8/31/07 Liberal Humanism

• EMAIL ADDRESSES FOR BLOG
  • will invite; sign up soon and start posting soon as well
  • what to write about: anything pertinent to the subject of this class: claims made by literary theorists, the status of literary study today, your own ideas about texts in general, etc.
  • How should you talk about these topics?
    • Don’t write papers! It’s a discussion with your peers, not a place to prove anything to me. It’s informal. You don’t have to worry about grammar, spelling, essay or paragraph structures, and so on. You do have to worry about making yourself understood.
    • Do hold high standards for yourself in terms of going into depth and detail, trying to provide evidence for claims that you make, and reaching for ambitious, original ideas. Think back to the most thoughtful and interesting intellectual discussion you’ve ever had, in or out of the classroom, and emulate that.
    • Argument, even heated argument, is good; harassment, flaming, name-calling and the like are not acceptable
  • questions on syll or other assign?

• Quite of lot of reading for today: some points worth noting:
  1) we’re starting with the 20th C, but, as Barry and to a lesser extent Richter point out, there is a longer view to be taken—people have been theorizing about literature since Plato’s day or earlier. Contend that New Criticism, or liberal humanism, or formalism, is the logical place to begin, for several reasons:
    a) it is still very much with us. Immediate evidence of that: Wednesday’s class. So far as I can recall, everything we put on the board last time could be considered solidly liberal humanist.
    b) much of what we call “theory” implicitly or explicitly quarrels with liberal humanism’s principles, and to understand fully what those schools are talking about we need to see what they’re responding to
    c) many of the theories that oppose New Criticism make claims about texts, selves, meaning, politics, and interpretation that, however widely accepted they are in critical circles, are sometimes counterintuitive and often at odds with the founding assumptions of, say, science or philosophy, much less business. It is useful, therefore, to acknowledge traditional criticism’s “common sense” view, however we end up thinking about it
  Still, important to realize that there ARE older traditions of theory, ones that don’t necessarily share the assumptions either of New Criticism or more recent critical schools. We’ll read some later.
  2) A certain degree of confusion is possible over what exactly we’re looking at for today. Barry calls it liberal humanism, but he’s mainly interested in criticism from I. A. Richards on, and it is not clear whether we would consider the whole of pre-20th C criticism from Aristotle to Arnold a part of liberal humanism; Richter calls it formalism, and lumps
American New Criticism is not only with Chicago school neo-Aristotelianism, but with Russian formalism, which arose from a very different context. Schwarz refers indiscriminately to New Criticism and formalism and Aristotelianism, as well as to individual liberal humanist critics such as Kenner and Ellman who don’t fit neatly into any of these camps. A couple of points, then:

—> the terrain of criticism we’re talking about is enormous, and it is far from monolithic. Any WHOLESALE rejections you may hear of “New Criticism” or “formalism” merit some skepticism.

—> what one calls these traditional forms of criticism says something about what one sees as central in it, and therefore a stance toward it.

• If you call it formalism, then you’re emphasizing its tendency to focus on formal features, either to dismiss it for its underemphasis of social, historical and biographical contexts, or to praise it for its technical rigor;
• if you call it liberal humanism, then you’re pointing to its non-radical stance, its emphasis on humane values, and its assumption of the viability of the autonomous, self-aware subject;
• if you refer to New Criticism, you’re probably focusing on a certain traditional mode of explicating texts;
• if you refer to the Chicago school, you’re emphasizing the works of particular critics; etc.

• BUT for all the complexity of this material as described in these sources, it seem widely agreed upon that literary studies today are somehow POST—post-NC, post-humanist.

—> Why?

• another way to phrase the question—do we need theory? I’ve tried to suggest in the first class is that we should define theory as something like “general principles which apply to a large number of literary or critical texts or to some aspect of reading and writing in general.” Seen this way, then the answer is that we probably do. Or at least it seems that we DO use theory; we have particular strategies that we know to apply to literature, and which help us to make sense of it. If you can say, as probably all of us can, “I do such and such when I look at a text,” then you have a theory, at least implicitly.

• but do we need theory as it is practiced today? OR—what was wrong with New Criticism? Let’s say that by NC we mean a kind of criticism that insists on close analysis of texts, that tends to deemphasize the social and biographical contexts of a work and see the text as an independent entity; that prizes irony, ambiguity, and all those other things that we mean when we talk about the “richness” of a text; and that focuses at least in part on the moral and intellectual purposes of a work, its redemptive value. Why did all that have to go?

• Good question. For New Criticism had many advantages. It was intellectually rigorous: one could speak with great precision about literary texts. It had a clear object of study: the texts and only the texts of the “great” or “major” works of literature. As for what constituted a major work, that was up for discussion, but the criteria seemed pretty clear: first, general consensus among critics and scholars that a particular work was of lasting value, and second, evidence that a
work (or author) had wide-spread influence on later writers. It had a clear methodology: explication, the close analysis of a particular text. It was an expansive school, in the sense that critics could continue to refine and expand the critical vocabulary which they use to explain texts. And it had a reasonably clear purpose: appreciation of “great works,” which would in turn lead to an enlarged and more critical understanding of life.

