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A Passage into Critical Theory

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A Passage into Critical Theory

She might have deplored the sentiment, had it come from one of her students. “What we need,” she was saying, trying hard not to whine, “is a short cut, a simple guide, a kind of recipe for each of these theories, telling us step by step how to make a particular reading.” It was the second week of a three-week institute dedicated to the proposition that all teachers were created equal and that therefore all should share in the excitement and challenge of the on-going transformation of literary criticism. But these teachers, it was clear, were just on the verge of saying, “Let’s just pretend that nothing important has happened since, oh, 1967.” I had whipped them into an evangelistic fever at the outset of the institute, ready to receive the spirit of critical theory; and they had read so much and worked so hard. But I nodded. She was right. They were mired in complexity and subtleties. I realized, of course, that no one whose loaf was fully sliced would seriously attempt an overview of recent critical theory in a few pages. But all they needed was to get their bearings, and then the confusion of ideas bouncing around in their heads would probably start falling into some comprehensible order. So I came up with the briefest of guides to some of the recent critical theory, an overview that would succeed when its users began to understand its limitations.

My strategy was to show how a single passage might be treated by a handful of different critical theories—certainly not every theory available, but enough to show how theory shapes practice and to help my students with those most puzzling them. Although multiple readings of the same work are easy to assemble and useful, my effort not only had the virtue of a calculated simplicity and brevity, it also displayed the same reader attempting to act as the extension of various different interpretive codes. The passage I chose, a wonderful excerpt from Brendan Gill’s Here at the New Yorker, is itself brief, but also rich. In offering these notes I am assuming that my reader, like those teachers, knows enough about recent critical theory to be confused. Obviously, my theorizing will be alarmingly reductive, and the examples won’t illustrate what any student at any level can produce, given a sketch of this or that theory. They illustrate only what I can do to provide in a very small space an example of a particular kind of critical behavior. But my teacher/students, as well as my student/students, have found these discussion/examples helpful, and so I’ll proceed immediately to Gill’s text and then mine, before anyone gets cut on any of these slashes.

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Here’s Gill’s text:

When I started at The New Yorker, I felt an unshakable confidence in my talent and intelligence. I revelled in them openly, like a dolphin diving skyward out of the sea. After almost forty years, my assurance is less than it was; the revellings, such as they are, take place in becoming seclusion. This steady progress downward in the amount of one’s confidence is a commonplace at the magazine—one might almost call it a tradition. Again and again, some writer who has made a name for himself in the world will begin to write for us and will discover as if for the first time how difficult writing is. The machinery of benign skepticism that surrounds and besets him in the form of editors, copy editors, and checkers, to say nothing of fellow-writers, digs a yawning pit an inch or so beyond his desk. He hears it repeated as gospel that there are not three people in all America who can set down a simple declarative sentence correctly; what are the odds against his being one of this tiny elect?

In some cases, the pressure of all those doubting eyes upon his copy is more than the writer can bear. When the galleys of a piece are placed in front of him, covered with scores, perhaps hundreds, of pencilled hen-tracks of inquiry, suggestion, and correction, he may sense not the glory of creation but the threat of being stung to death by an army of gnats. Upon which he may think of nothing better to do than lower his head onto his blotter and burst into tears. Thanks to the hen-tracks and their consequences, the piece will be much improved, but the author of it will be pitched into a state of graver self-doubt than ever. Poor devil, he will type out his name on a sheet of paper and stare at it long and long, with dumb uncertainty. It looks—oh, Christ!—his name looks as if it could stand some working on.

As I was writing the above, Gardner Botsford, the editor who, among other duties, handles copy for “Theatre,” came into my office with the galleys of my latest play review in his hand. Wearing an expression of solemnity, he said, “I am obliged to inform you that Miss Gould has found a buried dangling modifier in one of your sentences.” Miss Gould is our head copy editor and unquestionably knows as much about English grammar as anyone alive. Gerunds, predicate nominatives, and passive periphrastic conjugations are mother’s milk to her, as they are not to me. Nevertheless, I boldly challenged her allegation. My prose was surely correct in every way. Botsford placed the galleys before me and indicated the offending sentence, which ran, “I am told that in her ninth decade this beautiful woman’s only complaint in respect to her role is that she doesn’t have enough work to do.”

I glared blankly at the galleys. Humiliating enough to have buried a dangling modifier unawares; still more humiliating not to be able to disinter it. Botsford came to my rescue. “Miss Gould points out that as the sentence is written, the meaning is that the complaint is in its ninth decade and has, moreover, suddenly and unaccountably assumed the female gender.” I said that in my opinion the sentence could only be made worse by being corrected—it was plain that “The only complaint of this beautiful woman in her ninth decade . . .” would hang on the page as heavy as a sash-weight. “Quite so,” said Botsford. “There are times when to be right is wrong, and this is one of them. The sentence stands.”

