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REVIEW ARTICLE: THEORIES OF FICTION AND THE PRAXIS OF CRITICISM

It may be that the writing of literary criticism is not an art in the way that writing novels or poems is an art. And yet there is something similar in the activity of writing itself. A poetic structure does in some way point to particular reality such as that we encounter daily. For instance, Ransom's lines:

Dear love, these fingers that had known your touch,
And tied our separate forces first together,
Were ten poor idiot fingers not worth much,
Ten frozen parsnips hanging in the weather. ('Winter Remembered')

have a solidity of specification about them; they 'contain' particular touchable 'reality'. This particularity is, though, presented to us in a poetic *structure*; the general and the particular, then, are essential parts of the whole. Ransom himself borrows from Hegel the expression 'concrete universal' to indicate that a poem has both what he calls logical structure and local texture (and he believes further that the 'poetry' resides primarily in the texture, in the concrete which cannot ever be wholly used up in the service of any moral universal). We expect from literary criticism a similar respect for general and particular; we expect some general idea (this is already old-fashioned usage, what could once have been called an idea about literature must now be referred to as a 'theory') and a quantity of revealing particular evidence.

But evidence is not really the best word. The best criticism does not come from a mass of detail which is boiled down to (or summed up in) some definitive statement. Nor of course does it come from a mechanical application of pre-established critical categories. If criticism is not altogether empirical, or practical, equally it cannot be a matter of approaching a poem with a theory (or hermeneutic) in hand and hermeneutering a number of poems with it. The first function of criticism should be to turn us to the text in question to show us what

* *Animate Illusions: Explorations of Narrative Structure*. Harold Toliver. Nebraska U.P. 1974. Pp. ix, 412. \$10.00

Vision and Response in Modern Fiction. Arnold L. Weinstein. Ithaca and London: Cornell U.P. 1974. Pp. 282. \$11.50.

we may not have noticed. It is only after the reading of a piece of criticism that we should become aware that what looked merely like a fair and objective listing of particularities was in fact an idea in the process of revealing itself. First of all then, a critic is to be judged on his ability to quote judiciously from the text he is considering. Pound's *ABC of Reading* (the latter part) is the essential critical work in this respect. It is a *praxis* of criticism in the sense that a *praxis* is a list of samples or examples. The point is, of course, that an ability to quote judiciously (to be wisely particular) is a function of one's general understanding of literature and life—an understanding that a good critic seems to rediscover anew each time he faces a new poem.

Literary theorists have rightly had a hard time in making their way into the ranks of respectability, and one suspects that the common reader's distrust of theory is at least as good a ground as any to stand on. Practical criticism and the 'new' (now old but like the Modern period stuck with its misnomer) criticism appeal to our need and desire to see in detail what is really there. But perception of what is there is a tricky matter, we have discovered. We know now that perception is *also* organization; we see what we have learned to see. Perception is selective according to what might be called cultural generalities, or Ideas. In perceiving a 'poem' (including novels, etc.) we do two things then: we acquaint ourselves with the particular details of the presentation (what is the setting? what details of the setting seem to be given particular emphasis? what are the characters like? what clothes do they wear? etc.—e.g. in *Women in Love* we may notice that Gudrun is given to wearing flamboyantly coloured clothing), and also we begin to form some general idea of 'what the whole thing is all about'; that is, we become acquainted with the 'world' of the novel and the assumptions on which that world operates. The 'meaning' of the novel is the relationship between the assumptions of the world of the novel and the assumptions which hold in everyday reality.

These two activities of criticism can operate sequentially (in either order) or simultaneously, interpenetratively. It may not be possible to get any general idea of a book before reading some of the particular words of the first page, and yet the title of a book usually gives some kind of general idea before we even open the book (an idea open, of course, to confirmation or disconfirmation). It is perhaps safe to say that a first reading gives us only some of the particular information available (we may not have noticed Gudrun's clothes) and only a nascent general notion. A second reading is different in two possible ways: either we notice more evidence to support or contradict our growing hypothesis or, a process which seems to me to be more likely, we find that our growing hypothesis analyzes the details of presentation for us (our general understanding of Gudrun's character allows us to perceive that her choice of clothes is *appropriately* characteristic) and that the newly perceived detail leads to reshaping of the general idea.

