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## The Literary Crisis: The Nuclear Crisis

The most significant events of our time are the invention, use and proliferation of nuclear weapons. Literary criticism regularly has ignored the nuclear fact. In her recent article, "Lifton's Law and the Teaching of Literature," Gillian Thomas suggests that "we must begin by examining the ways in which our own modes of thinking and expression have been deformed and brutalized by living in the nuclear age" (14). In this paper I attempt to begin such an examination by describing some of the connections between literary criticism and nuclearism and some of the dilemmas for criticism which arise from these links. I agree with Thomas that by acknowledging the interactions between the nuclear peril and our activities as critics and teachers of literature we can begin to loosen ourselves from the paralysis deterring us from being fully alive in this profession.

The development of the atomic bomb, its use on Japan and the physical and psychic aftermath of those events, coincided with the intensification of critics' attention to the text exclusively. This coincidence is not fortuitous: they were swept up in the sudden society-wide awakening and the subsequent society-wide inattention which occurred. As Paul Boyer documents in his book *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, within two months after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, writers, broadcasters, politicians, scientists and the public had articulated every aspect of the nuclear consciousness with which we are today familiar, except the concept of Nuclear Winter. Shortly after this extraordinarily quick and pervasively felt illumination (an exhaustive study in 1946 by the Social Science Research Council found that fully ninety-eight per cent of American adults knew about the bomb) the fearful consciousness diminished. It resurfaced in the mid-1950s, faded in 1963, and emerged again in the late

1970s (22 and 352-60). Writers and critics in common with everyone, then, experience these swings of awakening and sleeping.

The most widely accepted explanation for the diminution of awareness is that it is a form of denial called psychic numbing. Robert Jay Lifton depicts psychic numbing in *Indefensible Weapons: The Political and Psychological Case Against Nuclearism* as a combination of the blocking of images which create too much stress, with the absence of images because of a lack of prior experience. Ultimately the effect of psychic numbing, both individually and culturally, is to exclude feeling from life (103).

It is important to understand that the public's receding consciousness of the nuclear peril is not simply a spontaneous response to the fearful reality; the State actively fosters what Jonathan Schell in *The Fate of the Earth* calls "the strange double life of the world" (149). The nuclear states' strategies to suppress consciousness include emphasising civilian uses of atomic energy, and trying to convince people that the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction, the deterrence theory, will work to protect them. In addition, governments admonish citizens to act reasonably within the overall insanity and to let the government handle these (unpatriotic) fears at the bargaining table. With these strategies the state deliberately obfuscates the underlying insane reality with jargon and other forms of "misinformation," leading people to believe that because of the complexities, the whole matter had best be left to the experts. Should one decide that government is wrong in its reliance on nuclear weapons, and decide to express such dissent, the state is fully prepared to back up its position with policies, delays, palliatives, even confessions on the part of its officials that they are powerless to change the situation. In common with everyone, literary critics are the victims of such state-induced confusion and apathy.

But in his collection of essays, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward W. Said adds an even more chilling dimension to the role of literary critics in the nuclear madness:

. . . it is our technical skill as critics and intellectuals that the culture has wanted to neutralize, and if we have cooperated in this project, perhaps unconsciously, it is because that is where the money has been. (173)

Publishing and teaching ingenious refinements of texts in a literary universe with little critical reference to the outside world have been the activities central to many English departments. Said maintains that between critics, who engage only in "formal, restricted analysis," and the State, extends a chain of validation which is also the conduit

through which funding is distributed, but in reverse, of course, from the State to the textually-absorbed critics (175)

According to a number of influential books that have recently been published, the chief problem for literary critics and theorists now is whether and how to incorporate history in the study of texts. Frank Lentricchia describes this ongoing crisis in his book of 1980, *After the New Criticism*:

The crisis is generated . . . by, on the one hand, a continuing urge to essentialize literary discourse by making it a unique kind of language—a vast, enclosed, textual and semantic preserve—and, on the other hand, by an urge to make literary language ‘relevant’ by locating it in larger contexts of discourse and history. . . . The traces of the New Criticism are found . . . in the repeated and often extremely subtle denial of history by a variety of contemporary theorists. (xiii)