New Criticism. I’ll start with New Criticism because modern literary study arguably begins with New Criticism, and because it is probably, even today, the most pervasive way of looking at literature. It emerged in the struggle to make literary criticism a respectable profession, which for many scholars meant making it more rigorous, more like the sciences—a goal embodied in Wellek and Warren’s landmark Theory of Literature in 1949. Wellek’s chapter on “The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art” is crucial: “The work of art,”
Wellek asserts, is “an object of knowledge,” “a system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective” (156). What Wellek means by this difficult formulation, at least in part, is that “a literary work of art is in exactly the same position as a system of language” (152). Because the work has the same sort of stable and “objective” status as a language, existing in a “collective ideology,” governed by enduring “norms,” critical statements are not merely opinions of taste: “It will always be possible to determine which point of view grasps the subject most thoroughly and deeply,” as “All relativism is ultimately defeated.” This assumption is important, because although New Critics in practice have not always ignored authors, genres, or historical contexts, the purpose of their analysis of particular works, their “close reading,” has been finally to reveal how the formal elements of the literary work, often thought of as a poem, create and resolve tension and irony. Great works control profound tensions, and therefore New Criticism’s intrinsic analysis, dealing with the work in isolation, is implicitly evaluative.

Common sense might suggest that the function of criticism is to reveal the meaning of a work, but New Criticism attends to how a work means, not what, for a simple reason: as Cleanth Brooks puts it, the meaning of a work is “a controlled experience which has to be experienced, not a logical process” (190). The meaning cannot, in other words, be summed up in a proposition, but the system of norms that constructs a reader’s experience can be analyzed. So, the New Critic focuses on “the poem itself” (rather than the author, the reader, the historical context), asking, “What elements are in tension in this work?” and “What unity resolves this tension?”

In Gill’s story, the most obvious tension might be seen as that between right and wrong (or editor versus writer, or the world versus The New Yorker, or grammar versus style, or confidence versus doubt, or something else). Whatever the basic tension is determined to be, it must somehow be resolved if the text succeeds, and New Criticism is inevitably teleological: endings are crucial. Thus a New Critical reading of Gill’s passage might well focus on the reconciliation at the end, when Botsford pronounces “right is wrong.” The New Critic would then consider, “How does this idea fit into the system of the work’s tensions, and how is the tension ordered and resolved?” The following paragraph briefly suggests the sort of discussion that might be produced in response:

In Gill’s story of the dangling modifier, Botsford solves the conflict between Miss Gould’s rules and Gill’s taste with a paradox that unifies the work: sometimes “right is wrong.” Miss Gould was right to spot the error, but Gill was right to be wrong, to have written the sentence as he did. The irony of this solution is reinforced by various paradoxical images: for example, the dolphin is “diving skyward,” an action that in its simultaneously downward (“diving”) and upward (“skyward”) implications embodies the same logic as a wrong rightness. The “progress downward” of the writer, and even his “becoming seclusion” (appealing to others; unknown to others), convey the same image. In larger terms, the writer’s “unshakable confidence” that quickly becomes a “dumb uncertainty” suggests the reversal that informs the story’s truth. In such an upside-down world, we would expect to find the imagery of struggle and violence, and such is indicated by the “yawning pit” and the “army of gnats.” Such tension is harmonized by Gill’s brilliant conclusion: in writing, conducted properly, the demands of correctness and
style are unified by the writer's poetic instincts, just as the story itself is resolved by the notion of a correct error.

Structuralism. At first glance, structuralism might appear to be simply the enlargement of New Criticism's project. But instead of focusing on the formal elements that create the experience of a particular work, structuralism aspired to deal, as Terry Eagleton says, "with structures, and more particularly with examining the general laws by which they work" (94). In other words, the structuralist looks at a surface manifestation and theorizes about a deep structure, or s/he interprets surface phenomena in terms of this underlying structure.

