Contemporary Theory

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[175] In the classical community contemporary debate about what constitutes an appropriate scholarly reading tends to represent it as taking two forms. (Danker 1988, 218; but Boyle 1991, 116-18, cautions against the too simplistic view that some have taken of an opposition between 'old philology' and 'new theory'.) One faces toward the past and concerns itself with sources, origins, historical considerations. The other faces forward and emphasizes the context and situation of the modern reader. More traditional (or, in the parlance of the opposition, 'reactionary') theories identify with the backward facing form and look to recover original truth or original authorial intent or original audience response as governing protocols that will yield readings more or less impervious to change. They argue that anything departing from or adding to original authorial intent and original audience reception is an inauthentic, contaminated reading. More contemporary (what the opposition calls 'radical') theories favour the forward facing form that affirms the large part played by the reader in the production of meaning and harbours an abiding scepticism about immutable meanings. They argue that what H.-G. Gadamer calls the modern reader's 'horizon' is inescapable, that original authorial intent and original audience reception are themselves 'contaminated' reconstructions that simply shift the problem of interpretation to a different (often more inaccessible) level and to yet other texts, and that the literary artifact leads an unintended ontological afterlife in an unpredictably altered state of its own language and other signs (Peradotto 1990, 12-14; Holoka 1991, 479).

Perhaps the most general critical approach focusing on the audience or reader, obvious in its very name, is '**audience-oriented**' or '**reader-response**' **criticism** or **'reception theory'**. (These terms are generally used interchangeably, but when the latter is distinguished from the other two, it refers to the Constance School, whose most original theorists are Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. It tends more than the others to concentrate on the historical variation in interpretations of the same work.) What the New Criticism condemned as an 'affective fallacy' here becomes the center of attention. It is not so much a distinctive kind of criticism, with its own principles of inquiry, as a focus on audience/reader by different kinds of critics. The common denominator is that such criticism 'seeks to describe and account for the mental processes that occur as a reader advances through a text and derives from it—or imposes on it—a pattern' (Suleiman 1980, 22). Practitioners differ in what they mean by 'reader' or 'audience'. They may mean (1) actual readers, i.e., historically grounded individuals, each of whose responses will differ from another's; (2) an authorial audience, the hypothetical one presumably intended by the author when composing the **[176]** text; (3) an ideal reader who responds more or less perfectly to all the effects of the text, whether this reader is constructed explicitly by the critic or by the author as conjectured by the critic. Practitioners also differ in the measure of autonomy they allow the reader to interpret vis-à-vis the authority or control of the author or text. In regard to Homer, for instance, where the distinction between narrative (*diêgêsis*) and dramatic speeches (*mimêsis*) is significant, (1) the responses of the audience may be viewed as indistinguishable from the narrator's perspective (e.g., Block 1986); (2) the alternation between

the narrator's direct representation (*diêgêsis*) and the characters' dramatic *speeches* (*mimêsis*) causes 'the reader's participation in the text . . . to shift from passively observing overdetermined scenes to the more demanding task of interpreting scenes in which the avenues of interpretation are poorly marked' (Scully 1986, 148); (3) the reader's interpretive strategies force an interpretation even on the narrator's perspective. (See below on Marxist criticism.) Thus in understanding and interpreting the character and actions of *Achilles* in the *Iliad*, the reader must decide how to weigh third-person narrative comment as distinct from first-person utterances, especially those of Achilles himself and then perhaps to range both against some extra-textual set of values. In the *Odyssey*, to cite but one example, how is the reader to evaluate the character of *Klytaimnestra* as it is variously assessed by *Nestor*, *Menelaos*, and *Agamemnon*'s shade, keeping in mind that in reading character, whether in texts or in so-called real life, the observer's and narrator's personal predispositions, interests, and purposes play a crucial role and must be factored in? At issue is not only how we have to consider Nestor's, Menelaos', and Agamemon's character in assessing their judgment of Klytaimnestra but—a more difficult complication—the way in which reading is affected by our own or any reader's predisposing attitudes about the kind of character Nestor or Menelaos shows, or what we know of Klytaimnestra from other sources, or how we respond emotionally and judgmentally to the actions and sufferings witnessed or described: in short, the variable set of cultural rules we use to make judgments about character.

