The Play and Place of Criticism

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II
THE PLACE OF CRITICISM
Perhaps no area in the English curriculum has undergone more radical changes since the Second World War than has literary criticism; indeed, only since that time has it become an area. Earlier, literary criticism would hardly have been thought worthy of separate treatment in a book of this sort. Surprisingly, this concern with criticism has shown itself most markedly at the two extremes of the university curriculum—in elementary courses and at the graduate level. What Understanding Poetry represents in the recent history of courses in the introduction to poetry Theory of Literature represents in the new awarenesses that graduate training has recently been seeking to impart. Indeed, the increasing influence of the latter served to increase that of the former: that is, Theory of Literature helped indoctrinate theoretically those graduate students who were to teach basic undergraduate courses in literature and indoctrinated them in the very way that would make Understanding Poetry their appropriate textbook as beginning teachers.

It was of special importance that the final chapter of the original (1949) edition of Theory of Literature was entitled “The Study of Literature in the Graduate School” and that the reforms it so urgently called for were the very ones that graduate schools seemed ready to undertake. It especially illuminates the development of graduate education in English to note that in the paperback reprint edition of 1956 the authors eliminated this chapter as no longer necessary, since its reforms had been accomplished and its complaints might have sounded anachronistic.

1 Originally written for The College Teaching of English, ed. for the NCTE, MLA, CEA, and ASA by John C. Gerber, John H. Fisher, Curt A. Zimansky (New York, 1965), this essay was edited by Curt A. Zimansky, who tried to bring some uniformity among the contributions. Some of his alterations I have restored to their original form; some—with thanks to him—I have happily allowed to stand.


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But was their seeming optimism justified, or is it justified even now? Although literary criticism has received increasing recognition and offerings in it have been welcomed into English departments, to what extent has it really become an integral part of the graduate program and, consequently, an informing part of the attitude of the beginning undergraduate teacher? Although this book is directed primarily toward the undergraduate level, in the case of literary criticism this level is almost totally controlled by graduate school attitudes. So we must ask, to answer the questions I have raised, how extensively courses in critical theory and critical method have been inserted into English department graduate programs. To what extent has awareness of critical method affected the orientation of all graduate courses? To what extent has it permeated the orthodox "scholarly" approaches to literature that control the general program? How professional, responsible, and disciplined has the introduction of critical methodology been? Or, to ask this another way, how much have departments really demanded of those whom they have chosen to introduce critical awareness at the graduate level? I acknowledge my own skepticism concerning the reformation of the upper level English program by presumptuously intending this essay to serve the present academic situation as the final chapter of Theory of Literature served its more acute situation.

I

The teachers of English of the present middle generation became aware—those that did become aware—of new and revolutionary ideas about the critical interpretation of literature during the 1940's, and most of what they learned came from extra-academic sources. Largely it was the work of those influential "big little magazines" which have since earned their way from the shades of academic unrespectability first to the broad daylight of acceptance and then—unhappily—to the fortress of their own solid respectability. Indeed, academic journals have come to imitate them, to influence them in turn, and, in effect, to forge a common institutional front with them.

It must be admitted that, during these years, the academy also showed occasional signs of a coming change. On some campuses an isolated teacher, like Yvor Winters at Stanford, was gathering about him students who wanted something more discriminating than their courses usually offered. Or an influential scholar-critic, like Joseph Warren Beach at Minnesota, began to gather colleagues whose critical concerns were their primary concerns. Or
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a scholar of high reputation, like R. S. Crane at Chicago, could reorient the study of literature in a great university. Or an administrator, Norman Foerster at Iowa, could shape a whole English curriculum to a study of values rather than literary history. And there were others. One needs, for example, only to mention the names of Vanderbilt University and John Crowe Ransom. Indeed, as early as 1933, criticism received encouragement from a quarter one would hardly have anticipated when John Livingston Lowes, as President of the Modern Language Association, called for a new direction to literary study:

Our scholarship has tended to move, of late years, from the large to the relatively small. Is it, or is it not, time to return on occasion, by way of the small, and with all the new light gained thereby, to the larger ends of scholarship . . . ? Is the time not ripe to apply in larger measure both methods and acquisitions to that formative interpretation which illuminates, and which is after all the ultimate end of our researches? . . . For the ultimate end of our research is criticism, in the fullest sense of an often misused word.²

Lowes' call went largely unheeded: after all, if one of the most respected and most orthodox scholars chose to indulge himself in a presidential address, what harm could it do? And despite the other heterodox movements in a university here and there, for the most part the establishment—the graduate program in English—continued to defend its own.