In its most ambitious moments, structuralism may aspire to reveal anything from the structure of the human mind itself to the conventions of a literary form. Structuralists have tried, for instance, not only to isolate the conventions of certain kinds of narrative, such as the fantastic and science fiction, but also to determine what features allow us to identify a text as a story. Is Gill's passage a self-contained story, an entity in itself, or is it an excerpt, a fragment, a part of Here at the New Yorker? If we consider how we decide whether something is a story, we might well agree that a passage becomes a story when it fits our ideas of what a story is, when it satisfies certain general laws of discourse regarding a story. If we use a very simple and ancient notion of narrative structure, most readers would probably agree that Gill's text does have a beginning, a middle, and an end, moving from harmony, to complication and crisis, and finally to resolution. Readers might also agree it has a hero (the writer, who appears to be Gill), a helper (Botsford), and a villain (Miss Gould), features that Vladimir Propp finds, interestingly enough, in fairy tales. We can identify these elements, which we might argue are essential to a story, because we can relate this story to other ones and to a paradigm of stories. We can imagine (and perhaps even recall) other stories involving a confident neophyte who encounters destructive forces, descends into despair and near helplessness, and then finds an unexpected helper and vindication. Such structuralist analysis moves into the realm of archetypal criticism (as in Northrop Frye's work) when it seeks the universal patterns, the "archetypes" which are the foundation of the system of "literature," rather than isolating the structures and relationships within a particular system of discourse.

To produce a structuralist reading, then, exposing a text's conventions and operations, we must first identify the elements of the text—the genre, the agents, the episodes, the turning points, whatever. Structuralists are naturally attracted to charts and diagrams because these are helpful in reducing the complexity of a text to some understandable pattern, which can be compared to other patterns, or their transmutation, or absence. This concern with conventions rather than discrete works means that structuralism, unlike New Criticism, is not implicitly evaluative. Gulliver's Travels and Gilligan's Island are equally worthy of analysis, at least structurally; they may, in fact, illuminate one another, since textual conventions appear in the relationship of texts. If all the stories in our culture, regardless of characters or plot, end with a pack of multicolored dogs going off to hunt antelopes, as is indeed apparently the case in one African culture (Grimes vii), then we recognize such an event as a discrete ele-
ment: the ending element. In the case of Gill’s text, one convention of a literary work that we surely recognize as missing is a beginning operation: a title. Does this lack alone disqualify this text as a literary story? If so, could we then add a title (what would it be?) and make the text into a story? If so, who would be the author of this story that didn’t exist until we titled it? (We might also consider the status of this story before it was extricated from Gill’s book.)

Because students’ experience of literature may be limited, it’s often helpful to supply comparable texts or to ask students to invent a comparable text, thus making the textual conventions easier to imagine. Here is my very limited attempt to think structurally about this excerpt, offering also another story to highlight the postulated form.

The structure of Gill’s text involves the repetition of an underlying sequence, in which a central figure encounters a contrary force that reverses his fortunes: \( x + y \rightarrow \text{anti-}x \). This sequence, which we see in the first two paragraphs, might be represented this way:

1. Unrealistic confidence ("unshakable confidence") + critical forces (editors, copy editors, and checkers) \( \rightarrow \) unrealistic doubt ("dumb uncertainty").

The same underlying structure appears in the last two paragraphs, except this time a particular example of the pattern is presented:

2. Specific instance: unrealistic confidence ("boldly challenged her allegation") + a critical force (Miss Gould) \( \rightarrow \) unrealistic doubt ("Still more humiliating").

In the final paragraph the pattern is inverted, as confidence becomes doubt, antagonistic forces become helpful, and doubt becomes confidence. This inversion, which is perhaps a common occurrence in the concluding element of a series, heightens by contrast the effect of the hero’s success:

3. Unrealistic doubt (helpless to "disinter it") + a helpful force (Botsford) \( \rightarrow \) realistic confidence (Gill’s bold challenge, stably maintained, is upheld).

The same underlying pattern can be seen in the following plot:

1. Dreaming of future glory as an artist, a student comes to study at the university and discovers that art professors systematically show students how incompetent they are.

2. The art student turns in a project, and one faculty member explains in public how the project is grossly wrong. The student did not realize that he had departed from the assignment.

3. The chairman of the department then responds to the faculty member’s criticism, saying that the assignment was a foolish one, and the student has demonstrated admirable creativity in revising the professor’s directions and producing a good project.

