and he described that value in psychological terms as the efficient organization of impulses and attitudes, a "finer organization of ordinary" (italics mine), not different, experiences.\(^9\)

Not only did his theory provide a way to make the experience of literature available to the many instead of the few (like Northrop Frye's in our own time), but it led him to his famous "protocol" method for identifying and examining sources of difficulty in apprehending and interpreting literature.

Though we may not agree with Richards' notion of what the understanding of a text involves, his method encouraged similar studies for discovering dimensions of response to literature. I wish to mention only two of those studies here, one rather well known, the other not well known but destined to be.

The well-known one is James R. Squire's The Responses of Adolescents While Reading Four Short Stories.\(^10\) The significance of Squire's study is that it attempted to record the thought processes involved in responses as they occur, and it employed sophisticated statistical procedures to relate patterns of response to variables such as ability, personality predispositions, sex differences, and the like.

\(^9\)Ibid., p. 16.
The other study, just published as a part of the NCTE Research Report series, is titled *Elements of Writing about a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature* by Alan C. Purves with Victoria Rippere.\(^\text{11}\) This truly remarkable piece of research addresses itself to the methodological problem of characterizing the typical patterns of written response to literature by thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds both here and abroad. Purves cuts across the usual categories of criticism—historical, biographical, psychological, etc.—to classify elements of written response into four broad categories: engagement-involvement, perception, interpretation, and evaluation. Any one category contains a number of elements of written response, some of which are undoubtedly learned. For example, the category for perception alone contains no less than fifty-seven separate entries of constituents of written response.

Of course, the identification of a large number of elements of written response is not what makes this report exciting, though, to be sure, the Purves study reminds us again how very complex response can be, even with adolescents. What I find exciting about the report are these possibilities:

1. Not only that we may now be able to perceive with greater clarity the complex nature of response, but that we may be able to describe it with greater precision than we have heretofore. Perhaps this fact alone will help us move away from an outmoded conception of response which makes us talk about “ooh” and “aah” experiences with literature—“ooh” to be identified with emotional response and “aah” to be identified with cognitive response.

2. That we may now begin to talk about response in the more neutral terms that Purves gives us. Maybe one day we can discard terms like “appreciate” and “enjoy” as serving no useful descriptive purpose in research. These have probably served as much to cloak our understanding as to enlighten it.

3. That this report will encourage similar kinds of studies of response to literature, since it provides a broad, workable framework for analyzing expressed response. For example, I should like to see a longitudinal study which tried to establish frequency of kinds of response at different age or grade levels. We might expect that younger readers make more statements about their engagement than they do their perception, though we do not know for sure. Maybe engagement-involvement statements are more numerous when perception is clear. In what ways are perception and interpretation related? Do the kinds of statements made vary with the kind of literature which is studied? With the kind of critical framework used to discuss literature? If readers are left to themselves for long periods of time, as in individualized reading programs, will their written responses tend to exhibit more of one kind of response than another? Are students more evaluative or less under

\(^{11}\) Alan C. Purves and Victoria Rippere, *Elements of Writing about a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature*, NCTE Research Report No. 9 (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968). Mr. Purves was kind enough to let me read his page proofs.
these conditions? Do they make more statements of engagement-involvement or less?
All of these questions plus the ones you have already thought of could provide topics for dissertations for many years to come.
At this point in time it is probably impossible to document the full extent of our indebtedness to the critical work of I. A. Richards; any criticism which concerns itself with spectator response—and not all criticisms do—must have an impact on those of us who are especially interested in the problems of the literary education of the young. For one thing, Richards' joining criticism with psychology probably paved the way for those hundreds of studies we now have on the reading preferences of adolescents. A statement of preference is also a response to literature.

His influence can be seen in the work of people like Lou LaBrant and Louise Rosenblatt, and most especially in Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* (1938) where, in addition to Richards' notion that art provides coherence to experience, one notes also the stress on the highly individual nature of response. Incidentally, *Literature as Exploration* has been reissued this year in paperback (Noble & Noble). Is that another sign of our renewed concern for response to literature?

Perhaps it is some sort of irony that the New Criticism was significantly advanced through the work of Richards even though we in education seem to have profited as much from his critical theory. The New Criticism took his concept of irony and modified his concept of tension, though it could not abide the relativity implied in his definition of aesthetic experience. We took his neurological concept of response and often employed it as a theoretical justification for looking through literature at something else called "needs." There is a moral in this. Ours is a dual responsibility: on the one hand we must know critical theories and practices which focus on the literary object to be perceived; on the other we must be sensitive to the complexity of response and ever alert to how we can use response to create literary meaning and value. We cannot sacrifice one to the other.