

EUGENE GOODHEART

The Skeptic  
Disposition in  
Contemporary Criticism



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**THE SKEPTIC DISPOSITION  
IN CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM**

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**SKEPTIC DISPOSITION**

IN CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

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*Eugene Goodheart*

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*In Memory of*  
**MY FATHER SAMUEL**  
*(1900-1981)*



# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION	3
1. Criticism at the Present Time	16
2. The Transcendental Site: From Heaven to Earth	39
3. Roland Barthes and the Monster of Totality	56
4. Reading with/out a Text	88
5. Discourse without Foundation	111
6. A Question of Meaning	136
7. Literature as Play	155
CONCLUSION: Deconstruction and Social Criticism	173
INDEX	181





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*Waltham, Massachusetts*  
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THE SKEPTIC DISPOSITION  
IN CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

Scepticism is a highly civilised trait, though, when it declines into pyrrhonism, it is one of which civilisation can die. Where scepticism is strength, pyrrhonism is weakness: for we need not only the strength to defer a decision, but the strength to make one.

—T. S. Eliot

## INTRODUCTION

Until recently theory occupied an uncertain place in literary study. The New Criticism taught us how to read individual works of literature. Its theory consisted of heuristic concepts like paradox and ambiguity (concepts that told us what to look for). It cautioned against certain fallacies in reading, for example, the intentional fallacy, which mistakes the source of meaning in the author's intentions or the affective fallacy, which confuses the reader's private emotional associations with the feelings evoked by the work. To say this is to be unfair to the achievements of I. A. Richards and Kenneth Burke, but I am more concerned with the way theory was perceived and used in the profession at large than with the intrinsic character of specific theories. Theory was (and remember I am speaking in the past tense) a kind of speculation about constraints in order to make practical criticism a disciplined activity. The primary—for many the exclusive—activity of literary study since the beginning of the New Criticism has been the interpretation of texts. In fact, once the New Criticism had established itself, it became possible to discount the value of literary theory altogether. T. S. Eliot, the unwilling father of New Criticism, had declared that the one thing needful was intelligence. F. R. Leavis pronounced himself against literary theory (and with increasing vehemence toward the end of his long career). For Eliot and Leavis, theory meant abstraction, method, system: terms denoting states of mind obnoxious to the literary intelligence, to which Matthew Arnold attributed "flexibility, perceptiveness, and judgment." This view of literary intelligence is Arnold's abiding legacy to the New Criticism, whatever else of his legacy it

## INTRODUCTION

may have renounced. Though I speak of the past, the anti-theoretical animus of the New Criticism persists in certain English critics who can't resist a sneer every time they utter the word "theory."

The theoretical impulse, however, was never wholly extinct. The largely negative achievement of the Chicago Aristotelians was in their demonstration of confusion and inadequacy in New Critical theory and practice. In particular, the Aristotelians found the New Critics wanting in a conception of literary structure. The remedy lay in the theory of genres. The principal element of structure was plot, which could be discovered even in a lyric poem. For the New Critics structure implied system and rigidity. They could afford to ignore the Aristotelians, because Aristotelian speculation was for the most part arrested in a servile piety toward the master's texts.<sup>1</sup>

But the advent of Northrop Frye was another matter. Frye, too, was inspired by Aristotle's theory of genres, but he was not slavish in his use of the theory. *Anatomy of Criticism* is an astonishing work of theoretical construction, bold in its conception and ingenious in its detail. Frye went beyond Aristotle to create new tasks for criticism and scholarship. The goal of criticism was no longer the isolated understanding of individual works of literature. The critic could now discover the generic or modal features of a work with a view toward understanding its place in the structure of literature as a whole. Frye's work had enormous authority for a while.

Ironically, it lost some of that authority when structuralism (a European import) came on the scene. I say ironically, because one might expect structuralism to provide reinforcement for Frye's work. Like Frye, structuralism (in the work of Barthes, Todorov, and Genette) promised a

<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, exceptions. Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) is a magisterial work that transcends the school

## INTRODUCTION

science of literary understanding in the study of the structures of literature. I suspect that the reason for the overshadowing of Frye by structuralism was that Frye, unlike the structuralists, remains a traditional humanist. If he distinguishes between the scientific understanding of literature and the experience of it, his practice as a critic happily fails to decontaminate his discourse of questions of value. The structuralists, on the other hand, fully prepared "to commit a social science," are more rigorous than Frye in excluding value judgments from literary study.