*Deconstruction.* New Criticism, like its sibling philosophy of writing instruction, Current-Traditional Rhetoric, is product-oriented. It is perhaps then not surprising that my New Critical reading of Gill’s piece focuses on the centrality of error, one of C-T Rhetoric’s fundamental concerns. At first glance, Gill’s story may appear to deflate Error’s terror, since being wrong turns out to be right. If we press this close reading, however, asking if the text might say something other than what it appears to say, we move into the realm of deconstruction. Composition students in particular might be sensitive to the way Botsford’s paradox reverses itself, unravelling Gill’s grammatical triumph and plunging
"'the writer' finally into an even dumber and darker uncertainty. It's bad enough for the writer at *The New Yorker*, not to mention the composer in Freshman English, if the rules of writing are so complex that not even three people in America 'can set down a simple declarative sentence correctly,' if an experienced and accomplished writer can commit a major blunder without knowing it and without being able to fix it when he does know it. But it's even worse if the rules obtain in one case and not in another, and the rules for determining such exceptions don't seem to exist but are rather invented and applied by whoever happens to be in charge. Basic writing students, mystified by the rules of Standard English, live in just such a nightmare, I suspect.

If we look again at Botsford's vindication, we see it is deceptive, for he does not actually say that sometimes right is wrong and wrong is right. He only says that sometimes "right is wrong." Certainly wrong is also occasionally wrong, and perhaps it is always wrong. But Botsford's apparent reversal of the dismantling of authors at *The New Yorker* is finally ambiguous, since we never know if the writer is ever correct, no matter what he does. "The sentence stands" indeed, but it stands with its error intact, a monument to Gill's inability and the inevitable error of writing—the way language masters us. The passage thus complements the deconstructive commonplace that reading is always misreading.

Although it has been asserted that post-structuralism is not an applicable method (see Tompkins), I am, I think, just applying some basic deconstructive moves to Gill's text, which seems especially receptive, given its overt oppositions and emphasis on language. And despite the reluctance of some theorists to risk the spectacle of defining deconstruction (an action that deconstruction, by definition, renders futile), useful and clear explanations are available. For example, Barbara Johnson says that deconstruction proceeds by "the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself" (5). Jonathan Culler says that "to deconstruct a discourse is to show how it undermines the philosophy it asserts, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies" (86). This teasing out or undermining might be described as a three-step process: first, a deconstructive reading must note which member of an opposition in a text appears to be privileged or dominant (writers versus editors, error versus correctness, men versus women, etc.); second, the reading shows how this hierarchy can be reversed within the text, how the apparent hierarchy is arbitrary or illusory; finally, a deconstructive reading places both structures in question, making the text ultimately ambiguous. For students to deconstruct a text, they need to locate an opposition, determine which member is privileged, then reverse and undermine that hierarchy. Such activity often makes central what appears to be marginal, thereby exposing "hidden" contradictions. Deconstruction seems to me especially worthwhile because it encourages creativity (my students often enjoy the imaginative playfulness and punning of much post-structuralist criticism) and scrutiny (in order to deconstruct a work, one at least must read it carefully).

Thus, if structuralism shows how the conventions of a text work, then post-structuralism, in a sense, points out how they fail. In our time, the genres fiction and non-fiction have proved especially interesting. Gill's passage would appear
to be non-fiction, since Gill really did work at The New Yorker, and his book obviously employs the operations of autobiography. But look at Miss Gould’s un-cannily apt name: she is a Miss Ghoul, having unearthed a “buried” dangling modifier, decomposing Gill’s sentence; Botsford, perhaps played by Vincent Price, enters with “an expression of solemnity,” carrying this mutilated modifier that the author finds himself unable to “disinter.” Miss Gould may not drink human blood, but she does have some strange nutritional ideas if “gerunds, predicate nominatives, and passive paraphrastic conjugations are mother’s milk to her.” Fortunately, the editor, a gardener, or rather a Gardner, who has the final responsibility for nurturing, pruning, and harvesting the writer’s sentences, knows how to deal with buried modifiers. A Botsford, he knows how to get over the unavoidable errors of prose, how to ford the botches of writing (ouch!). Thus, although we initially may place this piece into the non-fiction category, deconstruction calls such placement into question. People in non-fiction usually don’t have symbolic names—do they? Of course, there was that White House spokesperson named Larry Speakes. And then my allergist in Tuscaloosa, whose name, prophetically enough, was Dr. Shotts. And a hundred other folks I’ve known with strangely meaningful names. Deconstruction typically leaves us in uncertainty, but with a richer understanding of the categories we have put in motion—thereby unavoidably functioning as a kind of cultural criticism, or at least a prelude to cultural criticism.