- So why did it get the boot? One answer: history shook its foundations, especially the historical movements of the 60’s—the civil rights movement, feminism, and protests against the Vietnam War.

—CRM, and its corresponding movements to include blacks in education, made a powerful claim that African and African-American heritage was not studied; the curriculum, the university, suddenly seemed not be to timeless and universal but narrowly white.

—Feminist movements would come to similar conclusions, but in America came at it from a different angle. At first, problem wasn’t that women weren’t studied, because it wasn’t entirely clear that there were any women to be studied (canon had shaped sense of what was out there). What they did notice, because they were critiquing similar things in society at large, were that the works of the white males who dominated the canon were absolutely loaded with misogynistic images of women. This led to a new kind of criticism: one designed not to determine what a work meant on its own terms, but instead to critique what an author or a work assumed about women.

—anti-war protest harder to pin down, but important. In the first place, brought to the fore the class divisions in America in a way that hadn’t been evident since the heyday of the labor unions in the thirties and forties: middle class students went to school, while working class students went to war. This made it easier to notice that working class or popular literature didn’t have a solid place in the canon either. More generally, fostered an atmosphere of skepticism toward the Establishment, in which a wide range of political or philosophically skeptical theories would flourish.

—In the light of these changes in thinking, two weaknesses within traditional literary studies became very clear.

1 - The canon was in serious trouble. At the very least, it was clearly incomplete; it neglected minority literatures and literature by women. More profoundly, the basis upon which the canon had been selected seemed much more problematic. The criteria for inclusion in the canon, after all, was that a work be “great” or that it have major influence. But if the implicit definitions of great, usually not even defined, seemed to leave out whole races and genders, then more was at stake than just the objectivity of literary critics; basic assumptions of literary criticism could be seen to be functions of social biases. For instance, if we hold as criteria for admission to the canon the ability to influence members of the canon, then we have excluded a large part of the Afro-American tradition, much of which was written for Afro-Americans and ignored by white culture. Another example: if “great” works are those which focus on major social issues like war, social upheaval, etc., then writings by women which center on the home, the sphere to which women were long confined,
could by definition never be great. Even the valorization of “ambiguity,” a staple of New Critics could be seen to devalue, for instance, overtly political writing, some forms of which consciously aim not to be subtle and ambiguous.

2 - New Criticism’s focus on the text itself tended to obscure the social and historical context of the work. This could be seen as a willful if unconscious act of political repression, because it tended to place beyond the range of examination precisely those assumptions which were being challenged in society at large; for New Critics a work was great on its own, not as a result of any kind of social or historical consensus which might be biased. Therefore the dominant mode of criticism could be seen to validate the all-white, all-male canon.

• To make things worse, New Criticism’s own properties prepared it badly either to accept or to reject these charges. Its focus had always been on practice, not on theory. If you spent your life focusing on ambiguity in Shakespeare, and frankly haven’t had to think very hard about your founding principles, how can you possibly respond to the charge that your theoretical assumptions have perpetuated the oppression of women and blacks? No I didn’t? Sorry about that? Gee, and I was trying so hard to promote timeless human values?

Ironically, the first generation of New Critics—people like Richards, or Leavis—would have been much better equipped to deal with these challenges than the second generations; NC had first been defined, after all, in opposition to various kinds of historical criticism, including Marxism. But NC had held sway in America for 30 years, long enough for a generation to come of age that had never had to deal with such challenges. The result wasn’t so much a dialogue, therefore, or even a debate, but more of a talking past one another—with a good deal of heat and no small degree of contempt on both sides.

For this reason, NC has never fully died out, but neither has it every fully redeemed itself.

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<th>liberal humanism</th>
<th>theory</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• human nature is unchanging and universal;</td>
<td>• “human nature” is a myth; human qualities are socially constructed and changing</td>
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<tr>
<td>• individuals are more or less autonomous;</td>
<td>• indivs are constructed by larger social forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>• meaning is immensely rich, perhaps inexhaustible, but persists over time</td>
<td>• meaning is contingent upon cultural and historical conditions</td>
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<td>• literature serves a moral purpose</td>
<td>• morality is just a construct</td>
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today: look at some of the assumptions of NC as Barry reproduces them. Do you believe these? How or how not?
1) timeless. So how do we explain the major changes in the canon?
2) contains its own meaning within itself.
3) approach the text without presuppositions. How?
4) Human nature is unchanging. What is it like? And how then do you get past all those essentialist theories that say that women are naturally more nurturing, whereas men are more intellectual, or that races from southern climates are naturally lazier than northern races, etc.?
5) Individuality, human essence. So what does the self consist of? Where do all those attitudes come from if not “outside”?
6) Purpose of lit is the enhancement of life, but not programmatically. What’s the matter with programmatic?
(skip 7-9)
10) Purpose of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between text and reader, not to theorize. Same as 3, or not? Why do texts need mediators?