

# Forum

## In Memoriam: Norman N. Holland, 1927–2017

### TO THE EDITOR:

The fundamental question for the literary theorist, film devotee, and author Norman (“Norm”) N. Holland was “Why do we do literature?” The pronoun “we” denotes not only scholars in literary studies but also readers of literature in general. The repeated “do” suggests that readers are far from mere passive consumers. Something else is going on in their minds as they read. Holland endeavors to pinpoint what this something else might be.

The works that Holland is most often remembered for were published from about 1968 to 1980. During this period, along with Stanley Fish and David Bleich, he emerged as one of the principal exponents of American reader-response theory. All three had been trained as New Critics. All three began to question the New Critics’ assumption that there was one ideal, fixed, and coherent way of interpreting works of literature. Holland in particular questioned the notion that there could be homogenous thinking appropriate for every individual reader.

In his often reprinted *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (W. W. Norton, 1968), Holland proposed a methodology that would move beyond supposedly objective analysis of works of literature to incorporate a reader’s “subjective” experience. By examining his own responses, he tried to show how meaning was located not in the text but somewhere in the interplay between a reader’s conscious and unconscious mind. He hoped that this approach would also demonstrate that a work of literary fiction or a poem may serve as a vehicle for readers’ primitive, often psychosexual, desires and may even allay their deep-seated fears.

Early in the 1970s, with Murray Schwartz and Bob Rogers, Holland began coordinating and participating in “Delphi seminars.” In these seminars, students, along with the seminar organizer and any col-

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leagues who might be attending, would write down whatever personal feelings or memories were triggered by the assigned readings. Participants would then circulate, study, and discuss their responses.

The work carried out in these seminars naturally fed into Holland's writings, which then took on a flavor very different from those of Fish. While Fish's model of the reader in "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics" consisted of an idealized "informed reader" (not unlike Fish himself) possessing a high degree of linguistic and literary competence (*New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1970, pp. 123–62), in writings like *Poems in Persons* (W. W. Norton, 1973) and *Five Readers Reading* (Yale UP, 1975), Holland preferred to focus on actual readers. He provided a useful summary of his approach in "Unity Identity Text Self," first published in 1975 in *PMLA* (vol. 90, no. 5, 1975, pp. 813–22). Claiming that "all readers create from the fantasy seemingly 'in' the work fantasies to suit their several character structures" (818), Holland was determined to find "unity" on the basis of precise identity themes that match individual readers' ways of thinking and behaving.

These writings triggered some heated responses, especially from Bleich and Jonathan Culler. In *Subjective Criticism* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1975), Bleich located in Holland's model the idea that "new experience" was "a repetition of previous experiences" (121), implying that if we always read in relation to identity themes, we risk losing the joy of experiencing literary texts in unaccustomed ways. Holland's response could already be gleaned from his *PMLA* article in which he had explained that, following Heinz Lichtenstein, he had claimed that identity themes were susceptible to variation. This meant that readers could always be open to surprise.

Holland was condemned in even harsher terms by Culler, who, well-grounded in structuralism and semiotics, was quick to brand Holland's concept of "self" too simplistic. Culler also claimed that if we follow Holland's methodology "we attain no knowledge of literature but

only exercise the self . . . recreating our identity themes in one masterpiece after another" ("Prolegomena to a Theory of Reading," *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman, Princeton UP, 1980, p. 46). *The I* (Yale UP, 1985), which Holland liked to think of as his magnum opus, may be read as an attempt to counter such criticism by sketching the reader's self in more detail, most notably portraying it as both initiator and product of "feedback loops."

In the mid-1980s I came across Holland's "Re-covering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction" (published in the same volume as Culler's "Prolegomena") and was struck by a confessional element not customary in the kind of academic writing that was in vogue at that time. I decided to participate in one of his Delphi seminars, and so I joined the doctoral program in English at the University of Florida, where Holland was teaching. I could not quite share Holland's devotion to Freud and ego psychology and the work of psychoanalysts like Lichtenstein, Erik Erikson, and D. W. Winnicott, and so my interests veered off in other directions.