Although deconstructive critics may well deal with pervasive, basic issues, they may also choose some marginal element of the text and vigorously explore its oppositions, reversals, and ambiguities. In fact, for some critics, deconstruction is simply a name for “close reading” with a vengeance. The deconstructive critic, for example, might well decide to concentrate on the arguably marginal assertion that because of the editors’ merciless correction, “the piece will be much improved.” The New Critic, I think, would not be very likely to consider this assertion central, the key to the passage. Yet, proceeding from deconstructive assumptions, bringing the marginal to the center, here is what happened when I turned on this assertion:

Gill’s anecdote clearly sets the world’s writers against the editors, and the latter control the game. The editors and their henchmen, the checkers and copy editors, get to say what is wrong. They get to dig the “yawning pit” in front of the helpless writer’s desk; they determine the “tiny elect” who can write correctly; they make the scores and hundreds of “hen-tracks” on the writer’s manuscript, which serve as testimony to the incompetence of writers, the near-impossibility of writing, and the arbitrary power of the editor. To be sure, it is acknowledged that these editorial assaults upon the writer serve their purpose, for “Thanks to the hen-tracks and their consequences, the piece will be much improved.” But the cost is clearly terrible. Not only is the writer unable to write his own name with any confidence, he has become a “Poor devil,” outside “the elect.” In delivering his writing over to the editors, conceding their dominance, the writer inevitably places his own identity, perhaps even his very soul, in jeopardy, as the expostulation “oh Christ!” comes to be an invocation to the only power who can save the writer from the devil and the editor’s destructive forces.

In fact, this story of the errors of writing actually reveals that the kingdom of editors is based upon a lie: it simply is not true, despite the beleaguered writer’s ad-
mission under torture, that “the piece will be much improved” by editorial intervention. Miss Gould’s enormous grammatical lore does not improve the piece at all; her effort nearly made it “worse.” And Botsford’s contribution involves simply leaving the piece as it was written—a strange method of improvement. This instance, in other words, suggests that the writer need not approach dissolution in order to compose his writing. At the same time, Gill can never become again like the gill-less dolphin of the first paragraph, confidently “diving skyward,” for the dangling modifier remains, a part of the sea of language the author cannot leave. In the end, both writer and editor are defeated by their inability to control their language, as the status of the writer at The New Yorker becomes a paradigm for the alarming status of writing itself: deceptive, mute, and intractable, “The sentence stands,” neither improved nor made worse.

**Psychological Criticism.** In its most common-sensical form, a psychological approach to a text simply involves focusing attention on the motivations and relationships involved in the text’s production or consumption. The mental processes of author, character, and/or reader may be involved in such considerations. My students, who have seen their own writing covered by “pencilled hen-tracks of inquiry, suggestion, and correction,” are easily interested in what Gill’s passage implies about the emotional effects of criticism and why writers react so unconstructively and painfully to correction and advice. Whereas reader-response criticism would build a “reading” from such subjective reaction, psychological criticism would be more interested in analyzing (rather than expressing) the passage’s effects. Obviously, terms like “ego,” “anxiety,” “unconscious,” and “obsessive,” would be handy in such an analysis, although an introduction to psychological concepts could quickly engulf a course in criticism. And one could easily spend several semesters exploring different psychological schools and the various ways they might influence our reading. My minimal (but still challenging) goal in an introduction to theory is to give my students an extremely basic understanding of some essential Freudian ideas and their application.

Many of my students think they already understand Freud: he’s the guy who thought of everything in terms of sex. Freud did of course think that sexuality (in a large sense) pervades our lives, but it is also always in conflict with opposing forces. So that we can function in society, our drive toward pleasure is necessarily contained and suppressed, relegated in part to the unconscious, where it does not slumber peacefully away, but rather asserts itself indirectly, in dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, creative writing. For instance, dreams of water, Freud tells us, harken back to “the embryo in the amniotic fluid in the mother’s uterus”; dreams of diving into water may be expressing a desire to return to the womb (*Lectures* 160). Repression of such desires becomes a problem when the unconscious enlarges its domain, creating hysterical, obsessional, or phobic neuroses that insistently express the desire while still disguising it. If the power of the unconscious begins to take over reality, creating delusion, then we have a psychosis.

This economy of desire is based on Freud’s most outrageous (and undeniable) claim: that even infants are sexual beings. Freud’s theory of the central sexual phenomenon of early childhood, admittedly based on the development of males,
is laid out in a brief and accessible paper, "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex." Focusing first on the mother's breasts, the young boy invests his desire in his mother—he "develops an object-cathexis" for her, Freud says. As the boy's "sexual wishes in regard to his mother become more intense," his father is increasingly "perceived as an obstacle to them," thus originating what Freud calls "the simple positive Oedipus complex" (640). The desire to supplant his father and join with his mother cannot be acted out, and it must be repressed, turned away from, put out of sight. This "primal repression" initiates the unconscious, engendering a "place" for repressed desires. If no more than a repression is achieved, however, the Oedipus complex "persists in an unconscious state in the id and will later manifest its pathogenic effect." This "pathogenic effect" can be avoided, Freud says, by "the destruction of the Oedipus complex," which "is brought about by the threat of castration" (664). This threat is embodied in the father and perpetuated by the formation of the super-ego, which "re­ tains the character of the father" (642) and comes to stand for the restraints of "authority, religious teaching, schooling and reading." This constraining law in Lacan's reading of Freud is ultimately the system of language.

