

American Literary Criticism in Search of  
Literary Theory  
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Bloomfield, Morton W. (ed.):  
In Search of Literary Theory.  
Ithaca, London: Cornell U. Press, 1972

Morris, Wesley:  
Toward a New Historicism.  
Princeton, N. J.: Princeton U. Press, 1972

Goodheart, Eugene:  
Culture and the Radical Conscience.  
Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. Press, 1973

At certain times there seems to exist a special need for a renewed theoretical orientation. Obviously, American literary criticism has arrived at such a stage right now. After a long period of unquestioned reign of new-critical contextualism and after nearly as long a period of questioning and revising it, a climate of uncertainty is now prevalent which no contribution to the current theoretical dialogue can afford to ignore. Opposing perceptions of what the core of the problem is have led critics into various directions to solve it - toward "dialectical" criticism and a renewed interest in Marxist literary theory; toward "scientific" criticism and quantitative methods; toward structuralism or hermeneutics; toward a culture-and-society approach or a "new" historicism. The essay collection edited by M. Bloomfield and the studies by Morris and Goodheart belong to this variety of contending approaches in "search of literary theory". Their analysis can serve to exemplify a few of the characteristic responses to the challenge.

I.

'In Search of Literary Theory' is not a book which aims at a comprehensive survey of the state of literary theory - in contrast, for example, to the recent essay collection 'Contemporary Criticism' edited by Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer. It comprises six papers written by renowned literary theorists such as Northrop Frye, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Geoffrey Hartman, Paul De Man, Meyer Abrams and the editor, in conjunction with two conferences on literary theory held in 1968 and 1969. With the exception of the contribution by Abrams, all the essays have been previously published in the spring 1970 issue of 'Daedalus'. The special interest of the volume, then, lies in the solutions offered to the current dilemma by well-established literary theorists, since it is their common purpose to find "a firm theoretical base for dealing with literature." (p. vii) "All the essays", the editor claims in his preface, "deal responsibly with issues basic to literary study." (p. vii) What, however, are the essential elements of a "firm theoretical base for dealing with literature"?

In his essay 'Value and Knowledge in the Humanities' E. D. Hirsch, Jr., most emphatically insists on the "scientific" side of literary criticism. He starts out from the recent "pleas for re-examination and self-justification" in the humanities. In the various responses, he finds "complacency on the one side or mindless moralism on the other." (p. 58) To be sure, he is not satisfied with the conservative defense of the humanities in terms of "academic freedom" and "knowledge for its own sake" because it fails to acknowledge

the inescapable centrality of value and relevance. On the other hand, the radical answer strikes him as "irresponsible in a different way." (p. 59):

"The radical activist is naive to suppose that inquiry as such can be bound to an ideology. Only the choice of a question is in the province of moral or ideological commitment. Once the choice is made, the results of inquiry are determined by evidence and by logic." (p. 59)

For Hirsch, the basic problem of literary theory resulting from this analysis is the need to correct "scientific skepticism". The centrality of relevance and value is correctly perceived by critics of the conservative position, yet it is given priority to an extent which questions the possibility of "scientific inquiry" in general. "Many humanists ... have lost faith in the scientific side of their enterprise." (p. 60) Hirsch's essay is an attempt to restore this faith. His basic strategy is to negate "the attempt to formulate a satisfactory theoretical distinction between the cognitive element in the humanities and in the natural sciences." (p. 62) If this dichotomy cannot be maintained, all serious inquiry must be governed by precisely the same scientific laws, namely "the critical testing of hypotheses with reference to evidence and logic." (p. 64) Thus, "the logic of this scientific process is the same for all subject matters ..." (p. 68) Once this is accepted by literary critics, "the discipline will regain its health." (p. 67)

The solution of the current perplexity seems simple - a little too simple we have reason to believe in view of a vast body of literature pointing out various difficulties in the application of positivist laws of evidence and logic to the humanities. Unfortunately, it is at this most interesting point that Hirsch's argument breaks off. The theoretical and practical consequences of his approach are not worked out. I doubt whether his impulse toward more rationality, validity, and logic in the humanities would be seriously disputed *per se*. If possible, who wouldn't want it? The argument against it by the various anti-positivist positions is not necessarily that it would not be desirable, but rather that a) it is not possible for literary studies to be "scientific" in the sense of logical positivism and b) that even if it would be possible it would not be sufficient as criterion of the "validity" and relevance of the results.

