Response to comments on "A Passage into Critical Theory"

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A Comment on "A Passage into Critical Theory"

I'd like to voice reservations about practical criticism of the sort exemplified by Steven Lynn's "Passage into Critical Theory" (CE, March 1990). We need to question the assumption that, beyond courses devoted specifically to critical theory, critical-theoretical approaches are the most enlightened or enlightening ways of introducing our students to literary experience. Uncritically applied, 1) they tend to exacerbate current trends toward overspecialization in the humanities; 2) they may leave novice readers thinking more about cleverly fitting the interpretive frames of various "approaches" to texts (hardly more than a variation of the otiose symbol mongering that takes the place of genuine engagement with a literary work), and less about the literature to which these are applied; and 3) they stand to perpetuate the all-too-common tendency to turn from the literary text as a locus of authority (the author's) in exegesis, leaving it up for grabs in a political free-for-all facilely termed "pluralism." (To posit that the basis of meaning is political is no less a dogma—and ultimately a lot more subversive of the values affirmed by artistic achievement—than to conceive meaning as a function of, say, aesthetic or moral experience.) Submitting to a critical-theoretical hegemony (regardless of how "pluralistic" in its own rationalistic terms) conduces not only to the isolation of specialists from each other but to the isolation of our students from literary texts. The latter is fostered by our stressing the all-importance of critical-theoretical mediation and losing sight of what is being mediated (or worse still, identifying the text as an example of universal—and hence more important—critical-theoretical themes or patterns).

I suspect that one reason why we have become obsessed with valorizing these approaches is that we have lost touch, in typical modernist fashion, with the possibility (and hence with the possibilities) of literary experience simpliciter as critical experience and not as will or idea—whether psychological, deconstructionist, or feminist. When I introduce students to The Ambassadors I strive to enable them actively to participate in what James calls the "process of vision" he "demonstrates" in the novel: Strether's process of vision—not Freud's, not Derrida's, not Cixous's. Certainly if we are unable to concede that a text has any authority, or if we dismiss this as merely a warmed-over New Critical sentiment, what I'm urging has little point and James was deluded in thinking that he could demonstrate anything so determinate as a process of vision.

Theory is essential. And the indefinite number of approaches to any literary text offer as many opportunities for participation in and learning through a literary artist's achievement. We seem however to have reached the solipsistic point where the critical-theoretical means we construct and employ to facilitate this participation and instruction displace (if not for us, then for our students) the artist's achievement. We fail to see such construction and application, more modestly and less reductively, as our own. The result is that some of us have become overly concerned (with Lynn) that "our students . . . should learn how to inhabit the theories," rather
than that they should learn how to inhabit the world of a literary text.

By relinquishing authority to the text in our literature courses we bestow greater importance on our students as a privileged perspectives and points of departure from which we are obliged to orchestrate dialogically their access to the world—the process of vision—of a literary text. This calls not only for a sophisticated repertoire of possible approaches but for a humility, as opposed to critical-theoretical arrogance, before the text. Correlatively, it requires us to keep in view and continually to affirm the respect for those whom we are charged with enabling to discover for themselves the refinements of awareness and sensibility with the attendant joys and satisfactions that literary experience affords.

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A Comment on “A Passage into Critical Theory”

From the points of view of various critical theories, Steven Lynn analyzes a passage from Brendan Gill’s autobiography. His is a very effective guide to the perplexed. To those wishing to teach contemporary literary criticism, it provides a plan of attack, a means of allowing students to practice new criticism, structuralism, deconstruction, psychoanalytical criticism, and feminist criticism. Although these are his examples, Professor Lynn points out that his method can be applied to any critical framework; even Nazi and racist criticism are possible, though not, of course, advisable. Professor Lynn’s methods are reductive; their creators, all of whom emphasized (perhaps overemphasized) extreme subtlety, might recoil. But it would be a mistake to criticize Professor Lynn on this point. His methods are intentionally reductive, a simplicity that will disappear into appropriate complexity when students enter fully into the fold.