Even the most glimmering understanding of Freud, I would argue, can be useful: the idea of the unconscious, for instance, dispenses with the second-most-often-asked question in introductory courses—"Do you think the author really intended to mean any of that?" Further, my students generate thin and uninteresting readings more out of caution and a poverty of options than a plen­ itude of possibilities, and after an exposure to Freud, what interpretation can be immediately rejected as absurd? Even a basic understanding of "The Dissolution of the Oedipus Concept" opens up Gill's passage in ways my students have found liberating, comic, and revealing. For example, one of the most interesting problems in this passage is the apparent disparity between the emotional content and the actual events. We see a writer bursting into tears, hiding his head on his blotter; a writer who considers himself humiliated, who glares "blankly"; we even see a writer who is unsure of his very name. And what is the cause? A grammatical error? The scene makes so little logical sense that we may well wonder if it makes more psychological sense. The following reading tries to see what might happen when the Oedipal triangle, the unconscious, the super-ego, and the castration complex get Gill's passage on the couch:

The dolphin diving skyward at the beginning of Gill's passage is an obvious Freudian image of birth, and an important clue to the psychic problems being addressed here. The writer moves from the buoyant amniotic ocean of pure pleasure and unthreatened ego, the world of "unshakable confidence," into the difficult reality of The New Yorker, the world of the anxious, neurotic writer. Gill's longing for an impossible return to the uncomplicated indulgence of an animal state, symbolized by the dolphin, conflicts with his unavoidable status in a parental society of traditions, gospels, grammatical rules, and "editors, copy editors, and checkers." The ambiguity of the image, "diving skyward," reflects this troubled position, suspended between the id's impossible nostalgia and the super-ego's stern correction. Gill's symbol for himself, the dolphin, is an interesting (and no doubt unconscious) play on his name: a "gill" is naturally associated with a fish, which becomes the dolphin; a dolphin, however, does not have a "gill," thus marking again the gulf between the burdened Gill and the free-floating dolphin.
Does Freud’s model of psycho-sexual development also help to explain how this loss of innocence leads to Gill’s unexpectedly emotional reaction? Yes, startlingly well in fact, for analysis reveals how Gill’s scene re-enacts the traumatic dissolution of the Oedipal complex. To see how the Oedipal triangle shapes Gill’s passage, how Gill’s response bears the emotional charge of re-working his way through this complex, we should first note the writer’s special relationship to his editors: he owes his existence, as a writer anyway, to his editors. The union of Miss Gould and Gardner Botsford, in this case, allows “Brendan Gill” to appear. Miss Gould, the copy editor, the symbolic mother, stands for grammatical correctness. At The New Yorker the writer’s first desires must be for her “yes.” But this identification with Miss Gould, or rather what she represents, is unavoidably frustrated. Like the child who desires union with his mother, the writer is ill-equipped to satisfy Miss Gould: not even one of the “tiny elect,” the writer cannot possibly fill in the “yawning pit” of error.

But the writer, like the developing child, must also face the law of the father. Gardner Botsford, the symbolic father, the senior editor, must ultimately direct the writer’s attention away from Miss Gould toward the proper object of his attention, outside The New Yorker family—the reader. We see that Gill does in fact reveal a turning away from Miss Gould, using in fact the same focus as the child who turns initially from the mother’s breasts as an object of desire: Gill finds Miss Gould’s “mother’s milk,” the predicate nominatives and such, distasteful. The way Gill chooses to present her name (not “Gloria Gould” but “Miss Gould”) marks his recognition of her as a “Miss.” As a by-the-book grammarian, she may also be a ghoul, bringing a deadly stiffness to what she handles. Gill’s development as a writer thus requires him to reject her.

To see how this rejection is accomplished, again in terms of the Oedipal complex, we must observe how the writer’s identification with his writing contributes to his extraordinary anxiety and its symptomatic distortions. Threats to his writing endanger his identity, his ego. Thus we see that although it is the writer’s galleys that are covered with “inquiry, suggestion, and correction,” Gill shifts these impressions to the writer, and further transforms them from “pencilled hen-tracks” into stings. It is, as we might suppose, the particular work that may be attacked so much it dies, but instead the writer who may be “stung to death by an army of gnats.” In reality, gnats do not, of course, have stingers; they bite, if anything. The dream-like alteration here again substantiates the threat to his identity that the author has perceived: being bitten to death by gnats is absurd, but being stung to death is a terrifying prospect.

