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THE MIND AND THE BOOK:

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERARY CRITICISM

The Psychoanalytic Century

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Norman N. Holland

The first thing to recognize is that the title above announces an impossible task. One cannot survey the field of psychoanalytic literary criticism in a mere essay. The field is immense. The classic bibliography, Norman Kiell's, is two volumes and refers to some 20,000 items (Kiell 1982), and, at that, it only covers up to 1980.

Moreover, there's not much point in trying to survey this field again. The subject has been covered many times by many people, several times just by me. (See Schwartz and Willbern 1982, Natoli and Rusch 1984, Wright 1998, Coen 1994, and Holland 1976, 1986, 1990, 1993.) Instead, I'd like to set out some general ways of thinking about psychoanalytic criticism. In particular, I'd like to suggest ways of thinking about the past, the history, of psychoanalytic criticism, where it should go in the future, and what psychoanalytic critics should be doing now, in the present.

PAST

In a nutshell, the key to understanding the history of psychoanalytic

literary criticism is to recognize that literary criticism is about books and psychoanalysis is about minds. Therefore, the psychoanalytic critic can only talk about the minds associated with the book. And what are those? There are three, and curiously, Freud spelled them out in his very first remarks on literature in the letter to Fliess of October 15, 1897, in which he discussed *Oedipus Rex.* He applied the idea of oedipal conflict to the audience response to *Oedipus Rex* and to the character Hamlet's inability to act, and he speculated about the role of oedipal guilt in the life of William Shakespeare. Those are the three people that the psychoanalytic critic can talk about: the author, the audience, and some character represented in or associated with a text. From the beginning of this field to the present, that cast of characters has never changed: author, audience, or some person derived from the text.

Those are the three minds that the psychoanalytic critic addresses. How the psychoanalytic critic addresses those minds depends on the orientation of the critic. Is he or she a classical psychoanalyst, an ego psychologist, a Lacanian, a Kleinian, a member of the object relations school, a Kohutian, and so on? Each of the various schools in the development of psychoanalysis necessarily produces a different style of psychoanalytic literary criticism.

In the earliest stage of psychoanalytic criticism, the critics did little more than identify Oedipus complexes and the occasional symbol or parapraxis in one or another work of literature. Usually the critic would relate

the complex or the slip of the tongue or the phallic symbol to the mind of the author, as in Freud's studies of Dostoevsky or da Vinci. Other familiar examples would be Ernest Jones' often-reprinted book about *Hamlet* (1949) or Marie Bonaparte's analyses of Poe (1933). (Relevant collections would be Phillips 1957, Manheim and Manheim 1966, and Ruitenbeek 1964.)

As psychoanalysts began to define the preoedipal stages—oral, anal, urethral, and phallic—the range of fantasies that one could identify in a literary text expanded from oedipal triangles to fantasies about money, devouring and being devoured, going into dangerous places, fantasies about control, ambition, rage, and so on, as in Phyllis Greenacre's well-known studies of Swift and Carroll (Greenacre 1955), Edmund Wilson's reading of Ben Jonson as an anal character (Wilson 1948), or Kenneth Burke's fine studies of Antony *and Cleopatra, Coriolanus,* and *Kubla Khan* (Burke 1966a,b,c).

In 1963 the French critic Charles Mauron made the important point that these different levels of fantasies were all transformations of one another, superimposed, so that one could imagine the human being as a series of geological levels with oral fantasies at the deepest level—then anal, phallic and so on—forming and leaving traces of themselves at the higher. This is, of course, consistent with the continuities we see psychoanalytically in the development of any human being. Mauron showed that one could read from a

writer's repeated themes to the writer's *"my the personal"* or, as I would say, "identity theme."

Then, as ego psychology developed further, and psychoanalysis acquired its complex theory of defenses, we literary critics became able in the 1960s and 1970s to trace defenses as well as fantasies in texts (see, for example, Kris 1952). Again, we often read both the defenses and the fantasies back to the authors, and the result has been distinguished biographies by Leon Edel (1953-1972), Justin Kaplan (1966, 1982), and Cynthia Griffin Wolff (1977, 1986), to name but a few of the many good psychobiographers.