Is the centrality of relevance and value really only a matter of the choice of question? Interpretation and method in literary studies, it seems to me, cannot be separated from an underlying value interest. If, for example, a critic decides to interpret a text in terms of "structure" (because out of a certain dominating literary theory this might appear to him as the self-evident "scientific" goal of literary criticism) this interest in structure will inevitably and decisively determine all further steps of his procedure. It will direct his attention to certain features of the work; it will thereby recommend certain elements as invested with value, whereas other features will be ignored. This interdependence cannot be eliminated by merely replacing scientific skepticism with scientific optimism. What is especially unsatisfactory about Hirsch's argument is, in other words, the abstract and superficial level at which it remains. As it is, the paper contributes little more to the solution of the current "perplexity" than an abstract reassessment of the positivist credo.

In the desire to solve the dilemma by becoming as accurate and predictable as the natural scientist, Hirsch stands for a significant trend in the current search of literary theory. It is a trend reflecting the tremendously high scientific status which analytic philosophy deriving from Bertrand Russell and the older Wittgenstein has gained in the United States and England. Not

surprisingly, some literary theorists have resorted to it in a vague hope of obtaining useful suggestions for solving the theoretical dilemma of literary criticism. It is this hope that is challenged by Abrams in his essay 'What's the Use of Theorizing about the Arts?' Clearly, it is the best and most penetrating contribution of the whole volume. Its starting point is the claim of analytical theorists that "valid critical or aesthetic theory is a logical impossibility." (p. 3) How else can we explain, "that no one has yet located a common feature of objects denoted by the general term 'art' that will satisfy more than a fraction of people who profess to be experts on the subject?" (p. 24) Yet, Abrams is not content with the easy way in which analytic philosophy disposes of all aesthetic theory for three reasons: 1) It is not the sole function of theory to define "art". 2) Not all definitions necessarily rest on the mistaken assumption that there exists something like an "essence" of art. 3) Even if they are based on this assumption, there is still some use for this type of logically untenable generalization: just by its actual function as persuasive rhetoric under the logical disguise of an essential definition, it teaches people how to look at new features of aesthetic objects. Abrams' argument is most convincing where he ingeniously points out that the very critics who reject the possibility of general statements about what art is do not themselves hesitate to make unqualified assertions about art. The argument against the validity of aesthetic generalizations is itself based on a specific aesthetic theory. By giving a short and compressed outline of the history of aesthetic theories in the last centuries, Abrams shows how certain terms have become so much a part of "the current coin of aesthetic interchange" (p. 47) as to require no defense or explicit justification by the analytic theorists. This demonstration most impressively supports his basic claim: that literary criticism - like it or not - inevitably presupposes literary theory. It can never become "theory-free" as some analytic theorists claim it should in order to gain scientific status.

If there is one thing this essay leaves to be desired it is the fact that it, too, confines itself to reasserting a basic position: there is some use in generalizing about the arts after all. Abrams also advises us not to restrict ourselves to the position of analytic aesthetics, but he unfortunately does not take up the question of an alternative approach. Obviously, it was not part of his intentions at that time. Nevertheless, it would be very interesting to see his theoretical acumen being applied to this task.

In a way, one might think that this is what Frye and Hartman have attempted to do in their essays, since it is their purpose to provide a new perspective for literary history. In his essay 'The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism' Frye aims at a "theory of criticism which would, first, account for the major phenomena of literary experience, and, second, would lead to some view of the place of literature in civilization as a whole." (p. 93 f.) For Frye, the most convincing path to the first goal has been laid out by contextualism. But, although "the great merit of explicatory criticism was that it accepted poetic language as the basis for poetic meaning ... at the same time, it deprived itself of the great strength of documentary criticism: the sense of context." (p. 99) The dilemma is very far from being solved and Frye's paper is an attempt to suggest a "new path". He is, however, not at all interested in a sociology of literature as it is commonly understood, because he looks "for some context ... within literature itself." (p. 100) Usually, he claims, literature is merely "assimilated" to some other kind of history. In contrast, he regards certain structural elements in the literary tradition, "such

as conventions, genres, and the recurring use of certain images or image-clusters, which I came to call archetypes" as the creative and informing power operating on the poet specifically as a craftsman, and making possible "the creation of new works of literature out of earlier ones." (p.102) Literary history properly understood would then be the history of certain structural elements within the literary tradition. The "new path", after some 100 pages or so, turns out to be the old familiar highway after all. There are just a few new signs on the roadside. As a contribution to something like a "new" or at least a revised perspective on literary history, such a result is clearly disappointing, since it continues to isolate the literary tradition as a self-sustaining entity. Its inadequacy is closely connected with two basic convictions of questionable validity which nevertheless seem to be indestructible and self-perpetuating. One is the unwarranted assumption that the contextualist approach alone is capable of doing justice to literature. The achievement of contextualism lies in pointing out to us the values of "close reading" and the need for looking at the structure of the work itself. Yet this achievement should not lead us to the familiar confusion of a "literary" interpretation with its definition by contextualism. I can see no reason why it should not be possible to interpret a text closely, to take its structural elements into account and still see it as cultural expression in connection with the "outer" historical and social situation to which it responded. Obviously we need not make an either/or choice.

