

Lauriat Lane, Jr.

Review Article

Ahab's Tear and Ariadne's Thread

The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism. By Eugene Goodheart. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984. Pp. ix, 191. \$22.50 U.S.

If these are really the troubled times—what Hayden White calls the Absurdist moment¹—for literary theory, literary criticism, literary interpretation, literary study, literary appreciation, that many think they are, then basic questions of critical conduct follow. Are these matters for reasonable dialogue, in a genuine dialectic? Or are the truth, now the non-truth, and the future all on one side? Are we obligated by language, by logic, by the situation, even by temperament, to shed the both/and of humanist critical pluralism, to borrow one phrase, for the either/or of dogmatic deconstructive skepticism, to borrow another? Are these still matters of persuasion at all? Or are they, as I have recently been told, matters of power, of who “makes minciment” of whom?

If the former, Eugene Goodheart adds an important voice to those of Abrams, Booth, Donoghue, Graff, and others including some more moderate deconstructionists themselves. To listen to such voices is not just to settle for the allegedly unexamined life of unconsciously ideological common sense—although common sense, too, may have its own legitimate claims on our serious attention.

Writing at the close of a differently troubled time, Goodheart had ended his *Arnoldian Culture and the Radical Conscience* by directing a question to the university specifically and “the cultural life” generally: “Can we avoid the conclusion that we are left either with a skeptical relativism, which tends to deny authority to all intellectual and imaginative claims to truth, or to ideology, which is based on moral and political commitment?”² In the Introduction to that book he had made it clear that we needed its “critical attempt to disengage

the idea of intellectual and literary culture from the distortions it has suffered" both for "the present cultural and political situation," the work of *Culture and the Radical Conscience*, and for "a radical criticism of literary study," undertaken in *The Failure of Criticism*, continued in *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism*.

With *The Failure of Criticism* Goodheart obviously turned to his other concern, literary study, but still within a broad, humanist, Arnoldian sense of criticism as "inspired by a positive order of values, nourished by a moral understanding of the religious tradition and by a profound appreciation of the works of art and intellect of past and present," "a moral criticism which will result in the 'doubling' of the self-understanding of the critic-reader as well as of the text's self-understanding."³ In the main argument of *The Failure of Criticism* Goodheart showed the decline of "humanist" criticism from Arnold to such modern examples as Eliot, Leavis, and—interestingly—Philip Rieff, with briefer considerations of Frye, Trilling, Raymond Williams, Kenneth Burke, and others, and also showed how in literature itself "the triumphant modernism of Flaubert, Joyce, and Eliot, among others, signals the failure of the critical spirit to prevail in our cultural life" (50). But in his Introduction Goodheart cited briefly, as examples of "the predicament of modern criticism" (3), Derrida, Barthes, and Fish, each of whom gets fuller analysis in *The Skeptic Disposition*, and later remarked, in passing, of a comment by Jonathan Culler on Flaubert, "That such a claim can be made without irony or self-irony by an intelligent critic is symptomatic of the present state of criticism" (150).

There are two broad answers, I suppose, to Skepticism's claims: that such claims lack theoretical authority, or that their practical or ethical or critical human costs are too high. Often, as with Goodheart, a strong conviction of the second, the costs, may at once motivate and sustain the first and gain added strength from it. If *Culture and the Radical Conscience* and *The Failure of Criticism* gave more attention to skepticism's human costs, *The Skeptic Disposition* gives as much, if not more, to its theoretical flaws. Without the first, the theoretical answer, we would have to settle for the counterdogmatism of critics ranging from Helen Gardner ("They exaggerate partial truisms into patent falsities and elevate difficulties into impossibilities") to Paul Fussell ("I have rejected the notion that readers of literary criticism must be learned in mathematics, linguistics, computer science, and analytic philosophy").⁴ A third answer to skepticism, of course, would be the persuasive example of the answer's own rhetorical and logical clarity and force, its own refusal to fight dogmatism with dogmatism or to self-destruct into the deconstructionist abyss.

Goodheart's careful, almost witty title makes two important points. The skeptic "disposition" reminds us (with help from Kenneth Burke's motives?) that "what is at stake is not merely a matter of cognition. The conviction of certainty or of uncertainty is rarely the conclusion of an argument, however rigorous its logic; it is rather the result of a temperamental or willful need to see text and world in a certain way" (13-14). And "in" rather than "of" contemporary criticism reminds us that many of the best contemporary critics, perhaps the majority—the very different examples of Helen Vendler, of Frederic Jameson, and of many feminist critics come at once to mind—still adopt skepticism, if they do, for discovery or demystification but without deconstruction.