By the 1940's the new and iconoclastic claims were red meat to an increasing number of graduate students and young teachers who felt that the humanistic motive for their study was being drained away in philological programming. It was a fresh spirit that for several summers shortly after the Second World War brought graduate students from around the country to a small campus in central Ohio. For these pilgrims the Kenyon School of Letters was a shrine dedicated to the humanistic study of literature. They ran as to an oasis and spent their weeks there; their diligence to the critical task was their tribute of thanks for the brief escape from the aridity that came before and after. The summer teachers at Kenyon were, of course, the writers for those magazines that were then changing thinking about literature within the academic walls. But summer students at Kenyon, if they looked closely, would have observed that their teachers were in increasing numbers also becoming university professors and were moving to larger and more impressive universities year by year. And as the years went by, after the Kenyon School of Letters followed suit by becoming the Indiana School of Letters, the uniqueness of this summer place was gradually lost; increas-

² PMLA, XLVIII (Supplement, 1933), 1405.
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ingly it came to resemble certain aspects of graduate programs that more and more major universities had begun to make room for. There need be no oasis when watering places are everywhere—even though spreading them out causes their shallowness to increase with their number.

Thus arose the peculiar situation in which young Turks, armed more with what they had learned outside the academy than with their doctorates, were teaching the most elementary English courses with a critical sophistication often neither shared nor even understood by their senior colleagues. Since these senior colleagues were in the main defenders of the ancien régime, they often sought to perpetuate what seemed to them most valuable—or even sacred—by looking for younger versions of themselves to take over the “scholarly” areas of graduate teaching. Those younger men with less respect for “academic” values were edged into the less prestige-ful, less advanced areas of the curriculum. Occasionally successful publishing records created certain fortunate exceptions even in the most hallowed of historical periods. And some were allowed tentatively to explore new and less traditional aspects of an enlarging graduate program, thus joining those elder statesmen of modern criticism who had earlier been taken into and, to some extent, been taken over by the academies.

Still the irony persisted for a while that elementary courses were being taught at a more mature critical level than most graduate seminars. Even this state of slight fortune could only deteriorate as the revolutionary excitement of those anti-academic days abated, so that the new graduate students, now presumably at one of those watering places that were everywhere but existed in depth almost nowhere, would have neither the fervor nor the extramural guidance. These might manage, in the generation to come, to bring the undergraduate level of teaching down to that of its big brothers. What had promised so much to the institution by being nurtured outside was threatened with the loss of its distinctiveness by being brought inside and absorbed. At best it could only slightly influence the essential form of the institution to which it surrendered. So the apparent incorporation of literary criticism proved to be the shrewdest possible tactic of the establishment: here was the way to smother it by giving it a minor, unassimilated place. Criticism was absorbed, but not digested. What newer scholar-critics there are in important positions at graduate levels—and I have not meant to claim that there are not a goodly number—are still, on the whole, trapped within a framework that has not been transformed in any essential way by the forces I have been tracing here.
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The fate of criticism in the learned journals has been similar. It has been invited in, often to be at the mercy of unregenerate editors or readers who have not learned to discriminate among the new scholar-critics whom history now forces them to admit. So these journals have encouraged—sometimes compelled—criticism to deprive itself of much of its vitality as it conforms to their professionalism by turning itself into exercises in explication, as arid as many of the scholarly exercises it replaces or accompanies.

The revolutions that were institutionalized—and thus came to be symbolized—by the accomplishments of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and of René Wellek and Austin Warren, are indeed far behind us now, and with their victories consolidated. But the problems remain and in subtler form since they give the appearance of having been solved. They are less obviously painful but perhaps harder to cure since our confidence in our catholicity may permit us to mistake conviviality for health.

