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Pressed Flowers/Fresh Flowers: New Directions in Psychoanalytic Criticism

by ROBERT SPRICH

IN DECEMBER, 1966, Norman O. Brown was a featured speaker at the MLA convention in New York. The hall was filled to capacity, presumably by college teachers who regarded themselves as sympathetic to literary applications of psychoanalytic theory. By the time the session was over the audience was completely polarized into pro-Brown and anti-Brown factions. Clearly the intensity of these responses exceeded the level appropriate to a scholarly difference of opinion. Brown's paper, which was called "Daphne, or Metamorphosis," not only theorized about the process of artistic transformation; it was itself a prose-poem which embodied that process. The transitional links within the paper were analogical (even free-associative) rather than logical. Brown's manner of delivery was frankly sensuous; his reading of Latin verse incantatory. All during Brown's performance the audience remained spellbound; but afterward many were anxious to repudiate the "suspension of disbelief" into which they had been lulled.

Among the respondents, Leonard Manheim (a founder of the journal Literature and Psychology) denounced Brown's paper in carefully-constructed rhymed couplets, modelled on Pope's Essay on Criticism. Leslie Fiedler, on the other hand, praised Brown for having "given us a poem" and having brought some welcome life into the usually stuffy and solemn atmosphere of such professional meetings.

Why, then, did Brown's talk provoke such violent reactions on both sides? On the surface, the complaints concerned Brown's "anti-intellectualism" and the lack of logical coherence in his presentation. On a deeper level, however, I believe the rift was between "intellectual Freudians" and "experiential Freudians," between those who preferred to apply psychoanalytic concepts to the "scientific" (i.e., "objective") study of literature and those who approached both literature and psychoanalysis primarily as experiences to be encountered at first hand, not "distanced" through any conceptual system.

My own view is that psychoanalysis is not just another intellectual system like Marxism or Theosophy; it occupies a special position as a critical tool because, as Frederick Crews has noted, "only psychoanalysis

has registered the psychic costs involved in man's prolonged dependency and his improvising of culture out of thwarted desire."\(^2\) According to Crews, the psychoanalytic perspective suggests that

the primary function of art may not be instructive or decorative or sedative. Originating in what Ernst Kris called a "regression in the service of the ego", art uses symbolic manipulations to reconcile competing pressures. The artist is someone who provisionally relaxes the censorship regnant in waking life, forges some of his society's characteristic defenses, and allows the repressed a measure of representation, though (as in strictly unconscious symptom-formation) only in disguised and compromised form. His social role and his own equilibrium dictate a sign of victory for the ego, if not in "happy endings" then in the triumph of form over chaos, meaning over panic, mediated claims over naked conflict, purposeful action over sheer psychic spillage. In this sense the making and the apprehension of art works reenact the entire human project of making a tenuous cultural order where none existed before.\(^3\)

But, I would add, one can avail oneself fully of these insights only if one acknowledges the experiential dimension of psychoanalysis by focusing on the dynamics of one or more specific psyches. Norman Holland puts this matter quite concisely: "Any statement in psychoanalytic criticism involves two steps. First, the critic must establish a congruity between something in the work of literature and some general psychoanalytic proposition. Second, the critic must relate the psychoanalytic proposition about the mind in general to some mind in particular."\(^4\) The three most readily available minds, as Holland goes on to point out, are those of the author, a character and the reader (or, in the case of a drama, the audience). The principal objection to choosing the author is that any inferences about the author's life made on the basis of a literary text are really within the realm of psycho-biography rather than literary criticism. In practice—as in Marie Bonaparte's studies of Poe—such criticism has tended to be highly reductionistic, giving the impression that Poe's stories are merely a manifestation of his personal psychopathology. But moving from the text to speculation about the author's life has a further drawback: the text alone does not supply enough data to define the relationship between the author and his material. Was Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* an autobiographical projection of the author; did he represent a potential conflict which Nabakov "worked through" in writing the novel; or was Humbert a fictional tour de force produced by a literary artist who, like Shakespeare, was capable of creating "round" characters ranging over a vast spectrum of personality types? Erica Jong has remarked that, after the publication of *Fear of Flying*, she received a number of bizarre propositions from men who assumed that she would do all the things she wrote about—and with anyone!\(^5\)


\(^3\) Crews, p. 13.