All this, of course, is commonplace and it seems to need restating now only because of the force with which *theoria* has entered a field only recently thought to have been securely held by *praxis*. A naive fear of theorizing has certainly been in need of opposition, however, and the work of Wellek and Warren, Frye and Kermode (to mention only a few of the prominent names) has opened a road to

better criticism of literature by making us think more demandingly about literature and its relationship to life. Any attempt at a general understanding of literature is, as we have seen, directly dependent for success on the degree to which it makes us see again (or react with new surprise to) individual works. A system like Frye's can seem at times to tell us too much about literature so that what we know can, because of its inherent organizational or analytical power, begin to stand in the way of our openness to literature, particularly new literature. A gain in general understanding then must immediately be regarded as a potential deadener of critical insight, and a theoretical critic must ultimately be judged on the freshness and adequacy of his particular insights. Nevertheless, I believe that neither theory nor practice can exist alone. One must always be striving with bare hands to uncover the nature of this particular thing, in the hope of, or as a prelude to, trying to uncover the nature of things.

Harold Toliver's recent theoretical book, *Animate Illusions*, has a suggestive title that makes the mind re-echo with the possibilities of Art moving motionless at the still point of the turning world. Alas, one's expectations are not fulfilled. What seems to be implicit in Toliver's title is some recognition that aesthetic illusions are not passive or dead records, rather they are dynamic and can do things to the world and especially to our ways of seeing the world. Toliver's argument focuses on the temporal linearity of narrative, and he insists repeatedly—and advisedly—that our understanding of literature must contend with the reader's experience; or, as he puts it, part of what narrative does is give us a rhythmical, sequential experience of revelation and withheld information. What is disappointing in the book, however, is that there is not a single exciting or interesting exemplification of this idea in practice. We do not find a careful examination—although one keeps expecting it and it seems again and again to be promised—of the way in which a particular release or publication of information by a narrator at a particular time (I nearly added 'and place') in a narrative changes our perception of the course of events in a story. For instance, it is obviously crucial to our understanding of *Lord Jim* that it is at least sixty pages into the story that we discover that the *Patna* did not sink after all. What Toliver does do is assert—and re-assert—the value of plot and sequential action in narrative.

But why does he do this? He does it in response apparently to an influential group of 'some critics' and says that, "If fiction could be spatial or 'architectural' as some critics maintain, we would not be pressed to ask such questions, but the fact seems to be that however single and spatial an author's original grasp of his subject, the effect of fiction lies too much in the many articulations of phrase, spoken word, gesture and act—too much in the multitudinousness of finely textured expression brought recurrently to bear upon a web of connections—to pretend that one is ever satisfied with anything so skeletal [sic] as a geometric, pictorial, or architectural concept of design." (p. 120) This refutation of spatial critics is an important enough motive to be re-iterated in the conclusion: "But of course narrative art, as I have insisted throughout (against a recurrent critical tendency to spatialize it...." (p. 375) How well then does Toliver succeed on this theoretical level, and who are these demons of spatialization?

Toliver does not seem to add anything to well-established ideas about the novel (Lukacs's insistence that its defining element is Time, for instance). He comes close perhaps to engaging us in a consideration of the novel's formal struggle with history (Toliver has been strongly influenced by Leo Braudy's recent book). We are willing to accept that our reading experience is roughly sequential (except for those of us who skip ahead to the end or flip back to re-read the opening). But is our 'experience of a book' the experiences we have while reading it? The effect of narrative seems, rather, to take us through a sequence of narrated events which replace our present time with an imagined other time. And at the end of the sequence, at the end of our time-bound exposure to the words on the page, we are plunged back into an experience of the whole. A novel like *David Copperfield*, for instance, confuses our present time with a similar present time—the present time of the narrator—in order to plunge us into an imagined past time (past not to our present but to the narrator's, as the narrator's imagined past becomes equally our present time) in order to recount a history which arrives again at present narrative time and ultimately restores us (miraculously changed?) to our own present time. But the narrator's present time is a curious kind of time since it is present no matter when we take up the novel. Narrative present time is universal, or timeless, then. This would suggest that the novel's formal tension exists because the novel is a time-bound sequence of narrative events (bound by the reader's time) which struggles to overcome time. The irony of a narrative history, then, is that by rediscovering the past in narrating it, it makes it a present. By being immersed in time, it annihilates time. One can think of *Ulysses*, which takes place in twenty-four hours and depends on Homeric mythology, or of Proust. "Only through time time is conquered."