I would like to offer a reading of Professor Lynn’s article, a reading that suggests that he may be insufficiently attuned to the implications of his own analysis. This reading is deconstructionist in his terms: it is designed to show that Professor Lynn’s argument undermines itself. My reading suggests that current literary theory is intolerably vague, unable to correct itself, poorly grounded, not really literary, and, worst of all, incompletely coherent. If this reading is correct, we are morally obliged, not to come up with more efficient methods for teaching literary theory, as Professor Lynn urges, but to urge literary theorists to correct their theoretical deficiencies.

Few would deny that a theory must offer explanations in a particular area of investigation. To explain properly, a theory must be knowledge of, and must generate new knowledge in, that area. Evolutionary theory, for example, explains stability and change in the living world, while at the same time it generates new knowledge about that world. These conditions entail that a theory must be statable as a system of propositions. In this broad sense, new criticism, structuralism, and psychoanalytical criticism are theories. But since deconstruction and feminist criticism consist, apparently,
of admonitory slogans—find warring forces of signification, read like a woman—they are not. Admonitions may be worth following, but they are not theories.

Few would disagree that a theory must be testable against a body of evidence logically independent of its formulation. Of course, paradigms shift, and facts may well be theory-laden. But you could not even guess that a paradigm had shifted or that a fact was theory-laden, unless something hadn’t shifted, unless some facts were not theory-laden. How else could you perceive the shift or judge the nature of the facts? Between Ptolemy and Copernicus, a paradigm shifted; the night sky remained the same.

What is this body of evidence against which we can test the truth of these various theories of literary criticism? Literature itself, we are inclined to say or, to be au courant, texts. And here we run into a problem. The physical world provides a constraint for the theories of physics; by its criterion, for instance, Descartes’s theory of light was judged wrong, Newton’s right. At the time, the decision in favor of Newton was rational: there was general agreement on standards, on a right and a wrong fit with the world. Without standards, you cannot tell the discourse of a theorist from the fantasies of a paranoid; you cannot do theory at all.

But current literary theory has no such standards. It is a problem with each of Professor Lynn’s “theories” that they have built into them few, if any, constraints. Because virtually anything goes, virtually nothing counts as knowledge, genuine insight that can be validated over time. The problem does not inhere in the “ alarmingly reductive” nature of Professor Lynn’s readings; even in the subtlest readings of these various critical kinds virtually nothing can count as a mistake. In every case, however, there is one notable exception: the founding texts of that particular variety of literary criticism. Freudians and feminists and deconstructionists will see to it that you do not get their Freud or their Gilbert and Gubar or their Derrida wrong. In defense of the intellectual credentials of these theories, you may point out that even Freudians, feminists, and deconstructionists disagree among themselves. They do so, and so do Christians. The reason is the same: the untestability of differences. The result is the same: inflexible competing orthodoxies, with no possibility of adjudication.

Neither, as Professor Lynn acknowledges, are there any constraints on the number and kinds of “criticism”: Nazi criticism, Christian criticism. By the dictates of Nazi criticism, for instance, the New Yorker might be a tool of the international Jewish conspiracy, a conspiracy that has trapped the Aryan Brendan Gill in its Talmudic toils, forcing him to live the rest of his life with the knowledge that he has committed a dangling modifier. According to Christian criticism, on the other hand, the editor Gardner (note the reference to the parable of the vineyard) saves Gill from the logic-chopping of the pharisaic Miss Gould; Gardner permits Gill to admit to, but nevertheless accept, his fallen state. I admit, so to interpret Gill’s anecdote, that Professor Lynn’s example is, to speak, nonsense; but how do I tell my nonsense from Professor Lynn’s? There is no way; therefore, there is no theory.
What are the sources of these theories? Certainly, we err in calling them literary theories: theories about literature. In Professor Lynn’s selection, only the new criticism is a possible exception. Feminism, deconstruction, structuralism, and Freudianism are not literary theories; none has the means of differentiating literature from other texts or of telling good literature from bad: Neil Simon and Shakespeare are both playwrights, and King Lear is on a par with the telephone directory. In addition, with the possible exception of structuralism, these theories are employed despite their poor showing in their countries of intellectual origin. No viable literary critic uses the new criticism; few psychologists identify themselves as Freidians; deconstruction is disregarded by most philosophers. Feminist criticism is another matter; it is not a system of thought but a way of recouping for the canon neglected works by and about women and of correcting existing misreadings that are the result of masculine bias. Feminism can do useful intellectual work, but it is not a theory.