To demonstrate this denial is the fundamental concern of *After the New Criticism*. For example, Lentricchia begins his analysis of the most important theoretical documents which purport to reject the New Criticism with Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), the basic tenet of which is that literature is made out of literature. According to Lentricchia,

For Frye actual history can be nothing but a theatre of dehumanization, a place of bondage and torture . . . [W]hat is celebrated . . . is a fantastical utopian alternative to the perception of a degraded social existence: a human discoursing free of all contingency, independent of all external forces, a discoursing empowered by unconditional human desire. (26)

Noting Frank Kermode’s argument in *Romantic Image*, that by the writings of Kant and Coleridge “we were sunk in aesthetic isolationism,” Lentricchia shows that while the New Criticism overtly intensified the isolation, most subsequent theorists continue to turn away from historical contexts:

Whether New Critical or poststructuralist, the formalist critic is concerned to demonstrate the history-transcending qualities of the text, and whether he wields the textual cleaver of difference or that of irony, he portrays the writer as a type of Houdini, a great escape artist whose deepest theme is freedom, whose great and repetitious feat is the defeat of history’s manacles. (185)

Said agrees with Lentricchia’s insights about contemporary literary theory, similarly depicting it as a closed system. Said channels this awareness towards the world outside the text:

For the most part our critical ethos is formed by a pernicious analytic of blind demarcation by which, for example, imagination is separated from thought, culture from power, history from form, texts from everything that is *hors texte*, and so forth. In addition, we misuse the idea of what method is, and we have fallen into the trap of believing that method is sovereign and can be systematic without also acknowledging that method is always part of some larger ensemble of relationships headed and moved by authority and power. (169)

Lifton describes three major “Nuclear Illusions” in the opening section of *Indefensible Weapons*. In addition to the illusion of limit and control and the illusion of foreknowledge, he discusses the illusion of rationality of which the self-referentiality of literary studies is a particular instance. Within the “basic structural absurdity” that in the process of destroying their enemies, various nuclear-armed states are prepared at a moment’s notice to destroy virtually all of humankind (including, as they seem to need reminding, themselves,) people are urged to behave rationally, to keep on with business as usual.

The illusion is of a ‘systems rationality’—of a whole structure of elements, each in logical relation to the other components and to the whole. We are dealing here with nothing less than the logic of madness. (21-22)

Analogous to the nuclear “systems rationality” illusion is formalist literary theorists’ insistence on isolating the text from outside factors, particularly, as I will show, the nuclear factor, which undermines the traditional assumptions of literary studies and obliges these studies to focus exclusively on the literary universe. Another example of this illusion’s influence is the way the English departments of universities have conformed to the model of the Sciences—rationalized themselves, as it were. Most obvious, perhaps, is the emphasis on research and publication as the primary measures of their members’ performance; but also, in their mimicking of the supposedly value-free “scientific” attitude, English departments follow the model of the nuclear “systems rationality” Lifton characterizes as the “logic of madness.”

With “post-structuralism” the madness spreads, according to Terry Eagleton. He argues that post-structuralists’ tendency to regard the world as itself textual and therefore as problematically indeterminable is an extension of the contemporary isolation of texts from the world. Post-structuralism, Eagleton writes:

reaches out and colonizes [material] history, rewriting it in its own image, viewing famines, revolutions, soccer matches and sherry trifle as

yet more undecidable 'text.' Since prudent men and women are not prone to take action in situations whose significance is not reasonably clear, this viewpoint is not without its implications for one's social and political life. (146)

In his analysis of the condition of literary studies, Said locates the relevant "authority and power," which literary methodology serves, in Western nuclear-armed states, much as Lifton does, substituting for "systems rationality" the phrase "a liberal consensus":

the formal, restricted analysis of literary-aesthetic works validates the culture, the culture validates the humanist, the humanist the critic, and the whole enterprise the State. Thus authority is maintained by virtue of the cultural process, and anything more than refining power is denied the refining critic. By the same token, it has been true that 'literature' as a cultural agency has become more and more blind to its actual complications with power. That is the situation we need to comprehend. (175)

A necessary step towards such comprehension is to acknowledge our governments' most meaningful activity: the development and employment of the nuclear arsenal.