Each of the voices singled out at the opening of this review comes to its critique of the skeptic disposition from what, rightly or wrongly, it thinks of as a more fixed, more stable stance than that of its adversaries. For Abrams, broadly, this stance is one of "our common experience of the uniqueness, the rich variety, and the passionate human concerns in works of literature, philosophy, or criticism"; for Booth, critical understanding by way of a responsibly pluralist "harmony of productive discourse" governed by "vitality, justice, and understanding" toward author, work, and critic; for Donoghue, "the humanism of voice and epireading"; for Graff, "significant external reality" and "a convincing understanding of the world" in "indispensable forms of social and historical understanding."⁵

Goodheart, I think, shares all of these stabilities, just as he shares many of the anti-deconstructionist arguments that follow from them. He also cites, first, an Arnoldian "theology that still operates unconsciously in our belief in the power and value of literature" (12) and thereby "using the language of transcendence in appreciations of literature" (26); second, the "substantial otherness of a text" (103), its "plenitude" (141) and "power and appeal" (133), and "the undeconstructible self that writes" it (133); third, and above all, "a residual instinctive commitment to literary value" and to "the disreputable, if not discredited, transcendental value-making agency" (128), from which derives "an evaluative social and literary criticism" (173). For, "any activity, including the activity of deconstructing all activities, is founded on interests and values that constitute the origins of the activity" (175); moreover, even "skeptical scrutiny may come to rest in a clarification of values that may be immune to endless deconstruction" (179).

From this familiar, still potent stance Goodheart comments on and interrogates three manifestations of the skeptic disposition in contemporary criticism: Roland Barthes's post-structuralism; Stanley Fish's unstable texts and interpretive communities; and Derridean decon-

struction, especially that of Paul de Man. As background to this commentary and interrogation, he retells three stories: the recent history of literary theory (3-11); the "saving secularization that tries to disengage spiritual (i.e., symbolic) meaning from the dogmatism of literal belief" (108) and shifts the "transcendental site" (41) from heaven to earth; and Barthes's "career as a demystifier" (56) haunted by "the monster of totality" (87).

In his critical analysis of skepticism Goodheart argues three kinds of flaw: that this skepticism is against experience, that it dichotomizes needlessly, and that it contradicts itself in various ways. First, and essential to both sides of the skeptical argument is "the mind's resistance to the 'truth' of 'nothingness'" (26): "That the text is an emptiness is hardly self-evident; in fact, it is plainly counterintuitive and opposed to common sense, as post-structuralists would be the first to admit. Indeed, the counterintuitive and uncommonsensical character of the view makes it a goad to literary theory" (9). Reinforcing this kind of common sense experience are, on one hand, "an emanation or trace of the transcendent mystery from which we are estranged" (26), and on the other hand, empirical or phenomenological doubts of "the exemplary character of this particular 'metaphoric activity'" offered as deconstructive evidence.

"But why must it be either/or?" (109) asks Goodheart: "What I object to is a dogmatism that conceives plenitude or emptiness, wholeness or fragmentation, teleology or randomness as metaphysical priorities rather than alternative possibilities for different consciousnesses, or even within a single consciousness" (179). This objection to needless dichotomy attacks every stage of the skeptical argument. On value: "It is an odd consequence of an all-or-nothing mentality to repudiate humanist values because they are inadequate as an antidote to evil" (31). On objectivity: "One may hold a view of the imagination and intelligence as transforming or refractory faculties without denying an objective reality external to consciousness" (13). On subjectivity: "It does not follow, however, from the problematic character of our subjectivity that we must abandon it to the corrosive acid of dogmatic skepticism" (14). On the text: "The distance between interpreter and what is being interpreted does not require the view that the text does not have an intrinsic structure" (98). And on significance: "The fact of difference between intention and actualization does not extinguish meaning" (137).

Goodheart argues that this skepticism is also flawed by self-contradiction. At times its very tone is self-contradictory: "It is a curious fact that contemporary critics who argue for the indeterminacy of the text often assert their own views with remarkable confi-

dence, even arrogance" (86). Other contradictions are avoided only by refusing certain logical consequences. For Barthes, "the *néant* has been exempt from a scrutiny that discovers arbitrariness and artificiality in every other term" (60). "I suspect that Fish stops short of offering a comprehensive theory of interpretive community because he wishes to exempt it from the unstable and dependent status of texts" (95). De Man, however, willingly takes deconstruction's own self-deconstruction as "evidence for the deconstructive view" (119), enlisting it on the side of his argument. For others such self-deconstruction fatally discounts whatever authority de Man's argument may claim.

