Forum

Ideology and Literary Studies: A Dilemma

To the Editor:

Though Frederick Crews (*PMLA*, 85, 1970, 423–28; 86, 1971, 280–81) appears to solve the problem of the relation of literary studies to ideology, his animadversions imply a program that actually conceals what remains an insoluble dilemma. If he talks plausibly about "the possibilities for vital knowledge" in criticism, in the end he offers only a new version of an old approach that allows a surrender of literature and criticism to ideology.

Because the issue is of continuing importance, let us uncover the program he would substitute for the one he finds almost everyone else unwittingly adhering to. What, for Crews, are the relations among literature, criticism, and history? The answer is complex. When he mentions "the waning historical vitality of the formalist paradigm" (in response to his critics) and deplores "an absence" in scholars "of feeling for historical dynamics" (in his original essay), he gives us clues to his program. "Formalist esthetics," he asserts, has done a valuable service by engaging in an "energetic critique of impressionism." But now, having done its duty, formalism must be replaced by something else, just as impressionism presumably did a service by providing a critique of whatever it replaced. By showing to be "both true and important" . . . "the root assumption that literature conveys class meaning," critics like Georg Lukács provide what is needed now. Crews, who has "feeling for historical dynamics," must see criticism as constantly in need of change as new historical circumstances arise. But if the history of criticism reveals changing assumptions about literature, it also lets us see critics in successive ages wrestling again and again with similar problems, and only a few critics—perhaps including Lukács, perhaps not—qualifying as new in any radical sense.

This view of criticism as constantly in need of change has serious consequences: criticism must answer to matters other than literature, with literature itself denied any special nature of its own. The clue here lies in Crews's statement about Lukács' demonstration of the "truth" of an "assumption" about literature and class meaning. If Lukács has *assumed* "that literature conveys class meaning" and then developed a criticism from this assumption, he has not demonstrated a truth but has only argued in a circle. But in similarly circular fashion any critic may demonstrate the truth of his assumptions.[1] If what Crews means is only that Lukács has finally demonstrated the truth in what some critics have long assumed, then the same should hold as well for the parallel "truths" the formalists and even the impressionists demonstrated. Surely—and Crews seems to grant as much—the formalists must have had some claim to truth if they were able to provide their "energetic critique of impressionism." But if literature can thus accommodate Lukács' truth and the opposed truth of the formalists, its nature becomes obscure indeed. If for Crews literature is no more than what our assumptions make of it—if it exists for whatever social or other uses we can make of it, having no unique function of its own—the word *true* becomes meaningless when he applies it to criticism.

Probably, in Hegelian fashion, Crews would see Lukács as having arrived at a final truth about literature and class meaning after the only *partial* truths of earlier critics. But instead of a synthesis of various truths about literature, this is a *reduction* of literature to a single truth. When he charges that the criticism to be displaced promotes "the illusion of present classlessness—an illusion whose effective function is to ensure compliance with disguised class governance," he would—disclosing his own ideology—assign criticism a role in the class struggle: the "truth" revealed in reducing literature to class meaning would help bring about an actual classless society. When he invites us to recognize the "tacit political assumptions" supporting "disguised class governance," he is at the same time urging us to adopt new assumptions, elevating them as a new "truth" that will enable us in our way to combat such governance.[2]

But what would ultimately become of literature and criticism after the revolution? In the classless society criticism would have no role: having elucidated class meaning in literature and helped the revolution come to pass, it would have performed its function and could be dispensed with. Literature itself would disappear, having performed *its* function. With no classes for literature to refer to, the class meaning that Lukács has enabled us to discern in literature would be in fact *no* meaning. Whatever literature there might be after the revolution would be utterly different from what we know now.