A number of factors in addition to their consciously isolating themselves from "the world" contribute to literary critics' apparent helpless passivity in the presence of the nuclear dilemma. Inherent in the commonly used label for the present period, "Postmodern," is its fundamental orientation to the past, to the Modern period. This characteristic of the term is emblematic of the practice of teachers and critics of literature, as well as of many writers today. One devastating effect of nuclearism is its drastically undermining our sense of the future. To hold in one's mind the reality that at any moment our whole world could end—meaning not merely our individual deaths, but our entire species' extinction by a nuclear cataclysm—is to displace the sense, available to all human beings prior to 1945, that our world will continue even if we personally are dead. Schell elaborates on the significance of this condition:

Since the future generations are specifically what is at stake, all human activities that assume the future are undermined directly. To begin with, desire, love, childbirth, and everything else that has to do with the biological renewal of the species have been administered a powerful shock by the nuclear peril. (155-56)

Not only has this radical impoverishment occurred physically and emotionally, but concomitantly in the realm of symbolism. One aspect of the way traditional symbolic relationships have become proble-

matic may be suggested by the following examples. Under the burden of the nuclear threat, marriage, the central action of comic literature, cannot stand up as the symbolic promise of society's continuance. Regarded in the context of the total extinction that nuclear weapons threaten, even death, which in the past could give increased significance to the hero's life, loses meaning. Apocalyptic imagery, so effectively exploited by writers in the past, becomes in the Nuclear Age almost a mockery of our real prospects. Schell sums up the dilemma for traditional artistic aims in these words:

if it wishes to truthfully reflect the reality of its period, whose leading feature is the jeopardy of the human future, art will have to go out of existence, while if it insists on trying to be timeless it has to ignore this reality—which is nothing other than the jeopardy of human time—and so, in a sense, tell a lie. (165)

The dilemma is similar for criticism. Either we read literature's symbols with their pre-nuclear significations—another motive for sealing literary discourse into a history-denying discipline—or we acknowledge the nuclear threat and face the emptiness of traditional symbolism: face, in fact, the impossibility of any lasting meaning which involves futurity. Besides avoidance or an Existentialist despair, what sort of artistic or critical resolution is possible in these circumstances? Schell maintains, citing the visual art criticism of Harold Rosenberg, that the blurring of the distinctions between art and artist and between art and other activities is one reaction to the dilemma. (164) Peter Schwenger's work on literature which involves nuclear weapons is a rare exception to the response of critics who are busily avoiding the issue of meaning by concentrating exclusively on form. Obviously this avoidance is understandable, considering the ominousness of our circumstances. As the poet Carolyn Forché put it: "There is no metaphor for the end of the world and it is horrible to search for one" (Boyer 363).

Besides in the area of symbols, literature has been robbed by nuclearism of its traditional structures, causing another radical dilemma for the critic. Similar to the comic ending involving a marriage, the pastoral pattern—in C. L. Barber's phrase, the path "through release to clarification" (*Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*)—does not function fully in the presence of the nuclear threat. I have mentioned the loss of significance for individual death in the context of humanity's extinction: the loss is comparable for the genre of tragedy. As Lifton remarks, "We have no experience with a narrative of poten-

tial extinction" (6); again the choice is to bury oneself in the past or to face the absurdity.

Particular words too have become problematic. The word "war" in the nuclear context is a misnomer. The philosopher John Somerville states why and proposes a replacement:

What we are dealing with is, first of all, a massive case of linguistic self-deception which arises out of the fact that we have gone on using an old and familiar word—war—to denote a new thing that has a superficial resemblance to the old thing called war, but which in reality has been transformed into something qualitatively different. . . .

That is, whenever we spoke of war prior to World War II we were referring to an activity that presupposed the possibility of a human future. . . . Since we already have a series of nouns which denote successively wider ranges of killing—suicide for killing oneself, infanticide for killing infants, genocide for killing national or ethnic groups—and since nuclear weapons can now kill all human beings and obliterate all human creations in one relatively brief conflict, it seems appropriate to call such a conflict *omnicide*. (3-4)

The word "peace," much-touted by believers in nuclear deterrence, is also an erroneous usage. From stories my grandfather told me about his experiences in World War I, I learned of the severe tension the soldiers had to endure because of the knowledge that at any instant a shell might land and explode in their trench. The precarious vulnerability of which we all are victims right now is surely more like an experience of war than peace. One could advance a similar objection to contemporary uses of "security" and "defence."

