

The Story about the Story

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Toward a Fusion

These days, the debate over how to write about reading is a cold affair: a de-militarized zone. I avoid the terms *literature* and *criticism* here, and perhaps even *debate* is too hifalutin a word to describe what has amounted to a decades-long pissing match between creative writers and critics. The current steely silence is evidence only of empty bladders; the combatants have become preoccupied with internal skirmishes.

Not long ago, Cynthia Ozick, weighing in on a writers' spat between Jonathan Franzen and Ben Marcus in *Harper's*, announced that there was no good literary criticism happening despite the ongoing deluge from academic presses. Franzen and Marcus, arguing over how far fiction should bend toward publishing's fickle sun, weren't good models, either, Ozick said, and her proclamation was as much plea as elegy.

Yet Ozick herself (*Art & Ardor*, *Fame & Folly*, etc.) is a pioneer of a wholly different kind of writing about reading, work that reads the self as closely as it reads the examined text and that is every bit as creative as it is critical. Writers are often *reviewers*—John Updike produced a smooth-flowing river of work, and Joyce Carol Oates's hurried affairs appear often enough—but there is as well a kind of personal literary analysis, criticism that contemplates rather than argues, and while it's never amounted to a formal trend or school, a consistent flow of this kind of response to

literature has trickled along like an underground stream all the while the piss battles poisoned the surface.

My assertion is this: a writer's model for how to write about reading is now in ascension, and it's largely the upshot of a debate conducted on the other side of the aisle.

I'm not a scholar and I don't claim to be able to cite all the battles in the history of literary criticism, but there have been a few important moments. In 1910, the critic J. E. Spingarn fired off "The New Criticism," an essay that used an offhand remark from Goethe to argue that criticism should limit its concerns to what a writer has attempted to express and how he has attempted to express it. T. S. Eliot lashed out at Spingarn, claiming that his treatment of dogmatic criticism was dogma itself and that "new criticism" was a misnomer precisely because it followed in the footsteps of all those Spingarn had cited: Benedetto Croce, Carlyle, Arnold, and Goethe. H. L. Mencken weighed in as well with "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," in which he agreed with Spingarn and dubbed him "Major Spingarn," true to the martial character of the debate.

It wasn't until decades later that people began to bat around the term "reader response" to describe what Spingarn ultimately called "creative criticism." But this flew far beneath the radar of theory-based criticism, which ruled the day until criticism sank into a period of soul-searching. Susan Sontag's clarion call "Against Interpretation" (1963) had asked what criticism would look like if it set out to "serve the work of art, not usurp its place," and almost twenty years later, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels offered the blunt trauma "Against Theory" (1982), in which they questioned assumptions about meaning and text that had come about in the post-World War II years and eventually suggested that the "theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end." A

year later, Terry Eagleton attempted to rechampion theory in *Literary Theory* (1983), but recanted in *After Theory* (2004). James Wood's *The Broken Estate* (1999) honed in on what was wrong. He noted the tendency of critics to regard themselves as sleuths and texts as criminals: "Having been caught out, the poem is triumphantly led off in golden chains; the detective writes up his report in hideous prose, making sure to flatter himself a bit, and then goes home to a well-deserved drink."

But Wood had even more to say. In 2005, in an essay in *N+1*, he gave voice to what writers had understood all along: the no-man's-land between creative writing and criticism is fertile ground:

Writers also properly remind us that a great deal of criticism is not in fact especially analytical but a kind of persuasive redescription. Sometimes to hear a poet or a fine critic read a poem aloud is to have been party to a critical act; there is a good reason after all, why writers have always been very interested in actors and acting—there is a sense in which the actor is the purest, the first critic. The written equivalent of the reading of a poem or a play aloud is the retelling of the literature one is talking about; the good critic has an awareness that criticism means, in part, telling a good story about the story you are criticizing.

How to achieve that retelling? There is a kind of writing through books rather than about them that we recognize in the greatest writer-critics. This writing-through is often achieved by using the language of metaphor and simile that art itself uses.

The essays collected here are evidence of the power of the writing-through that Wood describes. Out of the carnage of the critics' battle a new fusion has emerged. Or reemerged. Whichever. Currently, there are a few consistent venues for innovative essays about literature. *Tin House's* regular Lost and Found feature attempts to rescue out-of-print books from the critical dustbin; the *New Republic* and *Harper's* offer space to

criticism that celebrates subjectivity instead of repressing it; and the minuteman armies of literary magazines and online lit bloggers have more and more become a venue for inventive critical work. There are innovators among critics, as well. Fred Setterberg's blend of travel writing and criticism, *The Roads Taken*, won the AWP award for creative nonfiction in 1993, and Sven Birkerts has long been something of a critic dropped behind enemy lines—he hides in the jungle, makes his own crossbows, survives on wild boar, and has established his own private utopia where the close read and the personal essay live together in bliss.

Indeed, it's probably someone like Birkerts or Wood who ought to be introducing an anthology like this one. Which is not to say that I come to the project empty-handed. My own relationship with criticism began a long time ago with a study of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, the history of which, I think, captures many of the salient points of the critic-writer debate.