Theory is valuable most of all because it has increased intellectual coherence in its gift; because we adhere to one theory, rather than another, because we adhere to the better theory, the world becomes a more ordered and orderly place. The adherents of the various literary theories Professor Lynn expounds may well have achieved this sense of increased coherence; otherwise, presumably they would not be adherents. Unfortunately, the sense of enhancement, personally experienced or shared by like-minded groups, is insufficient for truth. Feelings of increased coherence must be validated by other people and by states of affairs outside particular groups: people relatively disinterested in the preferred theory and a world presumably indifferent to theoretical persuasion. Otherwise, local coherence may have been achieved only at the price of ignoring inconvenient facts and arguments, of bypassing rather than engaging opponents. This is exactly the case with current literary theory.

Under these circumstances, Pascal’s wager is irrelevant: it is not a choice between belief and unbelief but among belief. Among the various literary theories, there is no basis for rational choice: when we choose, we have no means of validating the correctness of our choice and no way of dealing with the choices we have justly rejected. Are they compatible with our choice, in whole or in part? We cannot know. From an exposure to the varieties of current literary theory, all we can learn is patience. We must not subject our students to the intellectual confusion that the serious immersion in “theory” will inevitably cause.

Alan G. Gross
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Steven Lynn Responds
I want to thank Phillip Stambovsky and Alan Gross for their remarks and for providing the opportunity for me to thank Professors Charles Moran and Elizabeth Penfield, whose comments on a different version of my essay helped strengthen the one that appeared in CE. (That other version appears in Conversations: Contemporary Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature, edited by Moran and Penfield.)
In the teaching of writing we have in recent years re-learned the value of showing students explicit strategies for generating ideas. I view critical theories as invention strategies—starting points for helping students think and write about literature; not a displacement of the experience of literature at all, but one way to deepen and invigorate their interaction with it. I must therefore reject the responders’ assumptions that there is a confrontation between “critical theory” and “literature,” a contest in which we must choose between Henry James or Fredric Jameson. Instead, some “theory” is already always involved in our experience of “literature”—is already involved even in our very notion of what “literature” is. The choice we have to make is not between literature and theory, but between an articulated examination of the strategies and values we bring to a text, on the one hand, and the silent illusion that we apprehend texts directly, outside of any cultural moment, on the other. As John Crowe Ransom has put it: “Theory, which is expectation, always determines criticism, and never more than when it is unconscious. The reputed condition of no-theory in the critic’s mind is illusory.” In 1938, when it appeared, this statement may have been controversial, but the unavoidable involvement of theory in reading seems to me among the least contestable of assertions at this juncture. As Gerald Graff says in his recent Professing Literature, “If there is any point of agreement among the various competing ways of thinking about literature, “it is on the principle that texts are not, after all, autonomous and self-contained, that the meaning of any text in itself depends for its comprehension on other texts and textualized frames of reference” (256).