In any event, for some serious students of literature, both Frye and the structuralists promised the possibility of creating a body of knowledge that would give to literary study the dignity of a discipline for the first time in its history. No other field in the humanities or the social sciences would tolerate the amateurishness and amorphousness that characterized literary study. Theory would have to occupy a central place. It would now inspire the work of practical criticism and scholarship as it never had done before. In fact, the relationship between theory and practice under the aegis of structuralism would be the reverse of what it had been under the New Criticism. In the New Criticism, theory remained in the background, as a tactful regulator of the activity of practical criticism. In structuralism, theory created the tasks and defined the procedures for practical criticism. And the most important difference was that structuralism changed or tried to change the goal of literary study from the interpretation of the meanings of literary works to the knowledge of the conditions of meaning. In an essay "The Critical Assumption," Jonathan Culler, perhaps the most lucid advocate of structuralism, declares the interpretation of texts to be an insidious activity that must be transcended. Culler speaks of replacing interpretation with "studies of the relationship between literary discourse and other forms of discourse, literature's relationship to the world, the role of fictions in the psychic economies of

## INTRODUCTION

readers and writers, the operation of transference involved in reading." He proposes the following example:

Suppose that someone were interested in the problem of *catharsis*, a notion which has often figured in definitions of the tragic genre and which makes claims about the effect of fictions in the mental economies of readers and thus about the relationship between literature and "life." This is an interesting question and to elucidate it would, I claim, be more important to the discipline of literary criticism than to produce another interpretation of *King Lear*.

But how is interpretation involved in a project like this? First, interpretations are part of the object of investigation. One would study plays, such as *King Lear*, which are reputed to involve catharsis, investigate what has been said about them, and discuss reactions with readers and viewers. One would be seeking to devise a theory to account for attested interpretations and reactions, not to produce a new interpretation of one's own. And note that the investigator's own reading of *Lear* is in principle irrelevant. He might judge *Lear* a silly old fool with no tragic grandeur in him, but he might still produce a compelling account of the mechanism of catharsis that accounted for the usual reactions to this and other plays. At this level, and this is the most important, interpretations are what the investigation studies, not what it seeks to produce.<sup>2</sup>

Note how the understanding of literature is divided from the experience of it. In producing "a compelling account of the mechanism of catharsis," the investigator has no obligation to experience catharsis. It would be difficult to imagine an experience of catharsis if *Lear* were thought to be a silly old fool.

The most effective challenge to structuralism and the

<sup>2</sup> SCE (Society for Critical Exchange) *Reports* 6 (Fall 1979), 79.



## INTRODUCTION

science of literature has come not from the old New Critics or traditional humanists, but from those who now carry the banner of advanced literary theory: most notably, the critics who call themselves deconstructionists. Much of what follows in this study concerns deconstruction in particular, but I want to pause here to say something about post-structuralist thinking in literary study, which is not confined to deconstruction. I have already spoken of the value placed on the individual work in the New Criticism. With the appearance of Northrop Frye and the structuralists interest shifts from the individual text to those features of a text that are commonly shared by other texts. The boundaries between individual texts are effectively erased. Nevertheless, what Frye and the structuralists have in common with the New Critics is a belief in the presence of texts. Texts are structures of worlds, plenitudes of meaning. These meanings can be interpreted and the conditions that generate them can be studied.

What characterizes post-structuralism is a questioning, indeed a denial of the independent or substantial existence of the text. Post-structuralist skeptics doubt or deny that the text in or of itself has presence. Thus Harold Bloom subscribes to this post-structuralist assumption, but with the regret of a disappointed believer in presence:

The sad truth is that poems *don't have* presence, unity, form, or meaning. Presence is a faith, unity is a mistake or even a lie, form is a metaphor, and meaning is an arbitrary and now repetitious metaphysics. What then does a poem possess or create? Alas, a poem has nothing, and *creates* nothing.<sup>3</sup>

Paul de Man defines "true literary consciousness" (the consciousness of both writers and readers) as resulting not "from the absence of something but [from] the presence

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 122

## INTRODUCTION

of a nothingness.”<sup>4</sup> “Nothing,” as Bloom and de Man conceive the term, has a metaphysical or theological resonance; in the case of Bloom we are sent to the Kabbalah,<sup>5</sup> in de Man to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the continental philosophical tradition. In a reader-oriented critic like Stanley Fish, the intrinsic vacuity of the text is experienced as an empirical fact (though Fish is opposed to empiricism), devoid of metaphysical subtlety. For Fish the text is a series of marks on the page, which somehow have become estranged from the author who put them there. The marks do not in and of themselves constitute a structure or realize an intention; the text is realized only in the mind of the reader who is a member of an interpretive community that creates rather than discovers meaning. However different the versions, the authority of literary theory in post-structuralist criticism depends on the view that the text has no autonomous existence, that when we read a work we are in the presence of nothing.

Nothing, it should be said at once, is not to be confused with absence, as Hans-Georg Gadamer makes vividly clear in his objection to the following remark by Heidegger: “One cannot lose God as one loses his pocketknife.”