To urge the reader's interpretive strategies to the point of actually constituting the narrator's perspective is the tendency of most **Marxist Criticism** (as of Feminist Criticism; see *Gender*). The result is usually a meaning largely unintended by the author and reduction or elimination of the text's authority. The Marxist prospectus, more prominently than other contemporary criticism, goes beyond giving an 'account' of texts within an explicit theoretical framework to become social criticism. It attempts to show, in other words, how narrative sign production may constrain or enhance the human enterprise of transforming the world to its own desire and design, or how it may sustain and authorize the interests of one social group to the detriment of another in that enterprise. At the heart of Marxism is the contrast between productive forces and an ideological superstructure that justifies the unequal division of wealth and power by making it appear natural, rational or divinely sanctioned. Literary texts are a part of this ideological superstructure and so it is the business of Marxist criticism to expose their collaboration in maintaining the discrepancy between productive labour and the enjoyment of its fruits. But even in their support of the status quo, hardly any of these texts will not contain inconsistencies and contradictions that show traces and symptoms of what they repress. Chiefly by a process called the 'double hermeneutic' (Jameson 1971, 1981; Rose 1992, 33-42) texts are made to reveal their less obvious dimension. A 'negative hermeneutic' exposes the ways literary texts support and express the ruling class ideology, while a 'positive hermeneutic' 'aims at restoring to consciousness those dimensions of the artwork which call into question or negate the ruling-class version of reality' (Rose 1992, 36).

Thus, for example, a Marxist study of the *Iliad* will concentrate on the crisis created by the discrepancy between one's actual efforts on the battlefield and one's share in the plunder, and on how the fetishization of these objects of plunder suggests a transition toward a money *economy* (Rose 1992, 76). And even when *Thersites'* criticism of *kingship* is suppressed, the apparent approval of the text still cannot help 'reminding the audience of the grounds for that discontent'

(Rose 1988, 13). As for the *Odyssey* (esp. Finley 1978; Rose 1992, 92-140), Marxist criticism concentrates on such issues as *class* differences, the conflict between monarchy and an emerging oligarchy in the *Archaic Age*, the status of women, slaves, **[177]** professional craftsmen (*dêmioergoi*), the poor and displaced persons, and in the *Cyclops* episode, a latent sense of social evolution.

The Marxist concern to make explicit what is latent is perhaps something it shares generally with all contemporary criticism, but for none is it more essential than in **Psychoanalytic Criticism**, which managed to establish a foothold in Classical Studies earlier than most other contemporary critical approaches. In Freud's system the mind is subdivided as follows: (1) 'id', the mental expression of instinctual needs, the impulse to obtain satisfaction in accord with the 'pleasure principle'; (2) 'super-ego', that body of inherited norms of conduct, conscious and unconscious, accepted and incorporated into the self; (3) 'ego', the ground of mediation between id, super-ego, and the 'external world'; it is the perceiver, organizer and would-be controller of external and internal stimuli. The ego has the task of representing the external world for the id, displacing the 'pleasure principle' with the 'reality principle' and promising greater security and success for the diminution of instinct. Within this theoretical framework, insofar as it concerns the analysis of literature and *myth*, Freud sees personal infantile psychic states and processes as repressed (that is, eliminated from the conscious 'ego-system'), but continuing to exist in the unconscious 'id-system' and to affect behavior. Under certain circumstances these unconscious desires penetrate the hypothetical boundary between 'id' and 'ego' and emerge into consciousness in various disguises, such as *dreams*, slips of the tongue, neurotic symptoms, and, most important for our purposes, mythic or literary representations requiring interpretation. In Classical Studies, the major application of this type of analysis has been to myth and myth-based literature, especially Greek *tragedy* with its troubled interpersonal dynamics. Freud himself, to cite a most familiar example, saw in Sophocles' drama a manifestation of a latent condition called the '*Oedipus* complex', an early stage (between ages three and five) in the development of a male in which he fixates upon his mother and competes for her affection with his father.

But the Homeric poems, by the unusual fastidiousness with which they treat sexual matters and intra-familial conflict, offer considerably less grist for the psychoanalytic mill than the tragic stage. The story of *Phoenix* (*Il.* 9.447-83) seems to be a classical, if more veiled example of the Oedipus complex (Devereux 1954), just as the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon shows the same condition in an even more disguised format. The death of *Meleagros* (*ll.* 9.566-72) through his mother's curses, though clearly less straightforward than in other versions, offers an instance of mother-son antagonism that one analyst finds rampant in Greek myth (Slater 1968). A rewarding if complex study of the *Iliad* (MacCary 1982) discovers an 'Achilles complex' and views his heroism as narcissism, an ego weakness showing lack of super-ego integration, in effect a failure to get beyond the pre-Oedipal stage, characterized by an indifference to the demands of an external world. The return of *Odysseus* in the *Odyssey* is viewed by one study (Friedman and Gassel 1952) as a resolution (or successful repression) of the Oedipus complex. Another study (Devereux 1957) argues that *Penelope*'s tears of grief in her dream of geese slaughtered by an eagle (*Od.* 19.535-53) manifest unconscious enjoyment in being courted by the *suitors*. Symbolic births are discovered in the *Odyssey*: Odysseus' painful voyage from *Kalypso* and emergence naked from a thicket on the land of the *Phaeacians* and his escape from the Cyclops' cave. The potential and real harm posed by females (human, divine, and monstrous)

and the threat of castration, symbolic if not real (*Kirke* can make Odysseus *anênôr* 10.301), abound in the *Odyssey* (for a fine summary, see Rose 1992, 122-34).