This point, though, is similar to the one made by Toliver's 'opposition', Joseph Frank in his important essay 'Spatial Form in Modern Literature', reprinted in *The Widening Gyre*. Contrary to what Toliver implies, Frank does not neglect the timeliness of literature; the fact that he emphasizes it gives point to his argument. Frank says clearly that "literature is a time art", and his point is that much influential modern narrative literature has been attempting to overcome the limits of time to achieve a simultaneity of impact similar to that aimed at by the imagist poem. Some modern narrative attempts to present an emotional complex in an instant of time even though Proust needs a seven-volume novel in which to do it. Toliver, however, seems unaware of the care and subtlety with which 'some critics' have considered 'spatialization' in modern literature. If Frank's position is not altogether what one would like it to be, it would perhaps be worth looking at what Frank himself calls a "fair and cogent refutation" of his position (in an article by Walter Sutton: 'The Literary Image and the Reader', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XVI, 1 [1957-1958], 112-123). Frank's comment on Sutton seems applicable to Toliver as well:

Mr. Sutton's objections, however, seem to me to be based on a misunderstanding. His major argument is that, since reading is a time-act, the achievement of spatial form is really a physical impossibility. I could not agree more. But this has not stopped modern writers from working out techniques to achieve the impossible—as much as possible.

On page 375 of his overly-long book, Toliver quotes from Blake and comes close to sinking his own ship with the interesting comment that "as we noted with respect to condensed lyric narration, the attempt of all temporal art is to impose a central vision or mood on extended materials *despite* the chronological nature of syntax and dispersed understanding." This gesture comes too late to be of any help, however; the effect on the theoretical argument of the work is ruinous, and the book ends with a suggestion of a cogent counter-argument to its own theory. How does it fare, however, on the all-important level of particular insight? Let us join Mr. Toliver briefly and "*descend* to particulars" (p. 75, my italics). At the risk of being over-particular, it is worth noting the very disagreeable effect of spelling Herodotus as "Heroditus", especially in a discussion as heady as that which compares and contrasts the narrative techniques of Herodotus, Christ, Socrates and others. Toliver's first sizeable descent into the particular deals with a book well worth the attention, Wallace Stegner's *Wolf Willow*. Toliver's claim is that "Stegner's point is that even in Saskatchewan one is the product of a considerable history and that the impact of an inherited culture is often painfully odd in new circumstances." (p. 76). Even Saskatchewan? What about Manitoba? Even in Manitoba?

Unintentional condescension aside, however, this does not seem to be Stegner's point. Stegner's point is that local history may be there, but without active transmission it is mute, inarticulate, inchoate; and it always fights a desperate battle (as culture) against levelling forces of nature. Stegner belongs to that generation that grew up completely unaware of the fact that he played on the ground where Sitting Bull waited out his last free days, or where the Boundary Survey Team camped on the mission that created an imaginary line (the 'medicine line' of the Indians, where blue uniforms gave way to the welcome red) and so created a country. In the absence of the currency of history—the presentness of the past—he grew up at school under the influence of European culture, civilization and history. He is the product of a history no doubt, but not his own local history, not the history of the ground he walked as a child. Stegner's remarkable achievement is to retrieve the local past so that others can live more richly on the relentless earth. But Stegner is no easy optimist and has no easy assumptions about man's relationship to his past. The ending of *Wolf Willow*, "give it a thousand years", is a bleak pointing to the inevitable destruction of culture by the elements and points to the heroic, tragic struggle that man has in attempting to establish meaning amidst the flux of time and the hostility of nature. He is also saying, give us a future, then we shall have a usable past. None of the excitement of Stegner's achievement comes through Toliver's discussion, however, and this lack of passion is perhaps characteristic of the type of formalist critic that he is trying to be. Not that formalists need be boring. Toliver's quotations from Paul Goodman's *The Structure of Literature* remind one of what can be done: "The goodness of the protagonist is the seriousness of the apparent plot. Frailty is the possibility of emergence of the hidden plot." (quoted on p. 246) Beside such gnomic and pithy comments, which do give one furiously to think, Toliver's attempts in the genre perhaps stand little chance. In a discussion of the epistolary novel, letters are defined 'formally' as

"written messages by which adjacent or dispersed societies are joined." Swift! thou should'st be living at this hour: criticism hath need of thee.