Thus there are clear and compelling reasons why we owe it to our students not to pretend there is any such thing as “literary experience simpliciter”; reasons why we ought not only assign “literature” and talk about it but also discuss openly how we generate responsive and interpretive statements, how we “read” it; reasons to consider with them how various kinds of assumptions and behaviors enable and constrain this activity. The value of theory (and the consequences of evading it) can be illustrated by considering Stambovsky’s example of what, instead of theory, we ought to be doing in the classroom. When teaching The Ambassadors, Stambovsky says, he strives to enable his students “enactively to participate” in Strether’s “process of vision.” Such is certainly a worthwhile endeavor, but I cannot see why the richness of James’s work should be so limited. Nor, I hasten to add, can such participation possibly be insulated from theoretical motivations and consequences. Although Stambovsky points to “critical-theoretical arrogance” and the need for “humility,” one might observe that he appears to assume on his own behalf some non-political, non-theoretical, pure and unmediated access to James’s creation. Even if he can somehow be certain that his view of Strether’s view is untainted by Derrida, Freud, or Cixous, how can he discover the authentic and authoritative version of Strether’s “process of vision” in order to encourage students toward it? There must unavoidably be some “theory” involved in constructing Strether’s vision—a
context, a set of values and procedures, a way of proceeding. We simply don't have, apart from religious visions perhaps, unmediated access to creation, including literary creations. Stambovsky may choose to talk explicitly about the formation of his literary experience and commentary, or he may prefer to model his enactment, requiring his students to guess how they might more effectively participate in Strether's vision. But in any case, we should recognize that participating in Strether's vision (whatever that means) constitutes the valorization of one particular theory of reading and that there are many other enlightening and exciting ways to engage a work.

Indeed, Stambovsky's example of his pedagogy is telling: he urges his students to participate in Strether's vision; and Strether is a man, as R. W. Stallman says, who "comes round to see that life is better lived unbooked—minus visions or theories about how to live it" ("Afterword," 1960 Signet edition, 378). Stambovsky's approach to The Ambassadors, which tries to avoid theories of how to read it, thus appears perhaps to be the outcome of his own absorption in Strether's philosophy of life, which tries to avoid theories of how to live it. I want my students to inhabit Strether's world, and many others, but I also want them to search out and question the "visions or theories" that must shape their fictional and actual worlds. (Derrida, for example, might very usefully illuminate Strether's double vision, his pervasive lack of presence as he is "always considering something else ... than the thing of the moment," obsessed by "the other thing" [chapter one]. How Freud might be employed to explore Strether's vision is strikingly demonstrated by Gregory Jay in America the Scrivener.)

I advocate, in other words, only that the theories already inevitably at work in our readings be discussed, explained, expanded, supplemented, consciously employed and evaluated. I don't think it's fair or advisable today to assume there is only one way to read, only one valid aim in experiencing literature; or to imagine we have some direct, a priori knowledge of "the values affirmed by artistic achievement," some uncompromised pathway to textual authority. I think, in fact, that Stambovsky is already moving toward my position: at least we can agree, as he says, "Theory is essential." and our students need "a sophisticated repertoire of possible approaches."

Alan Gross on the other hand doesn't say how he would handle The Ambassadors or any other work, and we really don't know what he thinks we should be doing in the classroom, aside from protecting our students from "theory," which can only teach them patience and subject them to "intellectual confusion." I had to smile at these objections: more patience would be welcome, and I don't see how any real learning can take place without some "intellectual confusion." The paradigm shifts mentioned by Gross, from Ptolemy to Copernicus and from Descartes to Newton, certainly involved submitting to moments of intellectual disorder, when one theory is placed in question and the other under consideration (Kuhn's testing stage). My students need more intellectual confusion.

But I do not want to dismiss so easily Gross's comment, which isn't directed at my essay really but (like
Gross claims that all "current literary theory" is "without standards," and therefore "virtually anything goes." This charge, which is incredible when applied to feminist, psychoanalytical, structuralist, Marxist, formalist, fill-in-the-blank criticism, is manifestly inaccurate even for deconstruction, which has most often struggled with such a distortion. The charge can be quickly refuted by referring to Gross's own comment, which presents itself as a deconstruction of my essay, but which is not in fact "deconstructionist" by my own or Derrida's or de Man's or Hillis Miller's or Barbara Johnson's or anyone else's standards, so far as I can tell. I cannot see how Gross teases out conflicting significations in my text or how he identifies, reverses, and finally places in question any oppositions or hierarchies. Deconstruction involves the rigorously close analysis of a text; for Miller, it is "nothing more or less than good reading" (Ethics of Reading 10). But Gross does not read my essay closely or play my text against itself. Instead, he offers a definition of "theory" that is not my own and that I find questionable and then proceeds to show how all "literary theories" fail to meet that definition. Gross even criticizes the term "literary theories," which is especially odd since that's not the term I use: in my title and throughout, I refer to "critical theories."