In addition to the uncritical application of archaic terms, language is perverted by the unconscious acceptance and use of euphemisms deliberately proliferated by the nuclear powers. One of the most striking early examples is the terminology for the first bombs: the result of the Alamogordo test explosion of July 16, 1945 was encoded as "The baby is born"; the Hiroshima bomb was called "Little Boy," and the Nagasaki bomb "Fat Man." Later euphemisms lack the gruesome irony and therefore more easily become habits of thought and understanding. The manufacturing and deploying of nuclear armaments by various countries is sportily called the nuclear arms "race." By shifting metaphors, supposedly these weapons become a protective umbrella. The appellation "Star Wars" glamorizes a sinister escalation of the nuclear peril. Lifton says that by such linguistic abuse "we *domesticate* these weapons in our language and attitudes. Rather than feel their malignant actuality, we render them benign" (106).

Schell describes another pervasive corruption of language, observing that we have all come to live a lie: "the pretense that life lived on top of a nuclear stockpile can last" He goes on:

Meanwhile, we are encouraged not to tackle our predicament but to inure ourselves to it: to develop a special, enfeebled vision, which is capable of overlooking the hugely obvious, a special, sluggish nervous system, which is conditioned not to react even to the most extreme and urgent peril . . . In this timid, crippled thinking, 'realism' is the title given to beliefs whose most notable characteristic is their failure to recognize the chief reality of the age, the pit into which our species threatens to jump; 'utopian' is the term of scorn for any plan that shows serious promise of enabling the species to keep from killing itself (if it is 'utopian' to want to survive, then it must be 'realistic' to be dead); and the political arrangements that keep us on the edge of annihilation are deemed 'moderate,' and are found to be 'respectable,' whereas new arrangements, which might enable us to draw a few steps back from the brink, are called 'extreme' or 'radical.' (161-62)

Finally, the term "Postmodernism," commonly used to denote the literary period from about 1950 to the present, betrays even through its compounded blandness some salient features of the criticism that makes do with it. As I mentioned, the term is fundamentally oriented to the past. While I recognize that period labels are never entirely accurate, to me the most objectionable quality of this term, "Postmodern," is that it says nothing directly about the actualities it purports to label. Instead, "Postmodern" clouds with pseudo-technical jargon the most characteristic actuality of our time: the invention, use and proliferation of nuclear weaponry. By contrast, then, I suggest we use the term "The Nuclear Age" for this period as a precise indicator which places literature in its appropriate historical and cultural context.

The political analysis by Robert Falk in his section of *Indefensible Weapons*, contains the following sentence:

The challenges posed by nuclearism are overwhelmingly questions of values, belief systems, and underlying imagery of human destiny; specialized rational discourse contributes little to the resolution of such questions. (136)

As I have suggested, literary discourse contributes little because often it is almost entirely self-absorbed. But the questions Falk raises, it seems to me, are highly appropriate as subjects for students of literature. Are these not the sorts of issues that we are trained to address, albeit normally within the confines of purely literary study? This confinement is not only unnecessary, but to acquiesce in it is basically immoral. As Falk writes:

To write about nuclear weapons is inevitably to adopt a cause. . . . It is also a matter of integrity. To pretend dispassion is to mask a commitment at some level of consciousness to a continued reliance on these infernal weapons of mass destruction. (128)

The cause which the writer about nuclear weapons adopts is the cause of the future of human life: a cause about which nobody can be complacent. However, the literary critic's isolation in textual studies not only parallels the nuclear "logic of madness," but reaffirms it. Utterly paradoxically, the literary critic and teacher subscribes to and actively, because of her or his educative role, perpetuates the nonchalant—uncritical—attitude which is the lock confining us to the state of nuclear insanity.

The key to freeing ourselves—as critics, as teachers, as human beings—is to expose and to challenge the absurdity wherever we find its influence; and as I have tried to show, nuclear absurdity is evident in many ways in our professional as well as in our personal lives.

Language and literature are not abstract phenomena with no bearing on the material world; they are the basic tools and components of consciousness. As anyone who has visited a place where many people are illiterate may be impressed, reading and writing—at all levels of sophistication—are powerful instruments of liberation. Literary critics and teachers have vital roles to play in exposing the nuclear "logic of madness." To recognize, to accept, and to act on this responsibility are of the utmost urgency.

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