The second unfortunate heritage from the contextualist heyday is the sweeping view that all attempts at a sociology of literature are necessarily "deterministic" or "documentary"; that they are principally and inherently incapable of being "literary". This argument has been so generally accepted by American literary criticism that Frye nowhere attempts to take a closer look at current reassessments from which his discussion could have profited considerably. Instead he constantly alludes to earlier prescriptions of social realism as if they are to be considered as paradigmatic for all attempts to define the relationships between literature and its social context. The case against the possibility of a sociology of literature appears to be settled once and for all. Frye's use of terms is illuminating in this respect. Anybody attempting to go beyond an "inner" history of literature is immediately identified with the view "that the literary form of a work of literature is a negligible and arbitrary feature" and "that only the content of literature need be taken seriously" (p.188), or, that "society does . . . simply produce plays and poems and novels . . ." (p.187). It is this categorical and simplifying manner in which the possibility of a sociology of literature is dealt with in terms of its worst errors that I find especially vulnerable. One suspects that the reason for this lack of effort to understand the adversary position is that Frye was not really interested from the start in seriously discussing the possibility of a non-contextualist literary history. This would have obliged him to adopt an inquiring rather than a contentions posture. It would have meant "to look and see . . . what is going on, rather than what one is certain in advance must be going on" - as M. Abrams aptly puts it in view of the easy disposal of literary theory by analytic philosophy.

Geoffrey Hartman, in an essay entitled 'Toward Literary History', insists on the necessity of a newly-conceived literary history "because it alone can provide today a sorely needed defense of art." (p.199) Here, too, the main difficulty is seen in the need to "ground art in history without denying its

autonomy, its aristocratic resistance to the tooth of time" (p.199). The solution is found in the writing of literary history from the point of view of the poets or of poetry. By confining literary history to what he calls the genius/Genius relation (the artist's struggle with past masters) and/or the genius / genius loci relation (his quarrel with the dominant climate of opinion), Hartman's approach is another attempt to reconcile what is usually called history of ideas with a contextualist view of literature. The innovation remains one of using new or at least not commonly used terms whose usefulness is candidly admitted: "They have some kinship, obviously, with race, milieu, and moment, but they are free of special sociological meaning . . ." (p.217) In other words, they suggest some vague "context", yet are flexible and vague enough not to commit the "sociological" error of specifying it more concretely. Such a modification of terminology might provide some distance to an outdated contextualism, but it certainly is not anywhere near providing "a sorely needed defense of art" (p.199). The contrary might be true.

Neither do the remaining essays by Bloomfield and De Man take us very far in the search of literary theory promised by the book's title. For all the effort expended on the problem, they both end up reasserting very basic insights indeed. In Bloomfield's essay it is the existence of "The Two Cognitive Dimensions of the Humanities" which leads to a warning against either a "scientific" or a "subjectivist" reduction of literary criticism. In an essay on 'Literary History and Literary Modernity', De Man even toys temporarily with the idea of "a revision of the notion of history and, beyond that, of the notion of time on which our idea of history is based." (p.267) But the argument that emerges in the end is that "what we call literary interpretation - provided only it is a good interpretation - is in fact literary history." (p.267) This surprising anti-climax is very well suited to express the general perplexity with which the reader is left by the whole book. Rather than offering, as intended, "a firm theoretical base for dealing with literature" the authors - with the exception of Abrams - merely reflect the theoretical helplessness of the current literary establishment in view of the present crisis.