To extrapolate further from Crews's hints, after the revolution—and after literature as we know it would be of interest only to surviving antiquarians—"formalist esthetics" might have a place: it could once

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again teach us to value art as "a minuet of inert symbols"; with nothing to escape from, the apparent escapism of a criticism "stressing the formal harmonies, resolved differences, and sententious wisdom that emerge at the . . . end of the artistic process" would be entirely fitting for the bland, Houyhnhnm-like poetry of the new society. In short, Crews regards literature as having a content ("class meaning") and a pleasing form (the "abstract harmonies" overemphasized by formalists in their retreat from life). When he "urges . . . that literature be enjoyed for itself," the very term *enjoyed* implies the strikingly old-fashioned form-content separation at the heart of his program: the enjoyment is redeemed by the important social message. Though he may seem only to be objecting to current academic criticism—"practiced without enthusiasm and even with a certain disbelief"—he offers a program heavily freighted with ideology. With form and content split, literature quickly slides into ideology (here "class meaning"), which it becomes perverse to ignore.

Hence the principal antagonist is "formalist esthetics": Crews's formalist ignores the all-important, essentially ideological content of literature for the seductions of "abstract harmonies." Yet this formalist is an odd hybrid, part New Critic but mostly straw man. Since anyone with "feeling for historical dynamics" would not regard the New Critics as still influential, in his original essay Crews refers to them in the past tense, insisting the enemy is not the New Criticism, even though his response to Lawrence Hyman makes it clear that he has in mind as a point of departure for his program just this criticism after all. He encumbers it, however, with foolish and irresponsible notions it never entertained. For example, he mentions "the quasi-divine autonomy attributed to [the writer] by formalist esthetics." But such "autonomy" would make the writer different from other men not only in degree but in kind as well—strange nonsense indeed from critics who tried to keep poems distinct from poets!

Those whom Murray Krieger has called contextualists[3] did, it is true, argue in various ways that a *poem* might attain autonomy (but not "quasi-divine") only by virtue of the tensions or ironies it was somehow able to contain without apparent reduction. Cleanth Brooks argued that the good poem becomes "a simulacrum of reality . . . by *being* an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience."[4] Instead of regarding art as "a minuet of inert symbols," these critics maintained the paradox of the autonomous poetic context as recovering, in John Crowe Ransom's terms, the fullness of the "world's body." When Crews says, "The writer's real freedom . . . is his ability to *condense*, represent, and *impart meaningfulness to* tensions that would seem irreconcilable to the rest of us" (italics added), he seeks in the poem the rape of that "body," the "mere statement" or the "mere abstraction from experience." The class meaning he follows Lukács in finding—or the "psychological knowledge" he desires—is clearly the "statement" or "abstraction" to which the contextualists refused to reduce the poem. The formalist Brooks rather than Crews, the searcher for "vital knowledge," can maintain that in literature "those tensions are *not* wholly transcended." In addition, Crews actually reduces the poem to its social and psychological antecedents and consequences. When he says, "whatever we know about literature is knowledge of how minds behave in reaction to certain invitations and constraints," he extends his reductions even to a denial of the verbal in literature. If the contextualists at times seem to attribute miraculous powers to the word, Crews makes words—and the *art* of literature—at most the coating on his doctrinal pill.

Crews's program hides a contradiction between the claims of ideology and the critic's obligations to objectivity and truth. He ably exposes for us the dilemma facing the critic "impatient with the whole ideological consensus that has prevailed since World War II": how can one remain objective and neutral when objectivity and neutrality may constitute support of the very consensus he is impatient with, when anything short of active opposition may well count as active collaboration? Recent talk about a silent majority reminds us that objectivity can be made to serve ideological ends—or sanction the use of napalm on Asian children. So, urging us to recognize our "tacit political assumptions," Crews would move us toward "scholarship's ideal of shedding prejudice." But can we "correct any political inhibition on our objectivity" without also resorting to a "politicization of learning" that would in effect replace one set of prejudices with another? Crews seeks a way out of this dilemma by reducing literature to a political content that would make literary studies basically ideological yet save for them the appearance of objectivity. When he says that Lukács shows "the root assumption that literature conveys class meaning" to be "both true and important," he has only found a way of letting ideology masquerade as objective truth. He has solved the dilemma of the politically aware critic by the self-contradictory expedient of replacing one "political inhibition on our objectivity" with another: unless we accept such reductions as Crews makes, objectivity and ideology must remain separate in literary studies, however inconvenient this separation may be. Perhaps, with Lawrence Hyman, many of us must "march behind banners and posters with three-word solutions for our

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problems," hoping that we do not confound such slogans with the "life in a deeper sense" created and discovered for us in our best literature.

