

Literary Response and the Concept of Criticism

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What do we talk about when we talk about literary response, and what implications does the notion of literary response have for the concept of criticism? I want to discuss these two questions, and examine, clarify, and rethink certain considerations that are taken for granted in talk about literary response. These considerations include the familiar dichotomy between subjective and objective meanings or response and its various corollaries occurring in the form of such notions as the objectivity of a text in opposition to the subjectivity of a response. This dichotomy is in part the product of a distinction between fact and value, and in the context of criticism results at times in debates concerning the place of emotion in literary response.

Wimsatt and Beardsley's arguments about what they called the affective fallacy, and Stanley Fish's arguments against the Wimsatt—Beardsley position are too well known to need any retracing here.¹ The grounds for their opposition, however, need to be characterized, in order to show not simply how the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity is crucial to their dispute, but also that the notions of objectivity and subjectivity possess an ambiguity which poses difficulties for any account of criticism given in terms of either notion, "The Affective Fallacy," on Wimsatt and Beardsley's view, "is a confusion

between the poem and its results. It begins by trying to derive the students of criticism from the psychological effects of a poem and ends in impressionism and relativism.”² Wimsatt and Beardsley have in mind the whole history of affective theories from Plato and Longinus to I. A. Richards, a history that shows its various theorists holding different and at times conflicting conceptions of an affective response. Wimsatt and Beardsley are not opposed to the idea of there being a play of emotions and feelings called forth by literary works; they are rather concerned with the need for a sense of order in the emotions. Emotions aroused by literary works are structured, as Hegel and Bosanquet would put it; ³ they aren't just any feelings and twitches one might experience on the occasion of reading a literary work. In other words, not all emotions and feelings allegedly aroused by the work are integral to the structure of the work. Thus the emotions that cohere with the total structure of values and meanings in the work constitute a legitimate object of literary criticism. Emotions, insofar as one can talk about them, must be organically conceived in the sense that they possess a certain objectivity essentially attributable to the work of art. Wimsatt and Beardsley thus distinguish between the so-called effects one may experience when responding to the work and the poem, and the reason for this distinction is that effects tend to be contingent, subject to the accident of circumstance. What is intrinsic to the work, then, cannot be characterized as effects. A serious pursuit of effects will, on their view, make responsible criticism impossible. Hence, they argue, the criticism that refuses to distinguish between a literary work from its presumed effects commits a logical fallacy.

Stanley Fish has, in his head—on conflict with the Wimsatt—Beardsley position, argued that an accurate description of the meaning of a poem cannot be given except in terms of all of the possible effects experienced by a reader, and that a poem is the result of all the effects taking place in the reader's mind.⁴ The view already contains a twofold provocative idea which Fish did not then draw out: the idea that the distinction between literature and criticism is spurious, and that readers are the makers of poems.⁵ It is this idea which throws out the whole Plato—Aristotle matrix within which much of the theorizing about criticism has proceeded.

Fish calls the “affective fallacy” itself a fallacy,⁶ and in doing that he employs the form of logical thinking which is the same as that employed by Wimsatt and Beardsley. The latter attempt to fix the logic of criticism by recognizing certain procedures as legitimate ones, and by rejecting certain others as illegitimate, confusing, and finally inimical to what they believe is the right form of the concept of criticism. Fish pretensions precisely this idea

that Wimsatt and Beardsley provide such a form. It is exactly at this level of the conflict between these two positions that an analysis of the idea of literary response and its relation to the concept of criticism seems to me to become interesting. The centrality given to affective response leads to a fallacy only if one holds a concept of criticism that denies legitimacy to "affects" in the act of reading. But if one considers them integral to the act, then it is not simply legitimate to consider them, it is *necessary* to give them a place of centrality. From this perspective, one which Fish would seem to adopt, the "affective fallacy" is itself a species of fallacy. Rejection or admission of "affects" is a fallacy from particular critical perspectives; if and only if one could convincingly fix the logic of criticism could one decide once and for all whether "affects" are, on so-called logical grounds, legitimate or illegitimate.