\(^5\) In conversation on a television talk show.
The psychoanalytic study of literary characters has unquestionably produced a wealth of significant insights, but it has also led to two major problems, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical problem arises over the implicit assumption that a literary character, who, after all, exists only as a sequence of words in a particular context, may be treated like a living human being who has "a past and a future, a Freudian childhood that reaches back before the opening of the work." Any inference about the childhood of an adult character is simply incapable of verification, whereas an analyst dealing with a flesh-and-blood patient can wait for more associative material in order to verify an interpretive hunch. The practical problem is that in placing one character "on the analyst's couch," a critic may neglect other important aspects of a work's dramatic or narrative texture. For example, although Hamlet clearly must occupy stage-center in any analysis of the play, there are several other "fathers" and "sons" who act out important variations on the issues of filial duty.

Having raised serious questions about both the author and literary characters as fruitful subjects for psychoanalytic study, we are left with the reader; however this alternative may be seen as an exciting challenge rather than a last resort. One wonders why it took so long for psychoanalysis to be systematically applied to the reader-text relationship. I suspect that the reasons for this delay are related to what caused the outcry against Norman Brown's "Daphne": most critics are unwilling to admit the inevitable subjective element in literary criticism, for, by making this admission, they would lose their privileged status as "experts." Psychoanalytic theory strongly implies that the critic, like any other reader, uses imaginative literature to meet his own ego needs, though he might find ways after the fact to transform his experience of a work toward some "higher" meaning.

Every critic is first a reader who turns the text to the purposes of his beleaguered ego. By transmuting the author into a paragon of conscience or documentary literalism he completes the covering of his tracks; the literary self with which he has identified has been placed beyond reproach. Not even psychoanalytic theory, with its open attention to such unconscious tactics, is a sufficient preventative against their use. By bottling and labeling the repressed contents that Freud thought were so noxious, a Freudian can preclude the self-risk that literature asks of us. Literary art is then revealed as benign parlor magic and nothing more.

It is precisely this avoidance of risk-taking which is responsible, in many cases, for turning the fresh flowers of immediate literary experience into the pressed flowers of critical jargon. Northrop Frye is a prime example of an influential critic who, in attempting to view literature as an auton-
omous, self-validating system, avoids confronting the psychic roots of literary response.\textsuperscript{10} I would fully agree with Murray Schwartz that all literary criticism "originates in our personal experiences of individual works and all criticism is a transformation of those experiences. This seems obvious, yet, implicitly or explicitly, it is the most frequently denied or avoided aspect of the professional study of literature."\textsuperscript{11}

Within the past twenty years, however, great strides have been made in developing an in-depth understanding of the reader's participation in the literary transaction. The pioneering work in this field, now generally recognized as a classic, is Simon Lesser's \textit{Fiction and the Unconscious} (1957). Combining a thorough knowledge of psychoanalytic theory with considerable talent for "listening with the third ear," Lesser presented a comprehensive model of reader-response which emphasized the ability of imaginative literature to "harmonize" the demands of the various elements of the psyche. Lesser also coined the term "analogizing" to denote the process by which a reader establishes free-associative links between the content of a literary work and his own experience (and fantasies). Thus Lesser asserted that the day-dreaming which, in fact, accompanies the reading of a story or poem is neither irrelevant nor digressive but an intrinsic component of each reader's idiosyncratic recreation of a literary text. For Lesser, however, the phenomenon of analogizing remained peripheral: there was a core of unconscious content inherent in the work to which every reader reacted in some degree. Using this model, Lesser produced impressive interpretations of enigmatic works ranging from the Homeric epics to Harold Pinter's plays.\textsuperscript{12} But he consistently assumed that one could speak of "the reader" and hence that a critic, by attending to his own affective responses, could generalize about patterns of reader response.