II

The desire to be modish is hardly a serious justification for instituting or transforming programs. What are the arguments, apart from those of the changing fashions dictated by recent academic history, to support the growing role of literary criticism in the English curriculum? Perhaps in the justification of criticism we may discover its proper objectives. Its primary justification we may derive from those motives that prompted the growth of interest of a couple of decades ago. Through the critical approach to literature, the student can discover the unique subject matter of his field and the unique methods available to him for probing it. No matter what use his particular scholarly interest may lead him to make of a literary work, criticism allows a clear determination of the object he is subduing to his needs—a unified grasp of the thing itself. This grasp can allow him to treat the literary work terminally, thus controlling the instrumental uses of the work; humanly dedicated to the work as repository as well as sign, it can transcend and give purpose to those specialized scholarly studies that radiate outward toward extraliterary subjects through the use of extraliterary methods. Criticism thus presents itself as the one peculiarly literary discipline designed to locate and explore what is peculiarly literary in a national literature.

Thus the interaction between subject and its appropriate method; and from this to the further interaction between the yield of value and the yield of meaning. The concentration upon the literary object as a special sort of
entity whose nature is accessible only to special methods can make the student aware of it as the source and container of value, thus restoring to the humanities an area of concern which descriptive or "scientific" interests have sought to undermine and thus de-humanize. The student may well find that this value manifests itself in the work's incomparable capacity for meaning, in the special awareness of its moment in its culture's history, an awareness which its aesthetic-thematic organization can generate. For its capacity to function as a sign for meanings indeed follows upon its functioning as a repository of meanings. At this point the circuit of the unique to the unique is closed: the uniqueness of subject is discovered by (and yet helps to create) the uniqueness of the method it demands (and yet will submit to); together the two yield the unique sort of value that receives its ultimate sanction from the uniqueness of meanings—at once aesthetic and thus suprahistorical and yet in another sense historical after all—which the work in the totality of its discovering (and its being discovered) can reveal. The maintenance of this circuit will permit the full-scale study of literature, with its manifold but now subsidiary disciplines, without the danger that the centrifugal force of extraliterary interests and methods will tear apart the heart of the subject and destroy it as a unified entity.

But this view of literature as a subject—a view admittedly conditioned greatly by this critic's desire to defend his own—would find literary criticism as the central coordinator of the studies of that subject, as the queen of the literary sciences as it were. It is in accordance with this view that I earlier found the accommodation of the academy to literary criticism to be so inadequate and thus so misleading insofar as it claimed to be humanistically promising.

III

Precisely how much literary criticism has begun to be offered in colleges and universities, what sorts of courses have been initiated, and how do they measure up to the lofty position I have tried to create for criticism? A recent survey by Professor Albert Van Nostrand indicates the answer:

About four out of seven schools of liberal arts offer some course in literary criticism. This figure is based on the catalogues of 350 schools—about a third of those listed in the latest directory of the American Council on Education. As a basis for observation, these 350 schools are a representative sampling of American liberal arts education. They reflect a broad range in enrollment, course offerings, geographical location, affiliation, and the means of financial support.
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Most of them offer an undergraduate major in English literature. The catalogues of these 200 schools offering courses in criticism support some further observations.

Regardless of their location, state universities offer more courses in criticism than does any other kind of school. Six out of eight present at least one such course. Characteristically, with their large English departments, these universities provide several—sometimes as many as five—courses on different levels at one time. But this is not necessarily the consequence of enlightened state educational policy. A comparable ratio of courses in literary criticism offered in state teachers colleges makes this clear. Only one out of three state teachers colleges provides a course in literary criticism. Even some of these—called "applied criticism"—turn out to be courses in reading and writing book reviews! That public school English teachers should be kept so innocent of criticism and its attention to the nature of literature is cause for alarm.

According to the catalogues there are varying emphases. Junior colleges show no interest whatsoever in the discipline of literary criticism. City colleges, providing many courses outside of any degree program, have only scant offerings in this field. In the colleges with Protestant affiliations, the subject is more likely to be offered, if at all, by departments of philosophy. In Roman Catholic colleges, courses in literary criticism explicitly emphasize the classics.

As to the courses themselves, the survey is the most familiar. Half the courses in criticism taught each year in the United States are survey courses. From 150 catalogue descriptions, certain standard characteristics of such a course emerge. It is normally a one-semester course (occasionally two). Offered every year, it is taught by a senior member of the department. It is available to English majors, usually in the senior year, but not required. In universities it is a middle group course for both graduates and undergraduates and is usually required of doctoral candidates in English.