## II.

The study by Wesley Morris, 'Toward a New Historicism', must be seen as an attempt to supply additional theoretical substance to the special type of historicism Murray Krieger and - less influentially - R.H. Pearce have been advocating in recent years as an extension of contextualism. The book is the revised version of a Ph.D. dissertation, and Morris acknowledges in his preface that he is "indebted beyond measure to Murray Krieger." (p.ix) He also points out that the purpose of the book is to provide a synthesis "from which the foundation for a vital new study of literature may be constructed." (p.vii) Why is this vital new study necessary? For, "since the high tide of the New Criticism the profession has been inundated by treatises that would return us to the sanity of historical perspective . . . we are not much nearer understanding the claims we want to make." (p.3) The reason, he claims, has to be sought in a separation of the historical and critical approaches to literature. The basic task, then, is to overcome this polarity. Morris' definition of the "basic difficulty" is reminiscent of Hartman's version of the problem in asking "... how can the work be 'profoundly' influenced by these extrinsic activities and still be considered 'autonomous'?" (p.26) Most of Morris' attention and space is given to an outline of how traditional and newer historicisms have dealt with this "dual mode of existence" of the literary work of art.

In the first section of the book, Morris discusses what he calls "The American Historical Tradition: V. L. Parrington", "American Marxian Literary Theory" and "The Critical Heritage of Van Wyck Brooks". Part 2 is devoted to "The Rediscovery of Historicism" by critics like J. C. Ransom, M. Bewley, R. W. B. Lewis, F. O. Matthiessen, P. Goodman, F. J. Hoffman, H. Levin, R. H. Pearce and, of course, M. Krieger. One may not find the selection entirely satisfactory, but it is in this reconstruction of an American historicist tradition that the special usefulness of the study lies. Not surprisingly, the adequacy of Morris' treatment of the different positions depends on how close they have come to his own definition of a possible solution. His discussion of Marxist literary theory, for example, is not very helpful. The most prominent position in this reconstruction is actually granted to M. Krieger, since "Krieger specifically sets for himself the task of uniting literary criticism and literary history." (p. 196) Although Morris does not think that Krieger has managed to resolve this polarity, I cannot see that his own tentative suggestions in the last six pages of the book go beyond Krieger's position in any significant sense. Since he shares most of Krieger's assumptions the conclusions are rather similar. For example, Morris is not satisfied with the way Krieger bases his theory on the "organic miracle" - the concept of poetry's miraculous embodiment of acculturated meanings and values of language while at the same time the old words are transformed "into a literally new Word, the poem." (p. 211) Yet he himself resorts to familiar contextualist mystifications whenever he attempts to specify at least loosely what "the new historicist critic is supposed to do. "As the poet's vision, locked in the poetic structure, is freed from the restrictions of his social milieu, so the reader's vision of his world is set free by the structure of his response to the work." (p. 212 f.) In other words, "literature in the very materials of its existence brings history into being." (p. 212) Only qua structure does literature contain history and, thus, only by studying "contextually successful poetry" can we get at the true historical meaning of literature.

In my opinion there is a close connection between this type of contextualist apology and the inability to solve the "organicist-historicist dilemma" which he, too, merely reaffirms. To this extent, his book bears obvious similarities to the essays by Frye, Hartman, and De Man. For all the attempts toward "social context", "toward literary history" or "toward historicism" their position unmistakably remains that of an essentially unrevised contextualism with a slight historicist make-up. Because they stick to the contextualist's notion of literary value, they dare not move very far beyond it in relating aesthetic and historical aspects. Otherwise, they would be in danger of appearing "non-literary", which in the current climate of American critical opinion is still the worst of all possible crimes. They would, in other words, fall prey to the successful symbolic strategies developed by contextualism in defense of its own monopoly in literary education. I find it hard, therefore, to share Morris' optimistic expectations of "a new movement that seems destined for a rich flourishing." (p. 13) There might be many further contributions attempting to reconcile literary structure and historical context. Yet it is difficult to conceive how they will be able to move beyond Krieger as long as they dare not challenge the supposedly self-evident authority of contextualism and its elevation of contextually successful poetry to the status of the supreme cultural value.

