PREFACE

IT IS NOW GENERALLY ACCEPTED that such "new critics" or "formalists" as John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate have had a profound effect on the study of literature in our time. The main principles of their critical theory and practice were set forth more than twenty years ago in books like Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Brooks' *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), Ransom's *The World's Body* (1938) and *The New Criticism* (1941), and Tate's *Reason in Madness* (1941). Since that time the way literature is studied in the universities has undergone decided changes. A poetry-reading course no longer means the assignment of enormous readings lists, with but cursory treatment of individual works in the lecture hall. Emphasis is no longer on the poet's life or even on the historical, social, and intellectual milieu surrounding his work. These are still regarded as important considerations, but the main emphasis in undergraduate poetry courses is on the poems themselves. Scholarship is still central to the professor of English, but scholarship has expanded to include criticism —especially the practice of poetry criticism. Here the influence of the formalists has been greatest.

However, the study of fiction has not followed the same pattern. Courses in the novel still include massive reading

assignments. The works themselves still take a position subordinate to other scholarly interests: usually as documentation for an historical theme, "The Novel Since the Civil War"; or for a regional thesis, "The South in Modern Fiction"; or for a sociological theme, "The Proletarian Novel in America"; or for a philosophical one, "The Concept of Man in the Eighteenth Century Novel"; or for the tracing of intellectual patterns, "The Rise of Realism." Emphasis in such courses of study is characteristically on some principle which is seen as providing integration for the course; seldom in such studies is the work viewed as a unique presentation whose values and meanings can be realized only by regarding them as individual symbolic presentations, by seeking meaning within the forms employed in each instance.

Yet in spite of the general agreement among scholars and critics that a closer attention to individual works represents a healthy direction for literary study, many have expressed misgivings. Formalist criticism, it is said, leads to an overpreoccupation with form and technique, to an undue concern with literary language and devices. Certainly the study of literature should not be centered in dissecting works for the purpose of isolating paradoxes and ironies, locating "tensions," or emphasizing "irrelevancies." Is not this, after all, merely a more exacting kind of art-for-art's-sake aestheticism? What, it is asked, is the ultimate significance of close textual analysis? Were it impossible to give satisfactory answers to these questions, were the practices of the Southern New Critics incapable of substantial justification, the revolution in criticism of the past twenty years could hardly have occurred with such resounding effect. Or having occurred, it scarcely could have persisted.

The critical theory of John Crowe Ransom, and of his fol-

lowers Allen Tate and Cleanth Brooks, shows the direct influence of the Kantian generative idea. Each begins with an assumption which is the ground of his theory and practice —the assumption that the work of art is, from first to last, the celebration of man's qualitative experience. He knows that the task of distinguishing qualitative experience is an extremely difficult one; he must focus attention on an area of human experience which defies abstract symbolization, which can be adequately represented only in the nondiscursive symbols of the artist. To establish his critical principles he must force thinking to turn upon itself to reveal the fact of a cognition which can apprehend and organize into effective symbols that aspect of experience which is qualitative. His tools are the tools of the philosopher; the knowledge he draws upon is the knowledge of the epistemologist. He desires, as a man of letters, to express his literary theory as clearly and cogently as possible, and he deplores the abstruse, technical diction of philosophical aesthetics. But he realizes the necessity of it if his principles are to have a foundation substantial enough to withstand critical examination, and if they are to make a significant contribution to knowledge of literary theory.

Although the basic assumption of this criticism is the uniqueness and particularity of qualitative experience, the Southern New Critic seldom begins the explanation of his theory at this point. Rather, he wishes to show how he arrived at the necessity of his assumption, a process which can be accomplished only negatively, by revealing the inadequacy of the logical concept to represent all aspects of human experience. He begins, in short, with an examination of the differences between scientific and poetic discourse.

Once the limitation of scientific abstractions is established,

the formalist critic can demonstrate the real contribution of literary presentations of experience. Here his focus must be on "structural properties." He can explore the kind of "meaning" intended by the language of literature; he can investigate the ways this "meaning" in its particularity inheres in the language of literature. And by comparison with scientific knowledge he can show why he believes literature to be a form of knowledge, a necessary form if a full account of human experience is to be symbolically constructed.

The analysis and interpretation of modern poetry, which has been carried on so successfully by the modern critics, is an implicit testimony to the growing awareness that a work of literary art must be regarded as a special employment of language and idea, but the application of these convictions to the criticism of fiction has scarcely begun. One has but to examine the major quarterlies of the last five years to realize that a new criticism of fiction is being sought. The danger is that such a criticism of fiction is often hasty and immature in its mechanical application of the close analytical method. If critical practice is to be something more than the superficial search for ambiguities, paradoxes, and Freudian implications, then criticism must proceed from the clear convictions that motivated the pioneers of philosophical criticism —John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Cleanth Brooks. In the search for a new criticism of fiction the first problem is to isolate the principles governing the new criticism of poetry. The search must be for something more than the discovery of a critical method; it must seek the convictions which underlie critical practice.

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