

The Return to Philology

The quarrelsome tone that hangs over the debates on the teaching of literature can often be traced back to the advent of contemporary literary theory. This is certainly not surprising. Whenever new approaches or techniques are being advocated, a very understandable ill-humor overcomes those who feel they may have to modify or to reconsider well-established pedagogical habits that served them well until the most recent troublemakers came along. But the polemical response in the case of contemporary theory, and especially of some of its aspects, runs deeper.

It feeds not only on civilized conservatism but on moral indignation. It speaks with an anxiety that is not only that of a disturbed tranquillity but of a disturbed moral conscience. Nor is this mood confined to the opponents of theory. Its protagonists, in most cases, are just as nervous. When they appear not to be, their self-assurance often seems to be dependent on utopian schemes. The well-established rationale for the professing of literature has come under fire. Small wonder that it chooses to shoot back.

Ever since the teaching of literature became an autonomous academic field (and we are frequently reminded that this is a fairly recent development, going back *no further than the late nineteenth century*) it has justified itself as a humanistic and historical discipline, allied to yet distinct from the descriptive sciences of philology and rhetoric. Its ambitions, however, go beyond mere description. It not only has its own national and comparative history but, since it deals with a relatively stable canon of specific texts, it should be a model for the other historical sciences whose subject matter is less clearly defined.

Moreover, it has the task of determining the meaning of texts and this hermeneutic function establishes its kinship with theology.

Finally, as a depositor of human experience of considerable variety and scope, it gains access to questions of moral philosophy — questions of value and of normative judgment. Its technical and descriptive aspects as a science of language dovetail with its historical, theological and ethical function. The professor of literature has good reasons to feel appeased; his scientific conscience is satisfied by the positive rigor of his linguistic and historical knowledge, while his moral, political and (in the extensive sense) religious conscience is assuaged by the application of this knowledge to the understanding of the world, of society and of the self. The didactics of literature could legitimately hope to be exemplary for interdisciplinary humanistic studies. Neither is this hope incompatible with literary theory and literary criticism: some forms of theory, especially those which continue a tradition of aesthetic speculation that, in the field of English, can be traced back to Coleridge, fully confirm these expectations. This would be the case for such diverse names as those of I. A. Richards, Lionel Trilling, R. P. Blackmur and Northrop Frye.

It would, however, not be quite the same for William Empson or for Kenneth Burke, or, more recently, for some, predominantly French, critics and philosophers whose work takes into account investigations pursued in the field of structural linguistics and who have kindled the ire of their humanistic colleagues. Thus, in an influential article published in the Harvard alumni bulletin, *Harvard Magazine*, September-October 1982, the Distinguished Professor of English Literature, Walter Jackson Bate, author of outstanding books on Keats, Samuel Johnson and the intellectual history of romanticism, denounced the bankruptcy of literary studies. Their increased professionalism and specialization have failed, he claims, to rescue the humanities at a time when they are said to be “in the weakest state they ever suffered — bent on a self-destructive course, through a combination of anger, fear and purblind defensiveness.” In a historical overview that traces the gradual decay of literary teaching, Bate sees the increasing concentration on literary theory as the main cause for this decline. It culminates in the final catastrophe of the post-structural era, the invasion of departments of English by French influences that advocate “a nihilistic view of literature, of human communication, and of life itself.”

The main culprit, denounced by name, is Jacques Derrida, said to be a “puckish Parisian” (he is neither), “who never turns to the really major philosophers except to snatch at stale pessimisms” (e.g., Nietzsche). The remark suggests that Professor Bate, a careful scholar and brilliant teacher, has this time confined his sources of information to *Newsweek* magazine.

The crisis in the teaching of literature to which Bate alerts us is genuine enough. This does not mean, however, that his diagnosis or his remedies are

valid, even less so since these remedies do not take the form of a reasoned discussion but of an appeal to the administrative officers of the universities to deny tenure to teachers who concentrate on theory. The question to Bate's mind is not even in need of discussion. For all people of good will and good sense, the matter has long since been settled once and for all. What is left is a matter of law-enforcement rather than a critical debate. One must be feeling very threatened indeed to become so aggressively defensive.

My own awareness of the critical, even subversive, power of literary instruction does not stem from philosophical allegiances but from a very specific teaching experience. In the 1950s, Bate's colleague at Harvard, Reuben Brower, taught an undergraduate course in General Education entitled "The Interpretation of Literature" (better known on the Harvard campus and in the profession at large as HUM 6) in which many graduate students in English and Comparative Literature served as teaching assistants. No one could be more remote from high-powered French theory than Reuben Brower. He wrote books on Shakespeare and on Pope that are models of sensitive scholarship but not exactly manifestos for critical terrorism. He was much more interested in Greek and Latin literature than in literary theory. The critics he felt closest to, besides Eliot, were Richards and Leavis, and in both of them he was in sympathy with their emphasis on ethics.

Brower, however, believed in and effectively conveyed what appears to be an entirely innocuous and pragmatic precept, founded on Richards's "practical criticism." Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.

This very simple rule, surprisingly enough, had far-reaching didactic consequences. I have never known a course by which students were so transformed. Some never saw the point of thus restricting their attention to the matter at hand and of concentrating on the way meaning is conveyed rather than on the meaning itself. Others, however, caught on very quickly and, henceforth, they would never be the same. The papers they handed in at the end of the course bore little resemblance to what they produced at the beginning. What they lost in generality, they more than made up for in precision and in the closer proximity of their writing to the original mode. It did not make writing easier for them for they no longer felt free to indulge in any thought that came into their head or to

paraphrase any idea they happened to encounter. The profession is littered with the books that the students of Reuben Brower failed to write. Good readers often are spare writers and in the present state of literary studies, that is all to the good.