This survey may be called a "history" or "principles of literary criticism" or "critical approaches"; in the language of the catalogue these are synonymous. The description of English 462 at Eastern New Mexico University makes the characteristic emphases: "A study of the theory of and practice of criticism from Aristotle's Poetics to the New Criticism. The raison d'être of criticism itself; the characteristics of criticism as a literary form; the relationships between criticism and the literary masterpieces themselves." Usually, in catalogues, the title of a course appears without further description. . . .

More specifically, the emphasis is on English criticism from the Renaissance through the Victorian period. Augustana College at Rock Island, Illinois, specifies this: "The classical critics are touched upon, likewise the Renaissance criticism on the continent, though the emphasis in the course is placed upon the development of English critical theory as it relates itself to the prevailing thought tendencies from Sidney to Arnold."3

3 This survey was made for this chapter, which Professor Van Nostrand was originally to have written but was unable to complete because of other commitments. I am grateful to him for the extensive researches he conducted, now several years back. I have freely made use of his findings, especially his surveys of courses taught in literary criticism in colleges and universities and of the changing textbook situation in the area of literary criticism.
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It is obvious that the number of courses in criticism and the number of institutions offering them have increased considerably in these last years; that a survey like Professor Van Nostrand's, if conducted several years earlier, would have revealed much less going on in this area; and that a survey of the situation as of yesterday would reveal even more going on, with fewer schools going without some coverage. The increasing interest is also reflected in the recent revolution in textbook production and planning for the English department market, as Professor Van Nostrand also pointed out at length in his original version of this chapter. But by now the larger numbers of certain kinds of books are sufficiently evident to us all to require no extended discussion here. The increased variety of anthologies of criticism, of introductions to the critical study of the various genres (either with or without accompanying anthologies of literary works or critiques of them), of glossaries of critical terms, together with the recent invention, and even in these few years the exhausting production, of the textbook genre commonly termed the "casebook"—all these testify impressively to the growing role of literary criticism and its influence on the English curriculum generally.

However, Professor Van Nostrand's survey should alert us also to the unsystematic—if not altogether grudging—manner in which criticism is often permitted its place in the larger domain of the going concern of the institution, for reasons like those I have indicated. On the whole there is a lack of program. What is required, if there are to be more than modish reasons for teaching criticism, is an awareness of how it can be related to the English curriculum. And this awareness is also lacking—thus the predominance, at the advanced level, of the historical survey of literary criticism. There could be no shrewder way for the older vested interests to adapt the newly demanded offerings in criticism to the general organization of offerings in the English department. The criticism course could thus share a common historical method and organization with other period or genre courses. Its impact on these other courses, on the organization of the curriculum, and on the systematic justification of the organization could be minimized; the very idea that it offered a principle of organization could be obscured. On the elementary level there could be an increase in the "how to read" courses in the various genres with little danger that these would interact with those courses in the history of taste, ideas, and literary opinion that were allowed to pass for advanced courses in criticism and critical theory. Here is the split which I lamented earlier between the criticism
courses at the two extremes of the curriculum, between elementary courses in applied criticism and advanced courses in critical history and theory. This is hardly a rational arrangement, and fortunately it does not exist everywhere. But the exceptions are fewer than many of us have the right to wish.

And what about the teachers for such courses? I have already discussed the junior level teachers, noting that their critical awareness was frequently superior to that of their seniors. The advanced courses, more often than not, are handed to one of the latter as something he might enjoy doing for a while with his left hand, leaving his major energies free for his proper work in a historical period. In fairness it must be admitted that it may not be easy to find a teacher of literary theory at the advanced level since there is little formal training of an extended sort in this discipline. But there is a disposition to believe that almost anyone trained in literary history and capable of reading the texts in the history of criticism is qualified to teach the course. It is, of course, reasonable to argue that the proper teacher of literary theory must be more than parochially English in his literary concerns since, as a systematic study, literary theory can hardly be restricted nationally. And it is reasonable to argue that the proper teacher of literary theory must have a sophisticated grasp of the theory of the fine arts generally and that this grasp of aesthetics naturally involves a sophisticated grasp of philosophic method at large. These claims would argue that literary theory is a specialized discipline indeed, one requiring a specialized training. The English professor, however, has too often and too easily been thought of as being above the petty cavils concerning philosophic consistency for such stringent requirements to be imposed upon him, so that the conception of literary theory as a discipline or a body of related disciplines is not allowed to inhibit the rather casual introduction of courses in this area into the unaltered, general English program.