The Turn of the Screw caught my attention because even as a naïve young reader I sensed that something was not right with the simple read of the governess-narrator as a repressed spinster—the poster child of hysteria dangled carrotlike before the horse of psychoanalytic criticism. There was more there, I knew it. I began my research and discovered that *The Turn of the Screw*, pound for pound, might just be the most discussed text in the English language. (This is evidenced by Robin P. Hoople's *Distinguished Discord*, a treatment not of the book, but of its “critical tradition”—it's a two-hundred-fifty-page *catalog* of papers about what James thought to be a short story.) I eventually came to the conclusion that one hundred years of “tradition” had completely missed what James was writing about.

The debate over *The Turn of the Screw* is echoed in the essays included in this volume. James *loathed* critics. He claimed that critics heaped meanings onto his work to wriggle themselves out of their own “queer predicaments” (Geoff Dyer’s rant against criticism in the excerpt from *Out of Sheer Rage* printed here owes its fervor to James), and he called the prefaces to the New York Edition of his novels a “plea for criticism on other than infantile lines” (a sentiment Vladimir Nabokov repeats in his treatment of Franz Kafka in “The Metamorphosis”; Nabokov *loathed* Freud). James’s complaint in “The Art of Fiction” that critics of literature have “little interest for [its] producer” anticipates later debates over meaning and authorial intent (interest in the “producer” is precisely what compels Birkerts’s extremely close read in “On a Stanza by John Keats”), and the tendency of James scholars to ignore his own comments on *The Turn of the Screw* stirs up questions of authorship and the extratextual (Salman Rushdie’s tongue-in-cheek look at *The Wizard of Oz*, “Out of Kansas,” explores what he calls “the bugbear of modern criticism: the authorless text”). And so on and so forth, until I too came to the conclusion that maybe the whole business of criticism ought to be chucked.

Or maybe not.

Early in 2004, I wandered into the offices of the Critical Writing Program at the University of Pennsylvania, looking for adjunct work. I had one published book and was working on another, but I was living month to month. I was lucky that the head of the program, Val Ross, had once been an editor at *Esquire*. She wasn’t a knee-jerk academic. I was woefully unprepared for the meeting. I had hoped they might have some entry-level composition classes I could teach. They didn’t. It was a program designed to get students writing about whatever they actually cared about—imagine!—and as soon as I plopped

into the leather seat across from Val's desk, she prompted me to devise an entire course on the fly.

I didn't have enough time to think of a lie.

I mumbled something about having once written a personal essay on *The Turn of the Screw*—maybe something designed around a kind of “creative criticism” was possible? At that point, I'd never even heard of J. E. Spingarn.

“Sounds like a class!” Val said.

So I set out on a quest for creative criticism. I canvassed writers, readers, bookstore owners. Many had a favorite piece—some essay that had helped cement the idea of literature for them. I spent hours in libraries paging through the collected essays of notable authors: often there was one unique piece in which a writer approached literature from some kind of personal angle (Charles D'Ambrosio's look at J. D. Salinger through the lens of his own suicide-afflicted family in “Salinger and Sobs”) or, as with my work on James, attempted to resuscitate a text critics had left on the autopsy table (Wallace Stegner's retelling of a John Steinbeck short story in “On Steinbeck's Story ‘Flight’”). There were older book-length treatments (most prominent among them D. H. Lawrence's unclassifiable *Studies in Classic American Literature*) and newer book-length treatments (Alain de Botton's equally difficult to categorize *How Proust Can Change Your Life*). Almost invariably, the work touched on subjects that would have been verboten in a critical context: Walter Kirn stabbed a stern finger at his high school English teacher's rotten take on Salinger (“Good-bye, Holden Caulfield. I mean it. Go! Good-bye!”); E. B. White, despite *The Elements of Style*, acknowledged that in Thoreau the “quality of the ramble” is more important than grammar (“A Slight Sound at

Evening”); and Seamus Heaney admitted that, for him, the sound of Eliot is more important than the content (“Learning from Eliot”). Writers, I noticed, often stressed the tactile sensation of books. They rejected the “literary pilgrimage” (some even as they executed one), and they were perfectly comfortable saying that they simply liked a book—or disliked it. While critics tend to use literature to expose writers’ biographies, writers use biography to shed additional light onto the work. They are also comfortable with inconvenient realities, like the fact that we forget stories, or that a book *means* something different if you read it at eighteen and again at fifty. Writers set out to celebrate the work rather than exhaust it, and all the essays I found, in keeping with Wood, amounted to a story about a story. It was impossible to identify a common thread among them, but it was clear that they were all part of a movement—not a movement based on some critic’s theory, but one that emerged organically out of a common love and creative insight.

I see no way to examine the essays in *The Story About the Story: Great Writers Explore Great Literature*—kin on a broad spectrum—and find anything like a common denominator. You cannot tell me that Lawrence’s stream-of-consciousness (“Herman Melville’s ‘*Moby Dick*’”) has any direct connection with Robert Hass’s far more sober consideration (“Lowell’s Graveyard”). But you would be even harder pressed to link either to the dry, tenure-desperate prose of critics, who already have far too much say over how literature is perceived in the world. A better criticism has come around. And if this temporal splatter of essays does indeed indicate the emergence of a trend, then Spingarn’s advice “to have sensations in the presence of a work of art and express them” was a prophetic art in and of itself.