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Notes

[1] I treat this point extensively in my essay "From Imitation to Rhetoric: The Chicago Critics, Wayne C. Booth, and *Tom Jones*" (to appear in forthcoming issue of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*).

[2] Crews never mentions a specific critic in his blanket characterization of contemporary criticism. When he speaks of criticism based on "the illusion of present classlessness," does he have in mind Northrop Frye? For Frye "the central myth of art," the dream literature reflects, is the classless society: "the end of social effort, the innocent world of fulfilled desire, the free human society" (*Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology*, New York: Harcourt, 1963, p. 18). Though Crews would engage criticism in making the "myth" a reality, Frye sometimes takes pains to keep the utopian strain in his theory from turning explicitly political (see, e.g., *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957, pp. 347–49).

[3] *The New Apologists for Poetry* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), Chs. viii, ix.

[4] *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), p. 194.

Mr. Crews replies:

My paper on the distorting effects of ideology, first delivered to an MLA meeting in 1969, continues to serve as a diagnostic inkblot for some members to weave stories around. John Ross Baker rebuts beliefs that I neither mentioned nor implied nor secretly harbored. Like Morton Bloomfield before him, he chooses to doubt my plain statements about meeting the ideals of scholarship and instead depicts me as cynically "reducing literature to a political content that would make literary studies basically ideological yet save for them the appearance of objectivity." To his mind, a plea for scholars to watch out for their class presuppositions must entail a "program" to do away with non-Marxist methods, a subordination of literature and criticism to the cause of revolution, a belief that literature has "no unique function of its own," a diminishing of art to "the coating on [the] doctrinal pill," and even "a denial of the verbal in literature." My mention of Georg Lukács in one subordinate clause yields the inference that I am a disciple of Lukács' "final truth." In short, Baker's Rorschach response is, "Looks like a commie to me."

Why is it so difficult for my colleague to address himself to my manifest argument? His one glancing allusion to it suggests an answer. Instead of denying that American scholars are often influenced in the ways I set forth, he implicitly agrees with me. If we tried to make allowance for our ideological bias, he says, we would only "replace one set of prejudices with another." We do have a set of prejudices, then—but why worry about them? It's easier to pretend that the only alternative is revolutionary utilitarianism. Hence the effort to hold up a Marxist bogeyman, bearing my name, who wants to help "bring about an actual classless society" by "reducing literature to class meaning." Nothing in my essay supports this interpretation, and my remarks about "simpleminded and venal" socialist criticism that "must flatter a bureaucracy and meet a doctrinal test" indicate my opinion of ideological orthodoxy. But Baker is concerned to circumvent my ideas, not to understand them.

My view of left-wing plans for the English curriculum no longer has to be surmised through visionary methods, but can be found in print: "Offing Culture: Literary Study and the Movement," *TriQuarterly*, 23/24 (Winter/Spring 1972), 34–56. Baker, if he looks at that essay, will think I've completely changed my mind—but that's because he has completely misread "Do Literary Studies Have an Ideology?"

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Timelag and the Forum

To the Editor:

W. B. Carnochan (*PMLA*, 87, 1972, 1,125–26) expresses his puzzlement that a commentary by William Kupersmith on an article of his was published in Notes, Documents, and Critical Comment rather than in the Forum. I think I can clear up the puzzle, and both Carnochan and Kupersmith are entitled to an explanation.

The manuscript of Kupersmith's comment was sent to *PMLA* in the spring of 1970 and recommended for publication—not, of course, that such recommendation implied editorial agreement with Kupersmith's as against Carnochan's position; simply that it seemed a lively and well-presented challenge that deserved to be printed. At that time the Forum was not in existence—it first appeared in January 1971—and in the normal course of editorial processing the piece was channeled into Notes, Documents, and Critical Comment. Hence it suffered the usual timelag of ordinary contributions to *PMLA*—in this case, two years—before it was published.

It was precisely in order to reduce this timelag between the appearance of an article and the publication of controversial commentary on it—and of

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