Gross, in short, isn't doing deconstruction. And since deconstruction fundamentally assumes that no discourse can be fully attuned to its implications, it's unclear to me what Gross could have hoped to accomplish by embracing the methodology he opposes, other than illustrating its interest and utility.

Along the way Gross makes a bundle of particular assertions that deserve our scrutiny, but for obvious reasons I'll limit my response to four:

1. Gross somehow thinks that deconstruction and feminist criticism "consist, apparently, of admonitory slogans" and are therefore not "theories." By this test, Darwin's remarks on evolution do not constitute a "theory" because Spencer (so brilliantly) reduced them to the idea of "the survival of the fittest."

2. Gross, who seems to want to invoke scientific standards of "theoryness," charges that critical "theories" should be disregarded (as "theories" anyway) because they are not testable against "logically independent" evidence. But it's been a commonplace in science since early in this century that we do not have any logically independent evidence. Rather, the evidence we have is always a function of the observer. It is clearly incorrect, from any sort of human perspective anyway, to say that the night sky remained the same for all stargazers between Ptolemy and Copernicus: we cannot apprehend the night sky directly, without any perspective, mediating theory, or interpretive
framework. The sky changed dramatically, and with the Hubble telescope now in orbit, it is likely on the verge of changing again. I should also point out that Gross’s statement is inaccurate even from some omniscient vantage point: as Hubble (the astronomer) observed, the universe since the beginning of time has been expanding at a terrific rate. Between Ptolemy and Copernicus, in any sense, the night sky changed.

3. Further, I don’t understand how Gross can say that these theories are “inflexible competing orthodoxies, with no possibility of adjudication.” Can he be unaware of the multitude of books and journals in which these “orthodoxies” are being vigorously examined, challenged, shaped, and evolved?

4. Finally, where does Gross get the idea that a “theory” must distinguish badness from goodness? Does Einstein’s theory of relativity distinguish good energy from bad? A reasonable case can be made, to be sure, that all the theories I discuss do embody judgments of taste and quality (deconstruction, for instance, seems to value resistant texts that yield their contradictions in a startling and disorienting fashion; psychoanalytical criticism seems to value texts in which significant and submerged psychological themes can be “found”). Indeed, theory may help us to understand the distinctions of taste and quality that we do unavoidably make. Furthermore, critical theory has proved especially helpful in understanding the conventions of various genres, ranging from plays to directories—although anyone who can’t distinguish King Lear from a phone book is in need of more than a good theory.

In short, although both Stamovsky and Gross obviously mean well, their resistance to theory seems to me to limit those we all want to nurture, our students. And their arguments proceed from false assumptions about the nature of texts, literature, and theory. I don’t think my “method,” as Gross says in his first paragraph, has made it “possible, though not, of course, advisable” to teach “Nazi and racist criticism.” On the contrary, these ways of seeing were not only possible long before our current interest in critical theory: they have been practiced. Critical theory cannot in itself exclude certain ideologies and assumptions, but it can help us to identify them, to see them more clearly, to question their inevitability—to change. By taking an awareness of critical theories into the classroom, by talking openly about the values and interests and interpretive routines that shape what we say about literature and life, we and our students will be better able to evaluate and choose our interpretive frameworks.

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A Comment on The ‘F’ Word: The Feminist in the Classroom

At the beginning of Dale Bauer’s article, “The Other ‘F’ word: The Feminist in the Classroom” (CE, April 1990), she discusses one of her colleague’s teaching evaluations which indicated that about 50% of the students complained about the feminist content in the first-year composition and literature courses. Resistance to feminism