IV

What would be a fuller and more systematic conception of a program in literary criticism? To begin with, we would have to recognize that such a program must have a double role. First, as a separate group of courses, it forms its own subdepartmental program training future teachers in such a program; second, it must have an influence on the subject, methods, and values of the department’s general offerings and organization of offerings. In its first role, it cultivates its own garden; in its second, it uses its theoretical discoveries to contribute to the arrangement of the department’s more
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varied garden. This second role is the more difficult, and in the long run perhaps the more important: it means altering the attitudes toward the reading and teaching of literature for all of us as practicing humanists and defenders of the arts. But this role can be performed effectively only if the first, more exclusive role is performed with creativity and systematic awareness.

How can we best cultivate that separate group of areas that constitutes the distinct program in criticism? There would seem rather obviously to be three of these areas: the history of criticism, the theory or theories that allow criticism, and practical criticism—the disciplined application of criticism to specific literary works. It is mainly through this last that criticism can spread its influence to the rest of the department's offerings.

I have already spoken of courses in the history of criticism, those similar in method and objectives to courses in literary history—tame criticism by reducing it to a familiar and conventional framework. As advanced courses, usually elective, they do get criticism into the curriculum with the least jarring of teachers' or students' habits. But they do so at the price of foregoing the chance to create a systematic view of literature and, through this, a systematic view of how it should be taught, a view that might alter the attitudes and organization of the department as a whole. Also lost is the opportunity to relate literary theory to the usual courses in applied criticism, those elementary "how to read" or genre courses that I have mentioned several times.

A systematic view of criticism as a subject would require that the history and the application of criticism must be related to each other, and it is obvious that they can be so related only by way of a theoretical approach to criticism. Thus the role of courses in critical theory is central: these must give direction to courses in the history of criticism and practical criticism, controlling these so as to allow them to form related areas within a larger, integrated domain. Of course, giving so central a role to critical theory involves the risk of reducing an entire criticism program to inflexible dogma. Only the liberal intelligence can guard against this reduction, and our self-conscious wariness of the possibility must never be lulled. But the alternative danger, that of having no systematic and controlling view of the subject as a subject, as a body of disciplines, would so dissipate the potential energy of a criticism program as to make the risk of dogma one worth taking. This theoretical perspective will allow courses in applied criticism to be offered profitably at a higher level, thus reducing the disparity of levels.
that I have noted between practical criticism and the history of criticism. Further, it can reform courses in the history of criticism so that they need no longer be routinely historical examinations of chronologically ordered texts, which pick up their method from other courses in literary history or from an elementary anthology-text whose theoretical awareness may very well be questionable if not utterly primitive.

Let me pause here to describe the course that I have found most successfully transforms the history of criticism within a framework that serves an objective that is primarily theoretical. It is a two-semester course that could be offered at either the undergraduate-graduate or the graduate level. Although there is much that is historical in its proceedings, its essential organization is intended to be analytical. The first semester is directed toward establishing the central problems of literary theory and examining the solutions proposed to them through the nineteenth century. Reading is mainly in the obvious major documents and the important scholarship surrounding them. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, the course moves through the mimetic tradition; then, starting again with Plato and Longinus, it traces the expressionist tradition. The teacher should not take these labels too seriously; rather he should show elements of expressionism in the so-called imitatinist and elements of imitationism in the so-called expressionist. He might conclude with obviously mixed figures who defy the imitation-expression dichotomy altogether, using them to show what there is about the nature of the problems of poetics that demands something of each of these traditions, and yet to show also that the price of mere eclecticism is higher than one should pay without further attempts at systematic resolution. The semester could close with the impasse reached with the early Benedetto Croce at the turn of the century. If the course has done its job, it should have exhausted the possibilities for solving the problems of literary theory—both individually and as parts of an integral subject—within the terms in which they were set through the nineteenth century. The student should see that they were not solved, perhaps that they could not be solved, within these terms.