### III.

Eugene Goodheart, in his loosely coordinated collection of essays called 'Culture and the Radical Conscience', considers the preoccupation with "scientific" competence to have been damaging to the case of the humanities and to have resulted from the failure of conservative custodians of tradition to articulate a persuasive and "relevant" commitment. Both weaknesses, he claims, have generated a growing disaffection from cultural tradition and its failure to convincingly defend intellectual and literary tradition against radical thought. Despite obvious dangers and shortcomings, Goodheart realizes there is "enough truth in the challenge" to ask for a new and convincing answer. Thus, it is his main concern in most of the essays in this collection to face this challenge to culture in America. Referring mainly to critics like Roszak, Franklin, and Crews, he again and again points out basic and by now well-known shortcomings of the counter-culture: that the counter-culture, at least in a few of its manifestations, tends to confuse the culture it attacks with culture and education in general; and that by doing so it unwillingly joins forces with the technocratic and commercial attacks on culture. It is obvious that these rather general charges would profit from some differentiations and from some historical perspective. Written around 1968, they reflect the temporary impact cultural radicalism had on the American universities. The polemical circumstances in which most of the essays were written might explain the occasionally polemical overtones of Goodheart's attack. To be sure, the chosen manifestations of the counter-culture neither exhaust the arguments of the counter-culture itself, nor can they possibly do justice to all the other attempts which give priority to the question of value and relevance. Goodheart himself admits as much when he compares the American counter-culture with such British exponents of the culture-and-society approach as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart to whom he attributes reasonable attitudes which contrast favorably with the sectarianism of the American counter-culture. But if true it would have been worthwhile to limit his somewhat repetitive criticism of the counter-culture and to put more effort into discussing those approaches which have to be taken more seriously. In this regard it would also have been interesting not to restrict the analysis of American cultural radicalism to Franklin and Crews, but to include authors like Kampf, Lauter, Kessel, Ellis, and, above all, Ohmann, who often make a better case for this position.

Goodheart's preoccupation with cultural radicalism is not meant as a defense of the status quo: "To keep the traditional culture alive in us is not necessarily ... to affirm or celebrate it." (p. 15) In his own approach he aims at mediating between the claim for relevance and sustaining the integrity of independent disinterested liberal thought. G. Graff, in a recent essay on 'Aestheticism and Cultural Politics' (in: *Social Research*, 40, 1973) praises his work - together with that of Caute and Jameson - as a promising sign "that the necessary revision and revitalization of Marxist aesthetic theory may be under way ..." (p. 343) Unfortunately, this is an amazing claim for a position that - as a supposedly "lively alternative" to the current cult of method - resorts to "judicial criticism" rooted in taste and affection which seems to stem directly from Victorian criticism. Its essential method is characterized as "pointing to a great moment in a work and isolating it, so that it can be contemplated and enjoyed." (p. 53) Although Goodheart is careful not to encourage a facile or self-indulgent impressionism, the boundary line between "a cultivated personal response" and mere impressionism remains obscure.

The personal experience of the critic can be an adequate and significant experience indeed, but not simply because it is personal experience. It is not the attempt "to evaluate the significance or interest of the work" or the attempt to be more than purely exegetical that has to be criticized, but the return to an elusive criterion like the "personal cultivated response" to which the decision about the text's significance is delegated. Goodheart's argument may be a step away from contextualism, but it is a step in the wrong direction, actually a step backwards. It solves none of the existing problems and creates several new ones.

Where do these volumes in search of literary theory leave us then? It seems natural to expect valuable new insights from books called 'In Search of Literary Theory' or 'Toward a New Historicism'. Yet there is nothing novel about the three books. No new orientation is visible. Rather, their approaches should be viewed as new strategies to reassert old and basically unrevised positions - whether contextualist, positivist, or impressionist. The solutions they reach are the convictions they started with. If there is to be any progress, the first task would be to revise their underlying assumption about what the function of literature is or should be. For, in the final analysis, the current crisis is not primarily one of the scientific status or methodology of literary criticism. It is a crisis of the values from which literature has been traditionally approached. Hirsch, Abrams, and Bloomfield acknowledge the centrality of the problem but offer no specific suggestions at all for its solution. Frye, Hartman, De Man, and Morris implicitly or explicitly keep insisting on "contextually successful literature" as a supreme value - in other words, on the traditional contextualist apology. Goodheart, finally, retreats to a necessarily vague "personal element". In other words, the main accomplishment of the three books seems to lie in exposing what is not sufficient to solve the dilemma - which merely sharpens our notion of what needs to be done.

Approaches to Poetics.

Edited by Seymour Chatman.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1972

'Approaches to Poetics' is an oddly neutral title for this anthology, which records the impact of structural methodology on the speakers of the English Institute of 1972. That impact was not without its shocks, as these lively papers testify, and the resulting debate forms a good introduction to what has been called the structuralist controversy in the United States. <sup>1</sup>

The groundwork for that debate is laid by Seymour Chatman himself in his introductory note. Chatman is perfectly clear about the extent of structuralist claims and the kind of controversy they are likely to raise. He refers immediately to Todorov, the only continental critic directly represented here, and in particular to Todorov's claim to have found in structuralism a scientific method for the study of literature. In his introduction we hear the echo of Todorov's categorical statement in the final essay: "The structural analysis of literature is nothing other than an attempt to transform literary studies into a scientific discipline." (p.154) This statement has the authentic structuralist ring, and in it American critics often hear a call-to-arms.