Even more helpfully, we became able to see that literary forms functioned psychologically like various types of defense mechanism. Form works as a defense, both at the level of particular wordings and in larger structures. Our identifications with characters serve in this way, to modulate and direct our feelings as identifications do in life. The parallel plots of a novel or a Shakespearean play, for example, would act in the reader's mind and perhaps the author's as a kind of splitting. A shift of the sensory modality in a poem may serve as a kind of isolation. Symbolizing serves to disguise all kinds of content in literary works. And, of course, omission functions like repression or denial. (See Holland 1968a, Withim 1969-1970, and Rose 1980.)

The idea of form as defense meant that we could talk about literary works that had no characters at all, where one could only talk about form. We were no longer limited to plays and stories. We could talk about lyric poems (see, for example, Sullivan 1967 or Tennenhouse 1976). We could analyze nonfiction prose. Necessarily we related these to the mind of the author. We could say, for example, that Matthew Arnold's sentence structures expressed denial of physical contact, perhaps related to the general denial of sexuality in Victorian times (Holland 1968b; Ohmann 1968).

Today, in the 1980s and 1990s, I believe psychoanalysis has become a psychology of the self, although there are wide differences in the way different schools address the self: British object-relations, Kohut's self-psychology, or Lacan's return to a verbal psychoanalysis. Various collections of essays use one or another of these familiar approaches: object relations (Woodward and Schwartz 1986, Rudnytsky 1993); self-psychology (Bouson 1989, Berman 1990); and Lacan (Davis 1981, Stoltzfus 1996). In their various modes, these follow the general pattern of psychoanalytic criticism: applying object relations, self-psychology, or Lacanian psychoanalysis to the reader, the author, or some person derived from the text. To me, the most significant breakthrough was the recognition that our relationship to a literary work is to a transitional or transformational object. Literature exists in potential space (Schwartz 1975, Bollas 1979).

There have been many failures of psychoanalytic criticism, mostly as a result of crudity in applying psychoanalytic ideas: labeling, pathography, id analysis. And there have been some successes.

Today, I think the liveliest psychoanalytic criticism addresses questions of gender and personality in the personality of the author and, to me, most interestingly, in the mind of the reader (Holland 1975, Flynn and Schweickart 1986). Nowadays we have psychoanalytically-oriented courses in literature and classes oriented to analyzing reader-response (Holland and Schwartz 1975, Holland 1977, 1978, Berman 1994). In such teaching, a critic or teacher can help readers understand what they are bringing to a given work of literature. How do you respond when you enter the obsessional world of Charles Dickens? How do you respond when you enter the oral world of Christopher Marlowe with its overwhelming rage and desire? How do you shape and change those worlds to fit your own characteristic patterns of fantasy and defense? In other words, what kind of person are you and how do you perceive the world of books and the world around you?

FUTURE

But what about the future? I've developed very briefly the century-long history of psychoanalytic literary criticism. What's next?

It seems to me that a large challenge faces psychoanalytic theory,

including its theory of literature, in the twenty-first century. Psychoanalysis has to integrate its insights with the new discoveries coming from brain research and cognitive science. These are very powerful and, as I read them, often quite in harmony with what psychoanalysis has been saying about people from an entirely different perspective and based on entirely different evidence. It seems to me that what psychoanalysis or psychology in general has to do is to put together the clinical knowledge derived from psychoanalysis with the new knowledge of how the mind works in perception, memory, learning, bi-lateralization, and, most important for a literary critic, in the way we use language. I do not think this is an impossible task, or even, perhaps, a very difficult one. There have been several efforts so far: Reiser 1984, Winson 1985, Harris 1986, Modell 1997, and Kandel 1998.