This brings us to skepticism's final self-contradiction for Goodheart, its claims, often implicit or even unwitting, to various kinds of authority traditionally attributable to discourse. As to its form, "for all its suspicion of truth claims, deconstructionist thought usually has a resemblance to the truth it has deconstructed: it, too, is capable of intelligibility, despite the stylistic exertions of deconstructionists" (127). And so to its foundations, "I have tried to show that even in the thoroughgoing skepticism of deconstruction the values and interest that determine it (e.g., rigor, sophistication) of necessity have their source in an undeconstructible authoritative space beyond skeptical activity itself" (131).

If these are the flaws of the skeptic disposition, what are its costs? It risks the same abuse as other theories, but perhaps more so: "Certainly in the hands of epigoni and graduate students who possess neither the experience nor the conviction of deconstructive skepticism, deconstruction may become an absurd and wholly unjustified mechanical exercise" (179). Goodheart also finds more serious costs: first, "our value-making power, which is the secular meaning of transcendence" (14), and "the very activity of value-making" (32); second, "the thematic variety of texts" (119), the "knowledge of our experience of the world" (127) they might offer, and their "qualities of imagination, feeling, and intellect" (133); third, "all literary pretensions to depth, transcendence, interiority: all the terms that denote presence" (25); and last, "the social purpose of literature and literary study" (27), "social criticism of whatever inspiration (literary, historical, philosophical)" (173). All these costs Goodheart, by implication, will not pay; nor, he implies, should we.

Finally, how does Goodheart answer the skeptic disposition by example? First, by the obvious counter-example of Kenneth Burke and the much less obvious one of Northrop Frye. "It is possible to be an anti-theological skeptic without being a demystifier or deconstructionist Burke's disposition is at once skeptical and constitutive" (150-51). As for Frye, despite his "astonishing work of theoretical con-

struction, . . . Frye, unlike the structuralists, remains a traditional humanist" (4-5), for whom science "may be no more than a theological instrument to articulate the plenitude of literature as a whole" (53).

Second, by the example of Goodheart himself: both the substance of his discourse, which I have tried to convey, and its persuasive qualities, two above all. Many of his brief observations speak with near-epigrammatic, near-proverbial, near-witty clarity, sense, and force: "The pedagogues of culture are wary of pedagogical virtues" (18); "Deconstructionists deny the faith, not from empiricist premises, but from a counterfaith in the void" (37); "Having nothing but the present, the temptation to become an accomplice of the present is overwhelming" (63); "The undeconstructible self that writes circumscribes the deconstructive assault on the text" (133); "The conviction of plentiude is, of course, not susceptible of proof, but neither is the conviction of emptiness" (170).

Other, longer passages gather and convey the analytic balance, polemical seriousness, and concern to be comprehended that animate *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* throughout. Here, to conclude, are two such passages:

Why should we be *persuaded* by an interpretation (as distinguished from being impressed by its ingenuity) if we don't believe that it corresponds—or better, responds—to a presence in the text? Whether such a view is naive or not, that is what it means to be persuaded (102).

Of course, no amount of deconstructive skepticism can dissolve the need to remedy illiteracy, or to criticize moral and political falsehood, or to discriminate between a successful and failed work of art, though to the extent that deconstruction is persuasive, it may dissolve the will to satisfy the need. (38)

Postscript, by a Sub-Sub-Reviewer: One image applied to the relational (hence insubstantial?) structure of linguistic (hence literary?) "reality" is that of Ariadne/Arachne's web/thread.⁶ Caught if/as we are within this web, many of us—I hope, all—still have "texts" we cannot say with a steady voice. Just before the final catastrophe of *Moby-Dick*, "Ahab dropped a tear into the sea" (Chapter 132, "The Symphony"). Such moments, parts of even greater wholes, are another answer to unduly dogmatic versions of the skeptic disposition in contemporary criticism.

NOTES

1. "The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 261-82.

2. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 150.
3. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 8, 21.
4. *In Defence of the Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982) 5; *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), vii.
5. M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (Spring 1977) 435 (soon to be collected with related essays); Wayne Booth, *Critical Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 34, 97, 219-32; Denis Donoghue, *Ferocious Alphabets* (Boston: Little Brown, 1981) 206; Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 62, 207, 239.
6. J. Hillis Miller, "Ariadne's Thread," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (Autumn 1976) 57-77; Jonathan Arac, et al, *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 11-14, 86-87; Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel" 434-36.