

must happen to the writer's feelings and ideas; he must transcend his personal feelings, his opinions and beliefs, so that they become available to readers with very different feelings and beliefs. In Yeats's words "all art . . . exhausts personal emotion in action or desire so completely that something impersonal, something that has nothing to do with action or desire, suddenly starts into its place . . ." (*Autobiography*, Garden City, New York, 1958, p. 222). Keats's concept of "negative capability" and Eliot's concept of impersonality and escaping from emotions are too well known to require quotation.

What the formalist or contextualist critics are trying to do is simply to help the reader distinguish this aspect of literature, to become aware of feelings that are brought into existence by the poem or the novel, to see, in Eliot's words, "what was *not* in existence before the poem was completed." And in doing so, formal analysis must disappoint those readers who come to literature for the original emotion or the moral fervor itself.

I sympathize with this disappointment. It is difficult for a young man who comes into the profession in the hope that here he can exercise his moral commitments without being bound by the dogma of a political party to accept the fact that the literary experience goes beyond (or beneath, as a psychological critic might say) any political category. And as a result of this disappointment, some of these morally committed people are leaving the profession; others are willing to throw out the traditional syllabus of great masters in favor of "relevant" or propagandistic literature. But the more interesting (if mistaken) program belongs to those who, like Frederick Crews, want to maintain both their moral and their esthetic commitments.

The attempt to be faithful to both commitments cannot succeed, however, if as Crews argues, critics try to "accommodate their sense of esthetic complexity to their politics." (None of the critics mentioned by Crews in this context did so. They were scornful of Communist critics who did so, as they were of Fascists like Ezra Pound who, in a way, accommodated his politics to his esthetic beliefs.) The only way to be faithful to our moral beliefs as well as to our literary responses is to recognize that they are separate.

By not asking of literature to do what it cannot do, we will find that literature can give us its own value. Each reader will describe this value differently, but if the value is a genuinely literary value, and not superimposed by our political or religious beliefs, then that value or significance must be intrinsic to the work—it must be an extension of the qualities that make literature a work of art. Consequently, if the literary work is a result of the writer's ability to exhaust his personal experience, to go beyond desire and action, then perhaps the significance of literature lies in its ability to

make the reader do the same thing. Instead of lamenting the fact that literature—as it is interpreted by formalists—removes us from the "savage indignation," or the Christian piety, that the writer experienced in his life, let us be glad that through the power of a literary experience, we too can go beyond our personal feelings and ideas.

It is important, of course, to be involved in the real world, and to march behind banners and posters with three-word solutions for our problems. I have marched under such banners and will continue to do so. But it is also necessary, if life is to go beyond one dimension, to step back (in our *minds*—not on the battlefield or in the polling booths), and experience life in a deeper sense, a sense that goes beyond our categories of good and evil. And it is only in art that this kind of experience, impersonal, outside of the flux of ongoing events, can take place. Does not this kind of experience have a value? I submit that it does, and even if it is less important than a moral commitment, such an experience fills a basic need for all men, even, perhaps I should say particularly, for those who are in danger of becoming completely dominated by politics.

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To the Editor:

Frederick Crews surely gets one involved in researching the "ideology in literary studies" of the American scene! He has done the world of critics a great service in making them "sit up and take notice" about the meaning of objectivity as it has been accepted for the past half century (or more?). The conclusion he draws, viz., that the separation from political activity is a surface attitude, a mask, for the actual involvement in support of the American system (economic *and* political), could be valid for any period of literary criticism, in any particular country, in the literary history of man.

Objectivity is truly a controversial word. In Mr. Crews's efforts to be objective about *his* criticism he has definitely supported the enemies of the American system.

Let us look at the origin of this and any ideology which has formed a prosperous and culturally influential nation among men to see whether the activity or the ideology came first. We may ask ourselves whether the downfall of the system was due to any inherent defect or to the defective heart of man, which, of course, is revealed in his literature at all times and is therefore worthy of consideration.