The second semester examines those critics in our own century who, moving from the earlier exhaustion of possibilities, put their questions in a new way to evade the impasse to which imitationist-expressionist poetics in their older forms had led. The readings are dominated by new versions of the theoretical problems and recommended solutions rather than by merely new representatives of the older and already fully tried formulations. Yet
sufficient voice should be given to discordant notes that challenge the cogency of these new versions. This semester will not yield, of course, any last word or final solution or even final setting of the problems, but rather, it is to be hoped, a sense of some advance over older formulations even if an impasse has been reached again. At least one will have reached higher ground before the impasse: certain theoretical traps will once and for all have been eluded, so that we can claim some advances in critical thinking in spite of those traps that yet remain.

Beyond their immediate substance these courses have a methodological objective: to sophisticate the student's theoretical habits and to make him recognize the relevance of these habits to the daily practice of criticism on individual works. The teacher must continually foster this awareness of the relation of systematic thinking about criticism to the practice of criticism and to actual literary works. Further, despite the theoretical orientation of these courses, the student must learn an essential modesty about the claims of literary theory: he must see the ”more things in heaven and earth” in every good literary work than any theory can hope totally to account for, and also the values of the great critics in our literary history despite (or perhaps because of) their theoretical shortcomings. Yet on the other hand, this student must understand the advantages of being aware of theoretical presuppositions behind critical claims, even though a wholly adequate and coherent theory is unlikely to emerge. He can go on to apply his hard-won theoretical awareness to those crucial questions of method that control the courses in the program concerned with the systematic criticism of specific works.

V

This sophisticated awareness of theory, both its necessity and its limitations, is what many departments fail to achieve when they merely add literary criticism to their other offerings. It is what too many English scholars least want and think least worth having. In short, the defence of literary criticism as an organized program must finally turn on the defence of literary theory as a necessary discipline.

The usual argument against literary theory—and it is advanced as much by practicing critics as by scholars—is obvious enough: literary theory, like its parent discipline, aesthetics, has a distracting interest in philosophical abstractions rather than an exclusive interest in discrete works, so that it is just so much baggage imposed from the outside to burden—perhaps to the
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breaking point—the purity and immediacy of poetic contemplation. This argument springs from a strange form of anti-intellectual snobbery which many critics and scholars of English literature have, in a precious, self-indulgent, and sometimes stuffy way, allowed themselves. It is an academic weakness we can term the man-of-letters complex. The venerable position of the belletrist demands that his sensitive dignity not suffer the trivial hair-splittings of the hardheaded logician, the system-making logomachist. Perhaps, in criticism as in philosophy, this is but the traditional answer of the empirical English way to the German way which, goodness knows, can have an inflated stuffiness of its own. It is a disposition that makes even those moderns who have found Coleridge most useful somewhat distrustful of him inasmuch as he was rather in the German style. Consequently, it has produced a scholarly and critical atmosphere that often prides itself on being unlearned in matters of formal aesthetics. And it shows an embarrassed discomfort when faced by claims for the guiding role of literary theory, although it may be a discomfort springing from the threat not to the acute sensibility as much as to the gentleman's ease (I hesitate to say sloth) that wants to coddle its preciosity. So it is that a professor who would insist most severely on the use of appropriate scholarly disciplines in an historical literary study does not demand the equally appropriate aesthetic and philosophical disciplines in a critical study, indeed can be taken in by the student's ad hoc introduction of the shabbiest sort of hand-to-mouth principles of judgment. Scholarship is of course a term broader than history and its disciplines; it relates to any ordered, systematic study and to the mastery of disciplines appropriate to that study in our most demanding conception of it. I am suggesting that the areas required to master criticism as a discipline governed by scholarly responsibility are other than those which English departments usually assume to be the areas most required for a scholarly performance. And I am suggesting that this attitude leads to scholarly irresponsibility in critical study even where historical responsibilities are most carefully met.

It must be granted to the scholar-belletrist that, throughout the history of criticism, writers too dedicated to the philosophy of art have afflicted criticism with the misdirections of what George Saintsbury, borrowing from Pope, disdainfully termed the "high priori way." It is the way, often the German way I have mentioned, that moderns have referred to as the imposition of "aesthetics from above." Certainly many such writers have been interested more in theory than in literature and have fashioned Pro-
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crusteán beds, each to his own measurements, instead of doing the more open and empirical job that is rightly demanded of criticism. In such cases the primary concern with the a priori to the neglect of the thing itself does construct too "high" a way for criticism to pursue and still remain literary criticism.

