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Introduction: The Practice of Criticism Today

by Michael H. Means

The four essays in this issue are lectures delivered at the University of Dayton during the summer of 1965 by Elliott Coleman, the director of the creative writing program at Johns Hopkins University, and three distinguished graduates of that program, Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr., John Wesley Jones, and Rev. Louis Reile, S.M. Considered together, they present a good picture of one significant segment of literary criticism as it is practiced today.

As writers themselves, these men can help us look at literature from a viewpoint we rarely enjoy, that of the practicing artist. They take us inside the literary work to examine how it is made, where it came from, what it does. And because they must think through their craft, they ask some of the hard questions: what is prose? and poetry? what reality does literature mirror? how does the artist justify his existence?

They ask not only hard questions, but as men who are both writers and critics they ask large ones. Elliott Coleman attempts to create both a genealogy and a poetics for what is usually regarded as a highly suspect genre, the prose poem. Jones charts the movement of drama from the ordered statement of neoclassical theater to the bewildering mime of the absurdist drama and the "happening." Skerrett seeks the roots of the current "black humor" novelists remotely in Dostoevsky and proximately in Nathanael West. Fr. Reile asks how one reconciles the vocations of religious and writer, vocations that might be complementary in theory but that often clash in practice. And always they approach their subject from the inside, as artists who must understand their medium in order to exploit its possibilities in creating new works of art.

Before discussing the centrality of their critical methods to the practice of literary criticism today, however, a word needs to be said about their bias. Although critics sometimes write poetry and poets sometimes criticize, they usually represent two distinct approaches to literature. The man who is primarily a critic is a reader who sees his task as enabling others to read more responsively and responsibly. The creative writer — poet, playwright, novelist — on the other hand, seeks in the works of others better ways to practice his own craft and art. He is, in the words of W. H. Auden, a "critic who is only interested in one author and only concerned with works that do not yet exist" (*The Dyer's Hand* [New York, 1962], p. 33). His first concern as an artist is finding a suitable vehicle for his own art, and not surprisingly his critical writing tends to mirror that concern.

But it is this very interest in craft that makes the writer so important a figure in literary criticism today. The writer's concern with technique and form has been

absorbed into the mainstream of academic and intellectual criticism and is quite commonly present, implicitly at least, in critical articles in both the scholarly journals and the intellectual reviews. The reader has come to share this interest in form and detail for the very sound reason that the “total effect” or “total meaning” of a poem or novel derives from the cumulative effect of each word, each image, each convention of character, setting, plot, or technique. Although this involvement in detail may result partly from the Romantic preoccupation with the unique and partly from Germanic scientism, it has resulted in a closer alliance between writer and reader and has led to more meaningful criticism.

Nor is this approach to literature confined to only one or two schools of criticism. The New Critics — such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, W. K. Wimsatt, and William Empson — tend to emphasize verbal, rhetorical, and situational ambiguities. The disciples of Caroline Spurgeon investigate image patterns and clusters. England’s most influential critic, F. R. Leavis, has taught two generations of teachers to seek the moral values of literature in the texture of the works. Lionel Trilling uses similar techniques to arrive at the cultural function and significance of literary works. One of the most challenging American critics, Kenneth Burke, combines semantic, rhetorical, and sociological analysis into a highly complex critical apparatus. Northrop Frye has combined many of these approaches into an elaborately schematized criticism which enables one to “place” a particular work in very precise relationships with other works. The result of such wide-spread concern with form and structure is an increased awareness and understanding of the impact of the work on the reader.

This awareness and understanding is, furthermore, based on the work itself rather than on the psychology of the reader. Modern literary criticism thus has, potentially at least, a more universal validity than criticism based on personal response. Although one of the most important qualities of literature is its evocative nature, its interaction with the reader’s experiences and values, this evocation is necessarily personal and necessarily different from the experience of other readers. The personal reactions of the greatest and wisest critics, men like Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold, are of course always worth considering. But to describe “what *Crime and Punishment* means to me” is to write autobiography, not literary criticism. It follows that such statements must be judged as autobiography. The modern literary critic is thus constrained to distinguish between the qualities or characteristics of a work which have the power to reach all men and his own highly individual and personal responses to that work — between the public statement and the private response. And since the critic’s job is to make public statements, he feels himself more and more constrained to base his comments on the structure of the work itself.

A third respect in which artist and critic agree today is in de-emphasizing value judgments in their criticism. W. H. Auden, in the essay quoted from above, stresses that, for the artist, the “best” writers are those whose work will benefit him most at the time. There are times when Shakespeare is a very bad master and W. E. Henley

a good one. Critics have somewhat different reasons. At the beginning of this century, John Donne was admired by only a small coterie, and most critics assented to Arnold's judgment that Dryden and Pope are models of prose, not poetry. But over the last forty years we have witnessed a great wave of enthusiasm for Donne and his school followed a little later by a major reevaluation of Dryden and Pope. At the same time the fortunes of most of the Romantic and Victorian poets have correspondingly dipped. Milton's reputation has been fluctuating seismically. Such revisionism has led critics to reflect upon the vanity of literary hierarchies and to excise taste as a literary concern. To rank Johnson, Donne, Pope, Wordsworth, and Tennyson in a gradation is simply to state one's personal preferences. The important consideration for today's critic is that, at his best, each of these poets wrote his own particular kind of poem supremely well. Similarly, most critics will concede that Dostoevsky is a far better novelist than Nathanael West but do not consider that judgment to be very relevant to their criticism of the novel. Once again, the autobiography of the critic is no longer acceptable as literary criticism.

In view of all the changes in critical focus described here, it is perhaps reassuring to note that Coleman, Skerrett, and Jones employ one of the oldest of critical techniques: source-study. All three seek to understand modern literary forms better by studying them in the light of tradition, by examining their evolution from earlier forms, just as Aristotle began his study of tragedy by tracing its genealogy. Such a procedure gives the critic a workable and meaningful yardstick for measuring with some precision the innovations, shifts of emphasis, and changes in values and goals of the artists they study. A generation ago, source-study was almost universally the subject of obloquy because as a method it had too often been used mechanically and stupidly. Now that its value and validity have been re-demonstrated, however, scholars and critics are once again finding it an invaluable aid to their task when used with care and discrimination. They are once again concerned not only about a particular work's uniqueness but also, and more importantly, about its nature relative to the tradition from which it came.

In the essays that follow, we see the result of the artist and critic — each preoccupied with his own concerns — merging their interests to give us a literary criticism that is more precise, more analytical, and more responsible than that of the past. Poet and critic have, as in a stereopticon, brought their slightly different views of literature into focus so that we can see that subject in depth.