What I think is rather more difficult is integrating with literary criticism the things we are finding out about the brain and how it acquires and uses language. MRI and PET scans enable us to get pictures of the blood and oxygen flow and other things in the brain as that person fears or perceives or reads or listens to language. Scientists like Gerard Edelman (1992) or Hanna and Antonio Damasio (1992) are showing how we understand words in our brains. There is no simple correspondence between signifier and signified, between word-sound and meaning, as Lacan claimed (following the nineteenth-century linguistics of Saussure). Rather, just to understand one word, the brain must bring together a variety of separate features, the sound

of the word, its grammatical role, as well as other words that it is like and unlike.

Then, to arrive at a meaning for a word, the brain assembles or coordinates these different kinds of information from different places in the brain. Furthermore, and most important for the psychoanalyst, what information there is, where it is located, and what memories and emotions accompany it are all highly personal. For each of us, the meaning of a simple word like "dog" or "cat" results from our unique history with that word. And, of course, for complex words like "democracy" or "psychoanalyst," the results will be even more personal.

Thus, each of us interprets a word in an individual way, that is, a way that is both like and unlike everybody else's interpretation. If so, then *a fortiori* each of us will interpret a literary text consisting of a lot of words in an individual way. These new researches confirm what we reader-response critics have been saying for a long time. But more to the point, they confirm what every psychoanalyst has seen from behind the couch. Different patients will respond to an event—take, for example, national catastrophes like the Kennedy assassinations or the *Challenger* explosion—out of their different personal histories and characters. There is no fixed meaning "in" the event. Neither is there a fixed meaning in a literary text.

In a general way, then, I think the discoveries of brain science are confirming *the theory behind* psychoanalytic literary criticism, particularly reader-response psychoanalytic literary criticism. But how, if at all, can we apply this to individual works of literature? I'm not sure.

It may be that neuroscience will describe no more than the processes by which we read and interpret. If so, then neuroscience will provide at most a framework within which critics, to be consistent with the science of the mind, should situate their claims. (No claims of "the" meaning "in" the text, for example.) Perhaps neuroscience will be able to go further, giving us a picture of the flow of someone's particular response to a film, story, or poem—as, back in the 1930s, I. A. Richards had hoped. That would yield a great deal more understanding of how we perceive and interpret literature—and life.

We don't know where neuroscience will lead psychoanalysis or literary criticism. What I am sure of is that the best future I can imagine for psychoanalytic literary criticism is a fusion of insights derived from psychoanalysis with insights derived from neuroscience.

PRESENT

I've described what psychoanalytic critics have done in the past, and I've suggested what I think they should do in the future. I'd like to say now what psychoanalytic critics ought to do today. I'd like to go back to a more

fundamental question: What is the purpose of all this mental energy that people have put into psychoanalytic literary criticism over the past century? What was it all for? What *should* it be for? What is the purpose of psychoanalytic literary criticism? What, for that matter, is the purpose of any kind of literary criticism?

In the 1960s, literary critics vastly expanded their subject matter to include just about anything that involves language. Nowadays, in literature classes or scholarly journals, you find discussions, not just of this or that poem or story or play or writer, but of gender, race, politics, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, all kinds of sciences, and, of course, of psychoanalysis. Literary critics have become "cultural critics." Needless to say, few English teachers can qualify as the universal geniuses that such discussions require. Perhaps for that reason we might do well to focus on that part of this larger criticism that does talk about literature, particularly this or that particular poem or story or play or film or advertisement, as psychoanalytic literary critics tend to do.

What is the purpose, what is the use, of saying Hamlet has an Oedipus complex and maybe Shakespeare does too? What is the use of saying that Othello and Iago have a homosexual marriage? What is the purpose of psychoanalytic literary criticism? What is the purpose of literary criticism?

Literary criticism, any kind of criticism, rests on the purpose of literature itself, for, after all, criticism is, as the old saying has it, only the handmaiden to the muse. We come, then, to a much larger question. What is the purpose of literature?