On the other hand, it is not possible for criticism to proceed in such utter neglect of theory as a Saintsbury might propose. How humbly and unqualifiedly "low" dare we allow sensibility's empirical "way" to become without endangering the critical enterprise from the other direction? Any interest in the aesthetic presuppositions that, consciously or unconsciously, condition not merely our poetic response but even what we see in the poem is, after all, an interest in theory. None of us can, nor should we want to, come upon the poem with a theoretical tabula rasa, without some ideas about what we conceive a poem to be or how we think it ought to serve us or we it. We hope that these ideas will remain flexible and will damage the poem for us as slightly as possible, but have them we must. They will limit us, but if we know what they are, we may be better able to force them into flexibility. Strip our perception as bare as we can, in the unguarded moment the theoretical guard resumes its sway. Or will even the most anti-intellectual of us dare assert—while asserting that he is a critic worth listening to—that among his individual judgments of literary works no faintest pattern can be traced? Can even the historical or biographical scholar, who withholds himself from judgment, claim, in his assertions about the relation of environment or of personal life to what goes on in a literary work, that he has no hidden assumptions about how literature comes to have its meaning as an expression of what has happened outside it? If we must live with the inhibiting presence of theory, then, surely it is sensible for us to examine a theory closely to determine whether it will make us a bearable companion as we journey our way through works of literary art. Surely, too, it is sensible for us to fix it firmly so that it may always show us the same face. In other words, we must examine it to determine whether it accounts adequately for the facts of our poetic experience (even as we acknowledge that this experience is largely conditioned by the theory, whether implicit or explicit), and we must fix it in order to ensure its logical coherence. It is this examination and this fixing that the critical theorist undertakes. If he is acting as a historian of criticism as well, it is this scrutiny to which he subjects the writers under study. The teacher of crit-
ical history or of critical practice is the more valuable as he faces up to this theoretical responsibility.

One can insist, then, that every literary critic, and likewise every literary historian, is involved with theory whether he wants to be or not. So the historian of criticism, for part of the way at least, has to take the "high" road. In labeling an anti-theorist like Saintsbury an impressionist and a hedonist, we are attempting to place his theory, his high-road assumptions. And from the standpoint of most modern criticism, in applying these terms to him, we are saying that we do not much care for his theory, that we do not think that it permits him to treat adequately either literature or the history of its critics or their theories. Of course, although we can trace a priori principles, and thus a theory, in Saintsbury's anti-theoretical claims for pure sensibility, it must be allowed that Saintsbury's is a theory to end all theories and theorizing. His urgent insistence on the primacy and even autocracy of taste and its pleasures—a taste intellectually unguided—can lead only to an insistence on the irrelevance of aesthetics and its disciplines. Yet it is strange to find a similar anti-theoretical bias among many influential critics in our own day, even though these never dare to claim Saintsbury's theoretical justification for it. In a T. S. Eliot, an F. R. Leavis, an Allen Tate—whatever the differences among them—we often find a sort of absolutism that must and does reject outright the subjectivism and hedonism of Saintsbury's literary atmosphere even as, strangely enough, it shares with Saintsbury the distrust of theory as an unpoetic intruder upon the intimacy of the poetic moment. Still it is as much the case with them as with Saintsbury that, like it or not, they must reckon with theory even as they must live with it. Perhaps, as they sometimes claim, they have no theory. But is it not true that if a critic manages to hold no theory, he does so only at the price of unconsciously holding and presenting two or more theories, and mutually incompatible ones?

It would not seem unwise to be more conscious and thus more critical of the theories we assume. For example, this matter of the incompatibility of theories is a curious one. We have seen that the critic must try for a theory that can most fully accommodate the poetic experiences which, since he is a critic rather than a philosopher, are most precious to him. And, once he recognizes the theoretical problem, his poetic experiences may force him to make changes in his systematic bias. This is only to assert the obvious, that the dictation should not flow in one direction only, from theory to sensibil-
verity. But what if all his poetic experience should lead him to what seem to be contradictory theoretical claims—for example, the claim that poetry in some sense represents the world of our experience and, simultaneously, the claim that poetry in some sense is utterly nonreferential, representing only its own contextual world? Must he make up his mind between them and inhibit all future poetic experiences accordingly as he decides one way or the other? If his poetic experience has continually revealed to him the equal truth of both claims, surely he may provisionally hold on to both of them—in full awareness, however, that here is a serious need for resolution which he must try to serve as he goes about future poetic experiences.