When man began to work on this earth, in order to exist, he followed a pattern of action which has continued to the present day. He found that the more effort he spent on labor, as well as on thought, the more he could enjoy the fruits of his activity. In addi-

tion to his personal effort, he soon discovered, he could join his fellows in a communal effort and find satisfaction not only in greater production but also in a community of thought.

The natural basis of this pattern is, of course, the human family. In this single unit of human existence can be found the whole expression of the communal system and of any mutual organization. The only equality in the family is the right of each one to be loved and supported by the others, but the whole depends on each one's taking the responsibility for his "station." The thing is a mystery.

We cannot even define the mystery of a nation except that its contribution to the "family of nations" depends on the loyalty of its members and the seriousness and nobility of its purpose.

It cannot be denied that the purpose of this country of ours, from the beginning, was to form a "free society" as far as that term is capable of being negotiated with the necessity of observing the rights of others. Whenever we have failed, it has been quickly called to our attention. Efforts have then been made to right the failure, but not to change the system within which we are able to exercise free judgment. Together we have come to produce a vast enterprise composed of all the individual enterprises conceived by individual creativity and aided by those who are glad to feel themselves a part of the team—"manning their stations." And no one had to stay at his station if he chose to depart.

Wherein the heart of man is deceitful and wicked we know it has caused much sorrow among us. We know that the reformation of this single item could make the cooperative effort infinitely more concerned with attaining the ideal.

It is the human activity, then, which forms and interprets the system, although the form given to human beings (the family) is the starting point and should therefore be the ideal.

It would seem that the inspiration to interpret this ideal must be guided by something outside man himself, if he is to be "kept on course." What makes man keep the ideal in mind at all? One can say "survival," but that is not the inspiration of human culture. Man has sought the Authority for the responsibility he realizes he must take. He has set goals according to the revelations he has received, and over the ages, he has formed a "beautiful order" (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #403) to maintain public harmony. In the times when this harmony, however faulty, has been broken, the expression of cultural thought has been temporarily suspended.

The action necessitated to restore harmony, to inspire the sacrifice necessary to insure a measure of freedom to all, has overridden the artistic expression. The description of the ugliness of suffering, as well as of the beauty of restoration, has had to wait for the

opportunity to consider the meaning of the action. The ideology, then, would seem to be the product of reflection; the critic is the last person on the scene when it comes to working for society and keeping it going. His readers, those influenced by his thinking, are a very small group indeed.

The intellectually "elite" are surely responsible for "class thinking," but there is no reason to be sad about this fact of life! What fun would there be in a world of equal talents—nothing to work for, argue about, justify in terms of a crusade! All the classes of society proudly contributing to the whole prosperity, or maintaining each other, makes a happy picture.

If literary critics could see their role as judges of talent and inspirers to nobility of thought and expression, leaving political criticism to the realm of historians and political scientists, we might be able to make use of an "esthetic" that would lift us out of the commonplace and pull our worker neighbors with us—especially since education is becoming so commonplace.

We cannot leave human thought in the mire where it seems to be today. We need a God-oriented literature to heal our wounds and set us to righting our individual lives through which society will find its proper destiny.

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In the March *PMLA*, Professor Crews will comment on the three letters printed above.

Literature and Politics

To the Editor:

In a paper delivered at the Denver convention, and printed in the May *PMLA*, Professor Rima Reck warns us from the specter of a politicized MLA, and posits instead a vine-and-fig-tree state of individual political responsibility.

The argument—that individually but not collectively we must be "critical intellectuals" possessed of "ruthless honesty"—has a certain fatal appeal. But doesn't such honesty compel us to remember that not very long ago we were urged to direct our political energies, individual and collective, toward increasing the budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities? Haven't we been urged toward political methods to keep TIAA available?

To argue that we now wish to keep our political hands clean and humanistically disinterested smacks just a bit of hypocrisy. Our self-serving interests in the Endowment or TIAA are no more "professional" than our lack of *collective, humane* interest in the war and racism and poverty that are ravaging the human spirit. We must be involved—as individuals and as an orga-