Most, perhaps even all, theories of literature seem to me to agree in a general way on two purposes. They are most simply expressed by Horace in his Ars *Poetica: aut prodesse aut delectare. Delectare*—"to delight"—that's straightforward enough. We turn to literature for a pleasurable experience. We usually translate Horace's other term, *prodesse,* as "to instruct" or "to teach" or "to enlighten." That seems a little bit more problematic.

In the duller periods of literary history, people said that *prodesse* meant teaching better morals. That, I take it, would be the point of view of, say, Jesse Helms or McGuffey's *Reader.* Not a very sophisticated view and not very pleasurable literature. But then, in our rather phallic society, politicians rarely show interest in the arts (Apple 1998).

Another idea of *prodesse* would be that of a middlebrow book reviewer. "This novel tells us what life is like in an advertising agency." "This is a sensitive and perceptive account of life on a Minnesota farm in 1903." *Prodesse,* "enlightenment," means giving you factual information. But we do not prize Joyce's *Ulysses* for its picture of 1904 Dublin, nor Fitzgerald's *The*

Great Gatsby for its geography of Long Island.

If we take a less narrow and fundamentalist view, and a less middlebrow view, I would suggest that the delight, the *delectare,* in Horace's formula is the experience of entering the imaginative world created by the writer. I can enjoy the manliness of Hemingway's hunters and soldiers. I can enjoy the intensely interpersonal mind of Woolf's character Mrs. Dalloway. I can enjoy the gallantry of Sir Walter Scott's romances or the avarice of Charles Dickens's world. In other words, I can take pleasure in the great human themes, both the good ones and the bad ones, by means of what I read.

If that be the pleasure side of Horace's formula, what is the teaching or instruction side? Again, if we take a less narrow and fundamentalist and politically correct view, I would suggest that the instruction literature itself offers is the understanding of these experiences, these writers' minds, these alien worlds. Not judging them morally, not downloading information from them, but understanding them as fully as we can so that they can become part of our own experience of living—vicarious living.

What is the purpose of literary criticism, then? Literary criticism, any kind of criticism, rests on the purpose of literature itself. The critic is also *prodesse aut delectare,* to delight or to instruct, but more narrowly than the writer. The critic delights or instructs in relation to literature. That is, the

critic should give you ideas that enable you to add to your delight. The critic should be saying, “Watch this, notice that, see how this other thing works out. If you observe these aspects of the work, you will have a better experience of it. You will be able to enter the world of the book in a more imaginative, more exciting, more empathic, more satisfying way.”

In this way, a critic can add to your pleasure in a book but also help you to understand your pleasure. Criticism should help us to understand both our experience of literary pleasure and to understand ourselves as the experiencers. The art gives us the experience. Criticism should give us some understanding of the experience. Criticism finally, then, should enable both critic and ordinary reader to obey the primary command above the temple of the Delphic Oracle: Know Thyself.

That is how literary criticism helps literature achieve both its pleasure and instruction. Very occasionally, literary criticism is an aesthetic experience in itself. More often it is not. At least, though, literary criticism should help us to shape and articulate some other aesthetic experience to ourselves, to take it from the author’s words and put it into our own words and our own world of experience and understand what we are doing. In other words, instruction helps delight and delight helps instruction.

In that sense, all literary criticism would benefit from psychological

wisdom. The better the psychology, the better the criticism.

I started by saying that literary criticism is about books and psychoanalysis is about minds. The reader-response critics and the brain scientists would add an important corollary to that: *The only way you can know a book is through a mind.* You can only know a book—you can only know a work of art of any kind—through some human process of perception, through your own mind or through some other person's telling you about the book or the painting. Inevitably then, there is a psychological component to any talk at all about books. Often, orthodox, nonpsychological critics don't talk about that psychological element. They leave it unspoken or even denied. But there is always an element of personality in what a critic says—otherwise, why would we sign our articles?