It may even be that he will come to feel the ultimate futility of theory in trying to evade the dilemmas provoked by the poetic experiences he dares not forsake. But even so he must earn his right to doubt or even to reject the promise of theory by serving the stern apprenticeship to it. And if he has served well, he will suspect, or at least hope, that in his unhappy conclusion he is wrong—thanks to his own inadequacies. Despite all his trying difficulties, however, how much better off—and how much more useful, too—he is than the critic who, theoretically unaware, moves blithely along through what may ultimately prove to be intellectual chaos, all for the sake of preserving the integrity of a sensibility that in truth is everywhere being badgered by another unknown master.

So much, then, for this attempt to justify those awarenesses that should lie behind an organized program in criticism and each of its courses, whether historical, theoretical, or practical in its emphasis. Is this not reason enough for me to have insisted on the variety of areas of knowledge and discipline that I did? Can any responsible scholar who would be a teacher of criticism afford not to be able to trace the relations of his subject to its parent theoretical disciplines, aesthetics and philosophy, and to its brother areas seen in comparative literature and in criticism of the other arts, where generic literary and aesthetic problems, as distinguished from merely local ones, may be discovered? Clearly what I am arguing toward is the specialist in criticism, a man trained in a graduate field that involves a difficult combination of disciplines. The field is hard to determine fully and, given the available teachers, harder to cultivate, but it is no less necessary for that. Just as it is no longer adequate to speak of criticism as being a matter of private taste, so it is no longer adequate to see its objectives as being less ambitious than what I have been claiming here, even if there is the danger of ambition’s being a mask for mere pretension.
VI

If the criticism program can be rigorously pursued, then it can have the diffuse influence on the department's attitudes and objectives that I have spoken of earlier. By restoring a common subject matter to teachers and students of English literature—common to them but unique to a department of literature—it can allow a oneness to what we all do below the diversity of those specializations that radiate outward toward non-literary subjects and methods. Even more important, it can insist—while asserting the differences between critical method and historical method—that these differences rest not on pedagogical claims but on cognitive claims. It is not enough to urge, as some do, that to turn from philological studies to critical studies is to turn from an interest in making discrete "contributions to knowledge" to an interest in teaching the proper object of literary study, the work itself. For this is to limit the critic's function to pedagogy alone. The critical theorist can remind us that, unless we wish to surrender to the positivist's narrow definition of knowledge, literature and criticism can give us what might be called knowledge, even if it is not of the would-be scientific sort at which the philologist used to aim. Indeed, there may finally even be a bridge between criticism and history constituted by the former as it reveals the special historical role that literature and its meanings sui generis can play. Criticism may finally move beyond criticism by allowing to the work a peculiarly literary influence on the march of cultural forces and their ideologies. It may view the poet as exerting cognitive influences on his society that are unique and that need probing tools unique to them if we are to see fully how they function as well as how they come to mean. By so doing it may restore broadly cognitive claims to literary study, joining a function that is humanistically philosophical to the pedagogical function that many commentators have recently granted to the academic adoption of critical methods.

This essay would seem to claim a fearfully imperialistic ambition for criticism, giving it an autonomous realm and also authorizing it to mold all other realms to its own objectives. Yet its ambition should be nothing less than this. We must say of the teaching and study of literature what Matthew Arnold said of poetry itself, for the iron time strained him to justify his

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4 I discuss this movement in criticism in some detail in my essay "After the New Criticism," Massachusetts Review, IV (Autumn, 1962), 183-205. On this occasion there is space to do little more than mention this function as a desirable one for criticism to perform.
mistress as, in its exaggerated form, it strains us to justify ours: ". . .  if we conceive thus highly of the destinies of poetry, we must also set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence. We must accustom ourselves to a high standard and to a strict judgment." And so it is with our claims for our profession. If, as teachers of English literature, we defend our humanistic group of disciplines by settling only for the highest standards, by discovering for it and cultivating its unique subject matter, methods, values, and the kinds of cognitive awareness all these yield, then we shall have to give appropriate status to that area that can establish and maintain the hegemony of the domain to whose high destinies this entire book is to testify and whose high standards it is to urge.