One final point about a figure whose appearance is *de rigueur* in a current theoretical book about fiction, John Barth. Barth crops up suitably frequently in Toliver's book (Sixteen separate Index entries), to give a bit of radical chic to lit. crit., possibly. We learn that it is "the narrative fate of many moderns, to arrive at an end before or after the intelligence wishes, or at an end in no way a consummation of the drive that set it going. The reader is thus put in the position of the swimmer in John Barth's "Night-Sea Journey", who thrashes about in an indefinite sea without ship or shore in view. In this more striking case of purposeless movement, a shore, as Barth's swimmer indicates, even if there were one..." (p. 10) And so it goes thrashing on apparently oblivious of the little practical, particular fact that Barth's narrator in this case is a sperm cell (and not a fish, as Barth po-facedly tells us). Not just any sperm cell, but the single sperm cell out of a quarter of a million likely to make it and be annihilated in the beginning of birth. The fact that the narrator of this night-sea journey is a sperm cell does perhaps give some solidity, of a physiological sort, to speculations by Jung and others, as Barth hints in his introduction. Actually, this bit of information suggests a way in which story is related to 'ground', and Barth's idea is perhaps similar to the one recently outlined by George Steiner in *The Listener* about the labyrinth. Steiner's contention is, in part, that labyrinthine constructions recur in cultures because of the inescapable, essential (nay, fundamental) twenty-seven feet of labrinthine gut man has carried about since the dawn of time. But no, all that would be too practical; or too theoretical. Or both.

Rather than close on a pessimistic note, let us consider briefly another book which, despite its shortcomings, suggests that literary criticism can not only be about life in a significant way but can also be readable. Arnold L. Weinstein's book, *Vision and Response in Modern Fiction*, adopts an avowedly personal stance, a "biased oral style I use every day" and is evidence that the teaching of literature in universities is not necessarily a bar to the production of good criticism. The virtue of Weinstein's book is the way in which it puts us in the middle of texts and makes us think about them. He is in reaction to an over-formal, overly professional school of criticism, and his belief that "our ability to respond [to fiction] is good" gives vitality and urgency to his analyses. He proceeds by means of a series of individual studies of novelists who are often surprisingly, but never 'metaphysically' or violently, yoked together. Balzac and Dickens occupy a chapter as do Conrad, Ford and James; others deal with Bernanos and Faulkner; Kafka, Joyce and Butor; with Proust, Borges, Claude Simon and Robbe-Grillet in the last chapter.

If at times it is a little difficult to grasp exactly what Weinstein's general thesis is, this is because of his insistent particularity. He is aware that his approach is perhaps open to the charge that it is an example of the affective fallacy, but his rationale is perhaps persuasive enough:

Our affective fallacies, however, constitute the facts of our lives, and they may be worth more, in that realm, than our scientific evidence. It is possible

that response has always been sluggish and inert, and that modern man is no more anesthetized than his predecessors. But the emphasis on systems, the appeal of abstract, clinical, reductive approaches to people and problems, the often dehumanizing rage for order, have, it seems, never met with such grace and approval as they receive today. (p. 276)

Weinstein is not by any means an apostle of disorder; it is just that he has his own rage for order on a very short lead because he is worried about the possible tyranny of schemes and charts and wonders if they "tell us anything about literature." He asks "how such information can be of value. Why do we need the charts? What are we trying to learn?" Necessary questions, surely. In a time given much to theory, a time in which literary criticism because of its recent theoretical advances is perhaps once more tempted to start thinking of itself as a science, Weinstein grounds speculative flights in texts: "However, our disinclination for the particular and our interest in the general may cause us to overlook, rather than give us an overview. We may be rich in schemes and patterns, but blind to the visible, tangible world we inhabit." (p. 21) And equally, of course, blind to the human and moral demands that good literature makes on us. Weinstein urges us, then, to see and to respond and his method is eclectic because he believes that "anything is good that works".

Now, that is perhaps so; it is a little different from a purely pragmatic point of view which might say that whatever works is *true*, good or not. And one must still ask about Weinstein's book, even if it is good, is it also true? The problem here is that it is hard to isolate just what Weinstein's informing idea is—he has so many of them perhaps. He himself is not content, however, to regard his book simply as a collection of separate and self-contained 'readings', but sees it as containing an overall interpretation of the development of literature from Dickens and Balzac to the present day. Each chapter makes at least one attempt to spell out the connecting links amongst these widely disparate writers, but the very multiplicity of attempts testifies to a weakness of the book: its general idea does not emerge clearly enough, nor forcefully enough from its particular discussions.