Wimsatt and Beardsley excluded "affects" for ensuring objectivity in criticism, whereas Fish, in his countermove, requires them for ensuring subjectivity. Both answers to the question, what constitutes legitimate literary response, are formulated in terms of the traditional dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity. Fish seems to me to undermine his own claim by arguing that a particular pattern of responses occurs when readers read words on a page. "Essentially what the method does is slow down the reading experience so that 'events' one does not notice in normal time, but which do occur, are brought before our analytical attention."⁷ The claim, this is what happens at the moment of reading, not only rejects other subjectivist response and strategies as impossible, it also reifies a certain structure of happening in the mind. Fish has admitted some of the difficulties that attend his view, and modified it by appealing to the notion of interpretive communities.⁸ Wimsatt and Beardsley, on the other hand, construe the objectivity of the literary work on the model of the physical object, though Wimsatt himself later qualified it by characterizing the literary object as only analogically similar to the physical object. Their primary concern is to account for the experience of unity and complexity (in Coleridge's famous phrase, "unity in multiteity") made possible by the literary work.

The fact, however, that at least some of the criticism leveled against both positions on the nature and status of both literary criticism and the literary object is unquestionable, ought to enable us to question the notion of literary response conceived in terms of the traditional dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity. For it is interesting that when reader—response theorists criticize each other by asking whether the reader is still constrained by the text, or granted partial or total autonomy, they remain trapped by the traditional definitions of objectivity and subjectivity, and the opposition enshrined in

those definitions.⁹ The objectivist believes that it is possible to be free of all assumptions, except for ones pertinent to the very nature of the literary work, whereas the subjectivist believes that one's assumptions are formative of one's experience and hence that there can be nothing questionable about them.¹⁰ This dichotomy springs in part from two different and false conceptions about the nature of assumptions and its relation to literary response.

If objectivity in criticism means knowing a set of objective facts about literature and its history which will help bring about consensus in the critical community, then the objectivity so attained is uninteresting and unimportant to what is vital in criticism. If, on the other hand, it means gaining a clarification of the structure of values which constitute crucial features of one's experience of literature, then it is of course not only desirable but important to serious discussion in criticism. Conceived in this way, the idea of objectivity avoids the false dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity, one which prompts scientrally inclined theorists and critics to condemn subjectivity, and prompts psychologically and sometimes phenomenologically inclined theorists to castigate objectivity. The sort of objectivity to be sought for in literary understanding is one that will help us avoid the self-deception which inheres in believing that the act of reading a literary work necessarily gives us an insight into our own selves. This, incidentally, is an illusion often provided and sustained by psychoanalysis. The latter, however, can help us develop a capacity for self-reflection, but as often as not it can also fortify the complacent pursuit of gratifications in the name of radical individualism. If, in criticism conceived on the model of ego psychology and its later versions, one's so-called subjectivity determines what one experiences in literature, then criticism becomes simply the self's *capacity* to replay endlessly its own experiences. This capacity, however, is a *tendency*, a *symptom*, as much in need of critical diagnosis as the model which legitimizes in advance the inevitability of that tendency.

A strict commitment to objectivity which hopes to settle the conflict on every important aspect of criticism requires that we succeed in finding sufficient common ground among all who disagree to arrive at a consensual understanding of a literary work. To expect this is to expect that there is some final universal method of literary inquiry. But we need to get rid of such an expectation, and recognize that our conceptual or categorial structures are historical, that even if some of them continue to persist beyond their contexts of origin, they nevertheless alter and undergo a process of internal modification and refinement. Such a recognition threatens that conception of rationality which seeks

universal conditions of agreement, or, to put it in Kantian terms, "the conditions of possibility of experience."¹¹ It is a rigid conception of objectivity which has led to its equally rigid logical counterpart, subjectivity.

Subjectivism in literary criticism and its theory can be taken as an extension of emotivism in modern moral philosophy, and of ego—psychology in psychoanalysis.¹² Literary response, on this view, is the expression of one's personal feelings and attitudes, and one describes them in order to change the feelings and attitudes of others. This implies that there are no objective criteria, indeed that there can be no intelligible appeal to objective criteria. Once it is said that criteria of criticism are subjective, all interpretations and all evaluations become non—rational, in the sense that not only that they cannot be settled by reason, but that there cannot be any serious dialogue and conflict between different parties. All disputes would then be carried on either by clever manipulations of opponents, or, political and institutional contexts permitting, by overt or covert violence. It is this conception of the valuational dimension underlying criticism and its theories that leads some theorists to characterize someone's questioning of a particular theory or practice as a matter of his not liking it, and the acceptance of a theory or practice as a matter of liking it. This conception blinds its adherents to what is important, or questionable, in particular theories and the forms of practice envisaged by them. My discussion does not mean, however, that, for a variety of institutional and other reasons, subjectivist criticism and its theory may not acquire great influence in a given culture. (What the nature of that influence is, and what historical forces contribute to the rise of such a conception, are questions that require an historical—analytical inquiry, one that would have to be both interdisciplinary and critically self—conscious about the disciplines it considers important to grasp.)