At this point Freud’s assertion that the dissolution of the Oedipus complex is accomplished by the threat of castration is especially helpful. Gardner Botsford, Gill’s senior editor, his symbolic father, poses this threat. To see how Botsford plays this role, we must consider what he is threatening to remove. Botsford enters the scene with Gill’s play review “in his hand,” and we discover eventually that a part of this review has been illegitimately “buried,” and may subsequently be removed, although Gill himself cannot see how to “disinter it.” This threat to Gill’s writing is charged by the fear of castration precisely because the writer identifies with his writing. It is no accident that the writer’s “dumb uncertainty” becomes a paralyzed silence that threatens to erase the most public sign of his identity, as “his name looks as if it could stand some working on.” His name, his signature, organizes the evidence of his potency, his ability (in a sense) to reproduce and promulgate himself. Thus, the writer may well “stare” at his name “long and long,” once he realizes he may lose it if he cannot control the prose to which it is attached. Gill realizes that the editorial parents may correct and improve his “piece,” but the cost may be terrible, as the piece may be separated from the writer, taken over by the authorities who control the emissions of his pen. Gill’s image for what he has lost, the dolphin, thus becomes a rather blatant phallic symbol, re-emerging as the pen
(the grammatical penis) that the "dumb," unnamed writer loses. In other words, the writer must give up his "piece" to be published, to survive as a writer—but then he is no longer the writer. He cannot get himself into print, so he submits to the authorities of culture, propriety, and correctness, having realized that the self may be cut off from the sign of its identity.

We now may see the fittingness of the error Miss Gould finds: a structure that is "dangling." The writer may see his own fate in the sentence that sticks out, for it suddenly has "assumed the female gender." We would have to agree that the writer who focuses his desire upon grammar and correctness will be impotent, emasculated. The writer, in order to thrive, must get beyond the desire to please the Miss Goulds of the world. We may also see now the fittingness of "Gardner" as the name for the symbolic father: so close to "gardener," Gardner is the one who has the power to prune, to root out, the writer who is stuck on the mother's milk of Miss Gould, grammar. Thus, Gill's story draws on his psycho-sexual development and an apparently unresolved Oedipus complex to rehearse in powerful terms the advantages of accepting the values of the father and shifting his desire to the reader. Gill evades symbolic castration. "The sentence stands," the father says, saving the writer's penis.

**Feminist Criticism.** I have only recently stopped being amazed at how easily and enthusiastically my students take to feminist criticism. Part of its appeal, I suppose, is its simplicity, at least on the surface: to practice feminist criticism, one need only read as a woman. Such a procedure quickly turns out to have a profound effect on the reader and the text—an effect that hardly can avoid being political. Whatever students' sexual politics might be, feminist criticism unavoidably involves them in significant, timely issues. I do not mean to say that feminist criticism is invariably easy: reading as a woman, even if one is a woman, may be extremely difficult, requiring the reader to dismantle or discard years of learned behavior. And, of course, I am leaping over the difficult question of what "as a woman" actually means. Since we can't reasonably discuss, as Cheryl Torsney claims, "a single female sexuality" (180), isn't it absurd to assume there is a distinctly feminine way of reading? How can a man even pretend to read "as a woman"?

But these questions need not be answered in order for students to attempt to undo their sexual assumptions, try out new ones, or simply sensitize themselves to the sexual issues present in a work. Feminist criticism thus involves students in reader-response and political criticism. Not all texts, of course, lend themselves easily to feminist criticism, but it is difficult to find one that completely resists a feminist stance. I have found that Gill's passage easily supports a familiar feminist observation, that language itself is phallocentric, as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have insistently argued. But the passage also repays a more aggressive and perhaps even outrageous (or outraged) approach. Both appear in the following analysis:

We know not all the writers at The New Yorker were men, even some years ago during Brendan Gill's tenure. So, when Gill speaks of "some writer who has made a name for himself in the world," and about the editorial "machinery" that besets "him," Gill is of course referring to writers in the generic sense. One may still assert today, although less confidently than in 1975, that "himself" and "him" in this passage include "herself" and "her." Such a claim, that one sexual marker includes its opposite, is feeble—as if "white" included "black," or "totalitarian" in-
cluded "democratic." But the motivations for such a claim are revealed even in this brief passage, for Gill’s story not only contains this obvious pronominal bias, still accepted by some editors and writers; the story also conveys more subtle messages about sexuality and sexual roles. It is, in fact, a not-so-subtle attack on the image of women.