Weinstein circles around the way in which the novel oscillates between a visible world and an invisible one, although it is not always clear whether 'vision' means seeing only what is there, or if it means seeing beyond what is merely there on the surface to the significance that lies in the depths. He seems at times to believe that 'vision' means 'human reference' (p. 216: "The centrality of vision, of human reference, cannot be truly obviated...."), and it is perhaps this casualness of formal definition that makes the book so often unsatisfying. To say that vision is human reference is to deprive both terms of meaning, and the fact that vision is also organization, or system, or chart, seems a serious problem that such an inadequate definition cannot deal with.

There also seems to be some confusion about the term 'depth'. We learn that *Pere Goriot*, focuses on "the dynamics of selling out, the transition from depth to surface." (p. 32) What is merely visible or on the surface is never fully adequate and "the reader must learn to go beyond the concrete details, enlarge his frame of reference, return to the scene, and effect a final synthesis." (p. 49) Pip, in *Great Expectations*, must learn that the sane, clear, visible Apollonian world contains

hidden destructive forces, as embodied in Orlick, and we are to learn with him that Pip himself has an Orlick deep inside himself since Orlick does to Mrs. Joe what Pip himself secretly desires to do. By contrast we are told that "The core of *The Secret Agent* is Mrs. Verloc's tragic suspicion that 'life doesn't stand much looking into,' and Conrad's story bears her out, as her discoveries lead to death. Conrad's fiction depends on belief in these dark ineffable realms, for they generate the compulsion of his work." (p. 56) Here, there are depths, as there are in Dickens, but apparently they must not be looked into, even though they must be believed in; despite the fact that *The Secret Agent*, as a whole is a penetrating and withering look into the miserable lives of people who try to live and act in secret, in the depths of the city. The reader's confusion is perhaps deepened by Weinstein's courageous struggle with every critic's gordian knot, *The Turn of the Screw*. Weinstein eschews both depth psychologists who turn their talents on the governess, and others who try to read the story 'straight', treating her as a *ficelle*, or narrative convenience. He abandons depth and focuses on the surface events of the story and concludes that the governess herself is the ghosts she sees and that she murders Miles by trying to possess the secret depths of his soul.

From Kafka and Joyce, Weinstein sees modern literature moving more and more towards a surface fascination with patterns in language and as literature becomes engrossed with the schematic intricacies of form, so it loses its ability to portray character, or 'register' depth, or psychology, or make 'human reference'. The discussion leads logically enough, then, to Robbe-Grillet and one expects that the heavy indictment of Joyce will lead to an even stronger indictment of Robbe-Grillet. We see in Joyce the "gradual emergence of a form principle, a way of looking at and organizing reality as well as a strategy for writing books. This form principle leads to eclipse. The individual is submerged in Joyce." (p. 167) And indeed one's expectation is not altogether unfulfilled: "Already implicit in Joyce's work, the priority of formal pattern over human cogency is militantly at the core of Robbe-Grillet." This is visiting the sins of the sons on the fathers with a vengeance. Nevertheless, we are told that there is psychology in Robbe-Grillet's work "and consequently, there is vision." This seems to redeem it. With Robbe-Grillet we are warned, as we are repeatedly in the book, about the danger of our supplying depth where there is none (p. 225); and yet Robbe-Grillet's work demands a response from us. It is the kind of writing, as Robbe-Grillet points out himself, which requires the reader to write his own novel. Robbe-Grillet is ultimately rescued from the critical denunciation that the book seems at times to be heading for, by the charge (to us!) that "Robbe-Grillet ultimately has precisely as much depth as we do. And therein lies the challenge of his work."

In short, although Weinstein is onto an essential fact of the novel, that it articulates hidden depths and tricky revelations, and that it is both, somehow, a formal, autonomous verbal structure and a mode of reference to the 'real' human world, he hasn't yet developed his theoretical understanding fully enough to delight and instruct us as completely as he at times seems capable of doing. His merit is in his insistence on particular comments on and insights into individual works (and he at least gives one something tangible to disagree with, which is also one of the

businesses of criticism) while trying to discover the general pattern that directs and informs his responses. The critic's job is, as Kermode says, to help us make sense of the way in which we (as readers and makers of fictions) make sense of our world. And really to make sense, criticism needs particularity and feeling, but it needs understanding as well.