Now how does this ideal for criticism translate into psychoanalytic literary criticism in particular? Suppose I say that Dickens is an obsessional writer. That is the crudest kind of psychoanalytic criticism. I gave you no more than one word and that, jargon. Yet, you can now name a quality you may be experiencing. I gave you a way of thinking about it. You now have the opportunity of finding out what obsession is, what it feels like, what kind of world such a person inhabits, what kind of imagination. By evoking the psychoanalyst's clinical experience of obsession, I can sensitize you to the issues that dogged Charles Dickens, questions of control, aggression,

possession, money, dirt—you can share his horrified fascination as he followed the Thames floating its filth and corpses down to the sea. In effect, I offer you another way of entering the imaginative world of, say, *Bleak House* or Our *Mutual Friend.*

I believe that the psychoanalytic literary critic's primary job is to foreground that psychological element in what he or she says about books. In other words, I think psychoanalytic critics should be interpreting their own, if you will, countertransference to the text, author, or whatever else they are describing, a point vigorously made by Stanley Coen (1994).

Good literary criticism can help us to shape and articulate that experience to ourselves, to take it from the author's words and put it into our own words and our own world of experience. Also, good psychological literary criticism can help us shape and articulate the psychological experience of the writer or the characters to ourselves, to form that psychological experience from the author's words and put it into our own words and our own world of experience.

Think back for a moment to Charlie Chaplin's movies. I think most of us would agree that, mixed in with all the delightful comedy, is a great deal of dreadful sentimentality. We could simply call it mush or treacle or schmaltz and dismiss it. But suppose I offer you a bit of psychoanalytic criticism.

Suppose I say to you that Charlie Chaplin, as Stephen Weissman has recently written (1996), is dealing in his films with the problem of a promiscuous mother. At first, she had been a glamorous dancer onstage where the boy often admired her. At the end she was an impoverished seamstress, who perhaps prostituted herself, and who certainly suffered and eventually died from syphilis. The psychoanalytic critic combines this biographical information with the psychoanalytic insight that, as Freud put it about Chaplin, "He always plays only himself as he was in his grim youth" (Freud 1960).

We can understand why so often in his films his hero rescues and repairs damaged and fallen women. We can understand the ineptitude, the childishness of his tramp-hero, as he tries to attract these women, like a child playing up to an elusive mother. We, like most people, could simply write these episodes off as repellingly sentimental, but I think psychoanalytic insight offers us a chance to do better. We can enter into these episodes more fully, with better understanding and more empathy.

We can understand the Little Tramp as a recreation of the boy Chaplin. In *Limelight,* we can understand differently the appalling sentimentality of the last scene: the aged music hall star dying offstage as his protégée dances her way back to stardom. We can ask ourselves, how would *we* feel if we had had a prostitute for our mother? We can imagine a small boy giving his life to the

rescue of that shamed and failing mother, making her into something different from what she was, erasing the reality through his own creativity.

As a psychoanalytic critic, I'm asking you to look at the women in Chaplin's films in a different light, not just as sentimentalized or demonized, but as detested and loved in a painful and complicated combination of fear, desire, and loathing. And through that understanding, we perhaps can experience these episodes more sympathetically, more empathically, more generously. We can rescue them by using our imagination, as Chaplin rescued his mother in imagination.

That to me, is the purpose of psychoanalytic criticism. To open up art to us. To add to our empathy and understanding and through our empathic understanding to add to the experience of art. In other words, what I'm suggesting is that good psychoanalytic criticism instructs and delights its readers in the experiencing of our own human nature.

In the past, psychoanalytic criticism has addressed the three persons involved in the literary transaction: author, reader, and textual person. In the future, I hope psychoanalytic literary critics will draw on the rich insights of cognitive science. But in that future, and right now, I hope even more that psychoanalytic literary critics will offer their readers both instruction and delight. No more pathography, no more id-analysis, no more symbol-

mongering, no more jargon. I hope instead that psychoanalytic critics will keep open a royal road into the human possibilities offered by great literature.

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