Miss Gould functions as a familiar stereotype: the finicky spinster, a Miss Thistlebottom, who has devoted her life to English grammar and its enforcement. She is a copy editor, subservient to the male editor and writer, and her lack of imagination and taste testify to the wisdom of this power structure. This division of labor—male/creative, female/menial—is subtly reinforced by reference to the “hen-tracks” (not rooster tracks) that cover the writer’s galley, thus further associating petty correction with the feminine, even though surely some copy editors could have been male. These “hen-tracks” are more than an aggravating correction, as they even come to threaten the writer’s very identity. The effects of these hen-tracks, feminine marks of correction, allow Gill to assert the disabling consequences of the feminine upon the masculine: the writers become emotional, and even effeminately hysterical, crying on their blotter. Gill receives comfort and approval from the man, Botsford, but Miss Gould lacks the penetrating insight to deal properly with a problem as small as a grammatical error.

Gill’s misogyny influences the passage in other ways. The metaphorical threat to the writer is distinctly gynecological, a “yawning pit.” Miss Gould’s shortcoming is that she fails maternally, providing indigestible “mother’s milk.” Even the error that Miss Gould locates is subtly connected to the feminine, for the problem with the sentence is that part of it has “assumed the female gender,” which may be seen as the underlying problem for Gill: something has assumed the female gender. That part of the sentence Miss Gould complains of, naturally, is a “complaint”—which, Gill and Botsford determine, should retain its feminine nature. The complaint itself seems strange: in the mode of feminine busybodies like Miss Gould, the nonagenarian laments not having “enough work to do.” Miss Gould, similarly overzealous, has herself done more work than is reasonable, and Botsford’s pronouncement that “The sentence stands” returns her to her place, negating her feminine fussiness, re-asserting masculine mastery of the phallocentric world of writing.

**Conclusion.** One might want to point out. I suppose, that in offering this rehearsal of critical “approaches.” I am assuming that plurality is better than unity, that the relative is better than the absolute (or even a quest for the absolute). And, given what I think we know about language and knowing, it seems silly to me to assume otherwise: as Jane Tompkins says, articulating a current commonplace, we are not “freestanding autonomous entities, but beings that are culturally constituted by interpretive frameworks or interpretive strategies that our culture makes available to us” (734). In other words, the texts we read—when we look at books, at our world, at ourselves—are likewise constituted by these frameworks or strategies. Obviously, if this “reading” of meaning is correct, plurality offers us a richer universe, allowing us to take greater advantage of the strategies our culture makes available—strategies that do not approach a text, but rather make it what we perceive. Our students therefore should learn how to inhabit the theories mentioned here—and a good many others.

To be sure, such plurality is not always comfortable. Furthermore, if we should agree that the more strategies students can deploy (or be deployed by), the more power and insight they can potentially wield, then must we also agree there are no limits? Are all readings welcome, the more the merrier? My initial impulse is to say “Yes, we can learn from any reading, from any set of inter-
pretive assumptions. Come one, come all. We can see how readings that seem severely inattentive might offer useful insights: Robert Crosman reveals, for example, how one student’s reading completely missed the significance of the hair on the pillow at the end of “A Rose for Emily,” and yet this reading, comparing Emily to the student’s grandmother, profoundly enlarged Crosman’s understanding of Faulkner’s story. We can even imagine how ludicrous errors might stimulate our thinking: my student who thought The Hamlet was by Shakespeare did lead me to ask (mostly in an attempt to ease his embarrassment) about Shakespeare’s influence on Faulkner—perhaps The Hamlet in some sense is by Shakespeare, or is shaped by Hamlet. But we must admit that most readings in violation of shared interpretive strategies will usually be seen as inferior, if not wrong, and that finding insight in such violations often seems an act of kindness, a salvage operation.

I can also imagine theoretical possibilities that would not be welcome in my critical home, should they ever appear: Nazi criticism, racist criticism, electroshock criticism, for example. In other words, if we are not freestanding autonomous entities, we are also not entirely helpless, simply the products of the interpretive operations we inherit, “a mere cultural precipitate” (xviii), as Morse Peckham puts it. I would like to think we can resist; we can change; we can grow; we can, perhaps, in some sense, even get better. We can, that is, attempt to evaluate ways of making meaning, and their particular applications—and if we are very clever and very lucky, we may even modify interpretive frameworks, or possibly even invent new ones.

But only if we have some awareness that such frameworks exist.

Works Cited