In **Structuralism** certain basic tenets are assumed: (1) that all human behavior—the way we eat, dress, speak, choose sexual partners, paint pictures, tell stories, etc.—is patterned into codes with the characteristics of language; (2) that these codes originate from a structuring mechanism that is innate and genetically inherited and determined. Its most notable proponent, Claude Lévi-Strauss, derived his model from the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure through the mediation of the Prague School, notably Roman Jakobson, and applied it first in the study of *kinship* systems. He brought this model to the analysis of myth together with a methodology he had found in Vladimir Propp's study of the folktale, but critically adapted in such a way that in the collection of all available variants the diachronic or temporal **[178]** sequence of events is disregarded. The narratives are simply to be broken down into their smallest possible constituent units, which, practically speaking, will be their simplest subject-function relationships. The submerged structure of the mythic narratives—their meaning, in effect—will be the logical relationships obtaining among the constantly recurrent event-units, generally assuming the form of dialectical oppositions terminating in some kind of resolution. For Lévi-Strauss, the primary function of myth is to mediate insoluble cultural conflicts and contraditions, especially that which sets culture itself in opposition to nature. The Oedipus myth, for example, 'has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that man is autochthonous . . . , to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman'. Furthermore, this activity occurs so far beyond or below conscious control that Lévi-Strauss purports to show not so much how people think in myths but how myth thinks in people without their knowing it.

Now there is a clear correspondence between Lévi-Strauss's exclusive synchronic (or paradigmatic) analysis of narrative and the subject matter to which he addresses himself. In the Amerindian narratives that figure in his four-volume *Mythologiques*, chronology and genealogy are for the most part negligible or non-existent, both within each tale, and in the relation of tale to tale. They positively invite synchronic analysis, and promise little yield to diachronic analysis. By contrast, in Greek (and for that matter Judaeo-Christian) mythic narrative, genealogical preoccupations are prominent, together with rigid temporal priority and posteriority, and irreversible time. More important, *prophecy*, than which there is probably no more critical element in Greek myth, extablishes irreversible sequential and causal continuity—teleology—as an element of structure. By contrast, in all 813 of the Americndian tales studied by Lévi-Strauss, there is not a single prophecy. In response to criticism for so obstinately resisting the analysis of Greek and Judaeo-Christian narratives, Lévi-Strauss has argued that in such narratives intellectual operations (e.g., that of biblical compilers and redactors) have worked in conflict with the randomized non-intellectual operations of the ancient structures, thus making them undecipherable.

What, then, can the Homeric poems yield to such a method? It is true that their highly literary character, their intellectual sophistication, what strikes one as their deliberate repression or suppression of primitive elements found elsewhere in Greek myths offer less to synchronic structural analysis than non-literary renditions of Greek mythic narratives such as those in Apollodorus' *Library*. In Classical Studies, the Paris School (Jean-Pierre Vernant and others)

have had considerable success in applying structuralist techniques, but their efforts have concentrated on Greek myth, Hesiod and tragedy rather than on the Homeric poems. (See, for example, Vernant 1960.) Homeric literary scholarship, however, has not been deterred from finding value in a cautious and critical use of the method, most of it on the *Odyssey*. Consider a few examples. In the polarity constituted by *gods* and beasts, humanity is seen as occupying a middle ground. To remain with Kalypso Odysseus would achieve the immortal status of a god; to remain with Kirke he would be reduced to bestiality. Between these two lies the mediating humanity of Penelope. Analogously, on the social plane, the human reality of *Ithaka* mediates between the bestial savagry of the Cyclopes and the near divine status of the Phaeacians. The salient opposition between raw and cooked food in Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* figures prominently in the Cyclops episode, along with other homologous oppositions (e.g., lack vs. possession of technology) to underscore the antithesis between savagery and civilization, nature and culture, and on the divine level stands the polarity between *Zeus* Xenios, whom the Cyclopes openly disdain, and *Poseidon*, the father of *Polyphemos* (Segal 1974).

Concentration on the contemporary reader's 'horizon', as a condition of reading and interpretation, is not likely soon to disappear, even if, and however often, some new name is conjured up to designate the set of theoretical and epistemological stances that characterize it. The wholly self-contained text is an illusion and opposition to theory indefensible. Such opposition arises mostly from the belief that it inserts something alien (a contaminant) between the reader and the text. 'The simple response to this,' in Terry Eagleton's often quoted remark (1983, viii),

> is that without some kind of theory, however unreflective or implicit, we would not know what a 'literary work' was in the **[179]** first place, or how we were to read it. Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an ignorance of one's own.

In the long run, 'theory' as applied to the reading and analysis of Homer, as of any text, offers one among many explicitly considered frameworks for reading the text, for giving a rational account of it, as opposed to a reading that proceeds within a framework either inexplicit or unknown to the reader.

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