The idea of a mistake, confusion, error, or failure of tact makes no sense whatever in a context in which literary response is strictly a play of one's subjective response. Consequently, just as an error or confusion cannot be eliminated, neither can it be made. Such a mode of arguing construes a radically strange and confused form of epistemology. It harbors the fear and anxiety that if the concept of a confusion were to be given a legitimate place in one's inquiry, it would make one dogmatic and authoritarian. This anxiety is in itself a product of confusion, especially since its denial, implicit or explicit, itself breeds a dogmatic and authoritarian stance in critical practice. The subjectivist critic seems to be afraid that if it is allowed that critical practice can

at least partly be explicated in terms of reasons, criticism may be driven to draw certain dogmatic and coercive conclusions when faced with requisite evidence and argument, that the possibility of providing critical practice with explicit and defensible criteria might amount to a critical authoritarianism barely able to disguise its coercive power. But there is no reason to credit such anxieties. The specter of authoritarianism can be just as dangerous in a so-called radical stance as in a so-called conservative stance, if it is not able to engage a process of argument and self-criticism, and issues, instead, in bland assertions which are then taken to be themselves critical arguments.

Self-deception, wilful stubbornness, fanaticism, and perversity can mark any discipline of cultural inquiry, in the guise of traditionalism as well as radicalism, and they can hamper criticism and its theory in both rigidly subjectivist and rigidly objectivist approaches. When a theorist takes a strictly subjectivist stance according to which there is nothing objectively questionable about such a stance, one is faced with the unavoidable implication that there is nothing objectively questionable about the uniquely personal which characterizes everything in one's critical practice. Such theorists sometimes adduce the example of romanticism and its insistence on individuality and self-exploration. Romanticism, however, derives its power in part against the background of certain universal commonplaces of the predecessor culture which would have considered at least some of romanticism's central claims suspect, if not unintelligible. Nevertheless, romanticism's interest in the self does not make it subjectivist; indeed, like phenomenology, romanticism's interest in the self derives its strength from its exploration of inter-subjectivity.

The privileging of a subjectivist stance occurs partly because of its proponent's conviction that there is no possibility of knowledge except in terms of strictly subjectivist construals of all experience. This conviction has its logical corollary in the fact that for the subjectivist the problem of ignorance does not even arise. But to say that there can be critical knowledge of literature and that it cannot intelligibly be called subjectivist in any strict sense is to say that it is possible to invite reflection on our critical practice by those who do not and need not share all or any particular features of our experience. This kind of reflection is rendered impossible when critical practice is conceived as the logical consequence of holding certain assumptions in such a manner that no one who does not either follow or adopt that procedure can possibly understand what is being attempted in that practice. This, incidentally, is the subjectivism which is conceptually invidious. As against this stance, a

commitment to objectivity (as redefined here) entails not that everyone shall follow or adopt the same procedures or assumptions, but that whatever responses are elaborated in one's critical practice allow in principle for analysis and reflection.

Fish has, in his later essays, sought to eliminate the subject-object dichotomy. "Problems disappear," he provocatively says, "not because they have been solved but because they are shown never to have been problems in the first place."¹³ He dissolves the dichotomy by devising a notion of literary communities. The dissolution, however, is not genuine, since it generalizes the individualistically defined notion of the subject into a communal notion and thus manages at best to avoid or dissolve the problem of the object. On Fish's view, literary communities, since they make literary works, need face no real difficulties other than the one experienced in the process of making them, and the difficulties thus experienced become testimonies to the formative capacity of a given literary community. Fish characterizes his method as a persuasion model which directs our attention away from the demonstration model which, he argues, is based on the subject-object dichotomy. If all of what we do is guided by a specific set of assumptions which determines in advance the way we make poems and this strategy helps us celebrate our formative capacities, Fish can then draw the conclusion that "the greatest gain that falls to us under a persuasion model is a greatly enhanced sense of the importance of our activities."¹⁴