In \textit{The Dynamics of Literary Response} (1968), Norman Holland expanded Lesser's model by stressing the quest for the "core fantasy"\textsuperscript{13} of a given work which either resonated or counterpointed with the conscious elements of content and style to shape the Gestalt in terms of which a reader "made sense" of the work. In Holland's view "analogizing" became "fantasizing" and was a process much nearer the heart of the literary experience than the position which Lesser had assigned to it. Since the publication of \textit{Dynamics} (itself a major contribution to psychoanalytic criticism) Holland has been the prime mover in establishing what I believe is the most exciting "new direction" in this field. His fundamental shift of perspective may be stated as follows: fantasies are not "in" literary works,
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they are in people. Seen in this light, a given work serves as a catalyst to mobilize the fantasies which are congenial to a particular reader, but since the nature of the fantasies is a function of individual personality structure, the critic is no longer justified in postulating the existence of a generic "ideal reader," whose responses the students in his class should try to emulate.

Pursuing this shift of focus, Holland was led from the comfort of the critic's study into the realm of the social scientist: he devised an experiment in which he worked with real readers, interviewing them at length about their responses to specific literary texts. This experiment and its implications are detailed fully in Holland's recent book, Five Readers Reading. His most striking conclusion was that an individual reader's response to a text depended principally on his characteristic ego-style rather than on the data from the text. Take, for example, Faulkner's apparently straightforward statement—in the short story "A Rose for Emily"—that Colonel Sartoris fathered the edict requiring Negro women to wear aprons on the street. Three of Holland's subjects (all of whom were given fictitious names beginning with "S") reacted as follows to the key word "fathered." "For Saul, 'fathered' became merely 'sponsored'—because he needed to tone authorities down. To Sebastian 'fathered' meant 'fathering the women' in the sexual intercourse between Southern whites and their black victims, for Sebastian wanted to sexualize authority figures. Sandra said 'fathered' was a 'heroic' word—she wanted to make parents into sources of strength and support, preferably not sexual." Clearly we are not dealing here with literary ambiguity in any of the senses that William Empson used the term, but rather with differing styles of relating to the material.

The nearest thing to a constant in the reader-text relationship is not the unity of the text but the ego-style (or "identity theme") of the particular reader. Holland has already made two intriguing applications of this finding. First, he has shown how an identity theme which can be inferred from the writings of a particular author also appears in other areas of his or her life. Second, he and his colleague Murray Schwartz have designed a classroom model—called the "Delphi Seminar" after the Delphic oracle—in which the identity themes of the participants become an integral part of the study of literary response. Beyond this, Holland's

14. Holland has credited David Bleich with influencing this shift of emphasis. See Bleich's Readings and Feelings (Champaign, Ill., 1975).
15. Five Readers, p. 207.
17. Seven Types of Ambiguity (New York, 1947).
19. For a brief study of this type, see Holland's "UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF," PMLA. XC (October 1975), 821-822. For a longer version, see Poems in Persons (New York, 1973).
work shows promise of establishing links with both perceptual psychology and psycho-linguistics. But, in any case, his findings suggest the need for a radical re-examination of the classroom teacher's role in literature courses.

 Critics and teachers of literature can no longer afford to ignore the personal, idiosyncratic dimension of literary response. If, as Holland's data has shown, fantasies created by the individual reader are central to whatever meaning he derives from a literary text, then applied psychoanalysis (in its present state of sophistication) is in a position to contribute vital insights to literary criticism since only psychoanalysis has carried out a systematic study of the dynamics of human fantasy. Literary creation, transformation and criticism are not separate activities, and it is futile to shout down scholars such as Norman Brown who compel us to acknowledge their interplay and synthesis.

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22. For specific discussions of classroom models which take the subjectivity of reader response into account, see Holland's *Five Readers* (esp. pp. 208-218) and Bleich's *Readings and Feelings.*