Nevertheless, about twenty years later, while doing some research in cognitive studies, I came across Holland's name again, and I began a fruitful e-mail correspondence with him that continued right up until 2017. I was not surprised to learn that he had been reinventing himself. Not only had he written a novel (*Death in a Delphi Seminar: A Postmodern Mystery* [SUNY P, 1995]), he had also acquired some knowledge of neuroscience. In a series of articles in *PsyArt: An Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* that includes "Literature and Happiness" (4 Dec. 2007, [psyartjournal.com/article/show/n\\_holland-literature\\_and\\_happiness](http://psyartjournal.com/article/show/n_holland-literature_and_happiness)) and in "Spider-Man? Sure! The Neuroscience of Suspending Disbelief" (*Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2008, pp. 312–20), he had been consistently trying to provide neuropsychanalytic corroboration for his long-held views on reader response. Later, in *Literature and the Brain* (PsyArt Foundation, 2009) he used neuroscience to shed more light on the idea

that a reader of literature has the feeling of “being transported” (25–124) and speculated on the distinctive role played by the brain’s two hemispheres in how people respond to literature and why they engage with it at all (192–97).

These more recent works are not as widely read as those from the late 1960s and the 1970s. This may be partly because Holland had moved further and further away from any attempt to provide fresh insights into works of literature. He was always more interested in human nature than in hermeneutics. Indeed, his sustained concern for “the human” might help explain why some of his writings have been translated into so many languages, including Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin. Ultimately, Holland may best be remembered as a literary theorist, some of whose writings will never relinquish their global appeal because they invariably focus on the relation between reading literature and human identity.

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### Toward a Nonlinear Literary History

TO THE EDITOR:

Wai Chee Dimock’s judicious editor’s column “Historicism, Presentism, Futurism” (vol. 133, no. 2, Mar. 2018, pp. 257–63) makes a compelling case for a contrapuntal presentism and historicism, a “strategic presentism,” drawing on the debates in Victorian studies initiated by V21. I am struck, however, by the ways in which these debates still adhere to a familiar concept of time based in the discipline of history, for which a linear chronology of past, present, and future remains central.

New critical discourses about time—what Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias allude to as the “postmillennial emergence of time studies” in their introduction to *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present* (New York UP, 2016, p. 14)—challenge this linearity and the methods related to

it. Centered in studies of contemporary literature and art, the new temporalities dismantle the teleology of linear chronology and reconceive time as multidimensional and multiplicitous. A range of nonlinear descriptors for time appears in these studies of the contemporary: *heterogeneous, pluralist, disjunctive, disruptive, discontinuous, simultaneous, doubled, foreshortened, fractured, enfolded, interwoven, conjoined, crisscrossing, coexisting, dissident*, and so forth. As Burges and Elias write, “the present has emerged as an experience in the simultaneity in which temporalities multiply. . . . The present may be grasped as textured and stretched, latent and current—a mediation of presence and distance in time” (3–4).

Like the Burges and Elias volume, the essay anthology *Time: Documents of Contemporary Art* theorizes a new temporality of the present (MIT P, 2013). In her introduction to this volume, the editor, Amelia Groom, argues that contemporary art questions

the idea of time as an arrow propelling us in unison from the past into the future. . . . [O]nce the twentieth century’s fetishization of teleological progress is abandoned, history’s time reveals itself as a concoction of chance encounters, arbitrary inclusions, systematic exclusions, parenthetical digression, abrupt U-turns, inherited anecdotes, half-remembered facts, glossed-over uncertainties and forgotten back-stories. (12–13)

In their contribution to Groom’s volume, “The Plural Temporality of the Work of Art,” Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood contrast “chronological time, flowing steadily from before to after, [as] an effect of its figurations: annuals, chronicles, calendars, clocks” with what they call “the diagrammatization of time . . . [that] allows one to speak of diverse events happening in different places as happening at the same time” (39). For Groom, time as represented in contemporary art is neither nostalgia nor postmodern pastiche (17). Rather, the con-