This argument may well appear like a liberation of the self from the clutches of an emotivist philosophy but it cannot escape the implication that it carves up the institution of criticism into emotivist communities, each pursuing its various gratifications without any sense of doubt its activities. The concept of criticism, however, is a highly complex and sophisticated one, in part because it includes, as a crucial element of its self-description, criticism's ability to raise fundamental and sometimes skeptical questions about both its present status and the nature and limits of the self-understanding of particular theories and practices of criticism. Moreover, one can always raise questions of adequacy, legitimacy, and usefulness of a particular response or assumptions; and though these questions are often in traditional philosophy of science and criticism tied to realist epistemology which requires the subject-object dichotomy, they do not require that epistemology and its various assumptions.¹⁵

Freed from realistic epistemology and the correspondence theories of truth and knowledge, the concept of objectivity implies the denial of any

position that holds that the content and form of what one is going to say or do in response to a literary work are already fixed by the assumptions one employs to initiate one's response.¹⁶ Assumptions are, of course, constitutive, but constitutive assumptions are the ones that underlie the total configuration of a literary interpretation, and not the ones that help initiate a critical response. When assumptions are taken to decide a reading from its very beginning, they become, rather than assumptions, a method that strictly decides what is, and what is not, legitimate in a reading. Taken in this way, even apparently sophisticated assumptions which seem to allow for a process of fulfillment and thwarting of expectations are not distinguishable from a methodical machine. Though they may seem useful for pedagogical purposes, they cannot serve the interests of criticism. But this may imply that in literary studies the problem of pedagogy remains an unresolved one for those who have come to recognize the practice of criticism as something radically distinct from that which follows from the imposition of a method,

We need to acknowledge that there is such a thing as critical (literary) knowledge, in the epistemological sense of these words. We misinterpret the epistemological sense when we hope for a formalization of literary knowledge in the way in which the natural sciences seek to formalize their procedures and discoveries. All those who read literature and write about it possess some literary knowledge and understanding; they could not be said to engage in critical controversies if they did not claim such knowledge. But when we ask, as both Plato and I. A. Richards did, whether we can make knowledge-claims about literature, we may be in the grip of a scientific and false conception of knowledge. Nevertheless, the question about the nature and meaning of knowledge-claims made for literature is in itself a legitimate question; it is, as Wittgenstein might explain, a question about the grammar of literary understanding. Similarly, there is nothing as such wrong or authoritarian about one's conviction that some interpretations are simply absurd and some quite interesting and right. The vocabulary of right and wrong, however, is a problematical one, since it may tempt one to think that one can discover absolute grounds for adjudication among different interpretations, and that there is a "proper" method of doing interpretations which will put to rest the conflict among critics.

Now, the subjectivist stance is generally the product of an attitude that it represents the sincere and satisfactory mode of access to one's *felt* response. But it is not clear why felt response should make a literary reading subjectivist

as such. It can be construed as subjectivist only by insisting that the expression of a feeling or attitude is part of the essence of a literary reading, which cannot properly be done by objective criteria. This, however, misconstrues the very concept of literary response and its relation to the concept of criticism which is essentially institutional. The concern with a sophisticated concept of objectivity requires in fact that the expression of a feeling or attitude be taken to be integral to the practice of criticism.

If the subjectivist sometimes identifies a literary interpretation with the articulation of feelings and emotions, the objectivist construes the connection between a literary reading and feelings to be no more than external. It is here that serious theoretical reflection needs to assemble, as Wittgenstein would say, reminders that bring out the fuller and more complex situation underlying the concept of criticism.¹⁷ This concept covers a rather large and complex spectrum, and extends from fleeting emotions one may experience by a reading of a moving lyric on love or loss to the deepest disturbances one may experience on reading *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, or *The Brothers Karamazov*. Great literary works such as *Hamlet* or *Oedipus Rex*, too, induce fleeting emotional states in one, as do some fine lyrics, but what constitutes the power of *Hamlet* resides in part in the deep affective disturbances it induces, disturbances which can sometimes alter our very perception of our personal and social existence. The idea of affective impact is trivialized when it is confined to contingent emotional states; this is a tendency of the aesthetic of detachment.¹⁸ And it is trivialized when it is confined to some pattern of fulfillment and thwarting of expectations; this is a tendency of the aesthetic of involvement whose modern manifestation occurs in the reader-response theory in its subjectivist version. If the subjectivist is severely partial and therefore in error because he has accepted some pattern of fluctuations presumed to occur in the mind as totally determining literary response, the objectivist is severely partial and therefore in error because he leaves no room for a consideration of the meaning and implications of feelings and attitudes in literary response.