Here was a course, then, utterly devoid of subversive intentions as well as of theoretical objections. The conceptual and terminological apparatus was kept to a minimum, with only a few ordinary language terms for metalanguage. The entire stance was certainly not devoid of its own ideological and methodological assumptions, yet they managed to remain implicit without interfering with the procedures. Reuben Brower had a rare talent, not out of respect for the delicacy of language, for keeping things as tidy as a philosophical investigation ought to be yet, at the same time, entirely pragmatic. Mere reading, it turns out, prior to any theory, is able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would appear deeply subversive to those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history. Close reading accomplishes this often in spite of itself because it cannot fail to respond to structures of language which it is the more or less secret aim of literary teaching to keep hidden.

Attention to the philological or rhetorical devices of language is not the same as aesthetic appreciation, although the latter can be a way of access to the former. Perhaps the most difficult thing for students and teachers of literature to realize is that their appreciation is measured by the analytical rigor of their own discourse about literature, a criterion that is not primarily or exclusively aesthetic. Yet it separates the sheep from the goats, the consumers from the *professors* of literature, the chit-chat of evaluation from actual perception.

The personal experience of Reuben Brower's Humanities 6 was not so different from the impact of theory on the teaching of literature over the past ten or fifteen years. The motives may have been more revolutionary and the terminology was certainly more intimidating. But, in practice, the turn to theory occurred as a return to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces. This is so even among the most controversial French theoreticians. Foucault's first major book, *Les mots et les choses*, as its title indicates, has to do with the referential relationship between language and reality, but it approaches the question not in terms of philosophical speculation but, much more pragmatically, as it appears in the methodological innovations of social scientists and philologists. Whereas Derrida's starting point, though more traditionally "philosophical" in appearance, stresses the empirical powers of language over those of intuition and knowledge. His critique of phenomenology in the name of linguistics, by way of Husserl and Saussure, bears this out. Even in the case of Nietzsche, a frequent point of reference for all these writers, the accent falls on Nietzsche the philologist rather than on Nietzsche the existential nihilist.

Why, then, the cries of doom and the appeals to mobilization against a

common enemy? It appears that the return to philology, whether it occurs casually or as a consequence of highly self-conscious, philosophical mutations, upsets the taken-for-granted assumptions with which the profession of literature has been operating. As a result, the attribution of a reliable, or even exemplary, cognitive and, by extension, ethical function to literature indeed becomes much more difficult. But this is a recurrent philosophical quandary that has never been resolved. The latest version of the question, which still determines our present-day convictions about the aims of literature, goes back to the rise of aesthetics as an independent discipline in the later half of the eighteenth century. The link between literature (as art), epistemology, and ethics is the burden of aesthetic theory at least since Kant. It is because we teach literature as an aesthetic function that we can move so easily from literature to its apparent prolongations in the spheres of self-knowledge, of religion, and of politics.

In its origin and its development, aesthetics has been the province of philosophers of nature and of the self rather than of philosophers of language. Neither has aesthetic theory succeeded in its admirable ambition to unite cognition, desire and morality in one single synthetic judgment. Professor Bate, in the article mentioned before, asserts as a matter of course that it suffices to "turn to Kant" to lay to rest a linguistically motivated scepticism like that of David Hume. He echoes a generally admitted position among professors of literature rather than among professors of philosophy.

Whether a reading of *The Critique of Judgment*, as distinct from its simplified versions in Schiller and his offspring, would confirm this assertion certainly stands in need of careful examination. Contemporary literary theory has started this long overdue process.

Literary theory raises the unavoidable question whether aesthetic values can be compatible with the linguistic structures that make up the entities from which these values are derived. Such questions never ceased to haunt the consciousness of writers and philosophers. They come to the fore in the ambivalent rejection of rhetoric at the very moment that it was being used and refined as never before, or in the assimilation of the considerable aesthetic charge emanating from rhetorical tropes to the aesthetic neutrality of grammar. It is by no means an established fact that aesthetic values and linguistic structures are incompatible. What is established is that their compatibility, or lack of it, has to remain an open question and that the manner in which the teaching of literature, since its beginning in the later nineteenth century, has foreclosed the question is unsound, even if motivated by the best of intentions. What also ought to be (but is not) established is that the professing of literature ought to take place under the aegis of this question.

From a purely methodological point of view, this would not be difficult to achieve. It would involve a change by which literature, instead of being taught only as a historical and humanistic subject, should be taught as a rhetoric and

a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a history. The institutional resistances to such a move, however, are probably insurmountable. For one thing, it changes departments of English from being large organizations in the service of everything except their own subject matter into much smaller units, dedicated to the professional specialization that Professor Bate deplures. It also requires a change in the rationale for the teaching of literature, away from standards of cultural excellence that, in the last analysis, are always based on some form of religious faith, to a principle of disbelief that is not so much scientific as it is critical, in the full philosophical sense of the term. One sees easily enough why such changes are not likely to occur.

Yet, with the critical cat now so far out of the bag that one can no longer ignore its existence, those who refuse the crime of theoretical ruthlessness can no longer hope to gain a good conscience. Neither, of course, can the theorists — but, then, they never laid claim to it in the first place.