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> In Kabbalah, Nothing is far from being the emptiness that it signifies in post-structuralist discourse. Indeed, it may be the most substantive of realities. “This *Nothing* from which everything has sprung is by no means a mere negation; only to us does it present no attributes because it is beyond the reach of intellectual knowledge. In truth, however, this Nothing—to quote one of the Kabbalists—is infinitely more real than all other reality. Only when the soul has stripped itself of all limitation and, in mystical language, has descended into the depths of Nothing does it encounter the Divine. For this *Nothing* comprises a wealth of mystical reality although it cannot be defined. ‘Un Dieu défini serait un Dieu fini.’” Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1941), p. 25. In a work, Nothing signifies the divine itself, in its most impenetrable guise. And, in fact, *creation out of nothing* means to many mystics creation out of God.

## INTRODUCTION

But in fact one cannot simply lose his pocketknife in such a fashion that it is no longer present. When one has lost a long familiar implement such as a knife, it demonstrates its existence by the fact that one continually misses it. Hölderlin's "Fehl der Götter" or Eliot's silence of the Chinese vase are [*sic*] not nonexistence, but "being" in the most poetic sense because they are silent. The breach that is made by what is missing is not a place remaining empty within what is present-to-hand; rather it belongs to the being-there of that to which it is missing, and is "present" in it.<sup>6</sup>

Absence implies presence, the opposite of nothingness.

That the text is an emptiness is hardly self-evident; in fact, it is plainly counterintuitive and opposed to common sense, as post-structuralist skeptics would be the first to admit. Indeed, the counterintuitive and uncommonsensical character of the view makes it a goad to literary theory. Every act of reading becomes a theoretical exercise which inconclusively demonstrates the presence of nothing against the untheoretical evidence of the senses. The exercise is made possible by a new demystifying sensitivity to the devious tropological nature of language, which is no longer seen as the evocative source of meaning and structure, but as an intrinsically deceptive medium of expression. Theoretical criticism, which becomes the only criticism worthy of the name, is a perpetual demystification of the illusion of fullness.

Deconstructive skepticism (the most radical and powerful of literary skepticisms) holds the view that the language of written discourse is inherently unreliable, that no matter how hard a text may try to sustain the illusion of unity, coherence, meaning, truth (attributes of presence and fullness), the text is incorrigibly prone to disunity, incoherence, meaninglessness, and error. For such skeptics, "reading"

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), p. 235.

## INTRODUCTION

becomes a deconstruction, a process of discovering the sources of error in a text. Indeed, the great texts (the deconstructive canon, so to speak) are those that know their own incoherence, in which case the critic is only a catalyst of the text's own deconstruction. Paul de Man need only touch a text of Rousseau and it deconstructs itself.

One may already remark as evidence of the unreliability of language a slippage in the use of the word "empty," which may now be understood as a structure of error. Such a structure, of course, is empty only in the Platonic sense, in which error is viewed as a privation or absence of substantial truth. In practice, of course, the encounter with a structure of error is experienced as an encounter with something—to be unraveled, deconstructed, demystified.

For those who have been brought up on the distinction (and separation) between beauty and truth, between poetry and philosophy, it is disconcerting to be confronted by a literary criticism inspired by the cognitive passion of philosophy. The poem, for example, is now denied the privilege of exempting itself from so-called rational discourse. Shelley's "Triumph of Life" or Yeats's "Among School Children" is subject to the same cognitive scrutiny as any other structure of discourse.

One misses the full force of deconstruction, however, if one ignores its anti-theological motive. As Murray Krieger remarks, the post-structuralist, if not structuralist impulse "may be seen as springing from the metaphysical (or rather anti-metaphysical) anguish that accompanies our sense of the 'disappearance of God.'"<sup>7</sup> Epistemologically, deconstructive skepticism is opposed to logocentric knowledge; theologically, to belief or faith. In contemporary literary discourse, knowledge is a version of "onto-theological" discourse. What is at stake in the skeptical challenge is the status both of our interpretive knowledge of texts and of

<sup>7</sup> Murray Krieger, *Poetic Presence and Illusion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 172.

## INTRODUCTION

our values and convictions. Unity, meaning, coherence, all targets of deconstructive suspicion, are tropes of both theology and epistemology. "The text is not a line of words [writes Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author"] releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of an Author-God) but a multidimensional space."<sup>8</sup> And elsewhere in the same essay, he asserts ". . . by refusing to assign a 'secret,' an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), literature liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law."<sup>9</sup> Deconstructive skepticism "puts in question" the god terms of humanist criticism. From a theological point of view, nothing is the nonpresence of God, the source and substance of being. All claims to presence in a text represent a view of literature as an expression of transcendence: the view, for example, that Matthew Arnold expresses in the opening paragraph of "The Study of Poetry."

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.

My evocation of Arnold, of course, is not fortuitous, for Arnold gave to modern literary study its most powerful

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 146

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.