The involvement of emotions in literary response does not render the response incapable of reasoned elaboration, any more than the fact that the events of history are often emotionally charged makes them immune to analysis and reflection. In literary response, emotions can be directly involved, especially when a literary work deals with human action and its implications for life in particular social-historical contexts. When emotions become involved in literary response in this manner, they make central to their grasp the ideas of morality and

truth, without thereby making the response anything other, or less, than literary, response. then, is literary not in the sense of response to merely the formal properties of a literary work, but in the composite sense of its capacity to work toward a grasp of the work's structure and meaning.

Literary criticism doesn't, and in fact must not, fulfil a single function. It can, or ought to, focus on a whole multiplicity of functions: it can reflect on human relations, on the gulf between values and conduct in social and personal life, and on the kinds of things that constitute obstacles to a satisfactory realization of the projects by which human beings seek to define themselves and their world, and are often in defined by their world and its possibilities and limits. The concept of criticism comprehends a more complex range of procedures and insights for dealing with literature, and it cannot be equated, without severe impoverishment, with any strategy of analyzing writing or language as such. This does not mean that such a strategy may not have a bearing on criticism. But if it claims to be applicable to any literary work and hence generalizes itself as a strategy of literary interpretation, it misdescribes its role; it cannot be anything more than, a useful, even important, element in the act of criticism. The concept of criticism allows in principle for shifts in interpretative strategies, and it encompasses a host of other elements that require an analysis of formal, historical, and conceptual issues that arise in any act of criticism which sees itself as something more than the reading of a text.

Notes and References

1. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), pp. 21-39; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980). pp. 22-67,
2. Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," p. 21.
3. See G. W. F. Hegel. *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (London, 1920), I: pp. 67-78; and Bernard Bosanquet, *Three Lectures on Aesthetics* (London, 1915), p. 19.
4. Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 43.
5. Fish seems to suggest this idea in his later essays in *Is There a Text*, see esp. part II, pp. 303-71.
6. Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 42.

7. Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 28.
8. Fish develops the notion of interpretive communities to overcome the difficulties he acknowledges in his position; for "interpretive communities," see *Is There a Text*, pp. 167-80. For Fish's admission of the difficulties, see his introductory chapter in *Is There a Text*, pp. 1-17 and the parenthetical note, pp. 147-48, to chapter 6.
9. See, for instance, Fish's criticism of Michael Riffaterre, *Is There a Text*, pp. 59-65.
10. The question of literary response has at times been discussed in terms of subjective and objective paradigms. See, for instance, Norman N. Holland, "The New Paradigm: Subjective or Transactive?" *New Literary History* 7 (winter 1976): 335-46; David Bleich, *Subjective criticism* (Baltimore and London, 1978); and Grant Webster, *The Republic of Letters: A History of Postwar American Literary Opinion* (Baltimore and London, 1979).
11. In our time Karl-Otto Apel and Jurgen Habermas have made major attempts to revise and defend this Kantian notion. See, for instance, Apel, *Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften* (Dordrecht, 1967); and Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1971).
12. See, for instance, C. L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, 1945).
13. Fish, *Is There a Text*, pp. 336-37.
14. Fish, *Is There a Text*, p. 368.
15. For a discussion of these and related issues, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N. J., 1979), chapters VI and VII.
16. For a full treatment of the nature of assumptions in the context of hermeneutics, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), a translation of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen, 1960); pp. 245-341.
17. Assembling reminders would in a sense amount to a grasp of the grammar of literary understanding. In Wittgenstein, the notions of assembling reminders and what constitutes the grammatical are extremely difficult, allowing for no straightjacket applications. See, for instance, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London, 1958), pp. 217, 253, 371, 373.
18. For a discussion of this stance, see my *Metacriticism* (Athens, Ga., 1981), pp. 88-100.

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