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**THE PROBLEM OF MAKING JUDGMENTS  
IN AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES**

A great amount of literary criticism gets published in America these days. But it also gives rise to a number of questions. The primary emphasis in critical studies remains on production itself, not on any values that it might foster.

P. Blackmur wrote in one of his essays published in *"The Lion and the Honeycomb"* (1964), "What we are very largely up to in practice, and to a considerable extent in theory, is the hardening of the mind into a set of unrelated methodologies without the contolling advantage of a fixed body of knowledge, a fixed faith, or a fixed purpose" [1, p. 178].

The matter of university and college instructors' concern is that evaluative criticism – a criticism based on the making of judgments and striving for real knowledge has almost disappeared. Students are not encouraged to make judgments and to believe that some works are more important, more vital for our time, than others.

Some think that the state of criticism is part of a general crisis in the humanities. The natural and social sciences have displaced the authority of the humanities; few students wanted to study the classic texts of the Western tradition, answers and solutions were difficult to find. In order to "cure" the humanities, scholars decided to study the connections between the universities and "industrial culture". In Richard Ohmann's opinion, literary work develops in complicity with the demands and goals of advanced capitalism.

He insists on the importance of humanities. Universities have traditionally attempted to teach – even though through the agency of graduate assistants - the skills of organizing information, drawing conclusions, making reports, solving problems, seeking objectivity, conducting persuasive arguments, producing work on request and under pressure, valuing the intellect and its achievements. These abilities have always been useful to the industrial state.

Critics today are addicted to exalted language. They reflect on the "abyss" of meaning, the grave fate of reading, and other somber matters. The so-called Yale Critics – J.H. Miller, H. Bloom, G. Hartman, Paul de Man – meditate with much solemnity in their collection of essays *Deconstruction and Criticism*. There is also a hundred page essay by Jacques Derrida dealing with a subject, yet to be determined. Meanwhile their essays are admirable when they stay focused on the text.

The subject of Eugene Goodheart's book *The Failure of Criticism* is the collapse of "humanist criticism" in America. "Humanist criticism", he writes, "which has as its subject the quality of life as well as works of art, no longer has authority" [2, p. 8]. This great tradition has lost its power, subverted from within by the triumph of "modernism" in literature and criticism, in the author's view. For Goodheart humanism is rooted in moral values or pieties, which radical modernism with its profound passion for uncovering the amoral process of reality, with its impulse to bring everything into the light, to rationalize the world is bent on destroying.

On the other hand, humanist criticism reduces complex texts in order to make them serve social and cultural aims, as can be seen in Eugene Goodheart's commentary on Dickens' *Hard Times*, Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Lawrence's *Women*

*in Love*. Important distinctions are blurred, and very different writers, such as Arnold and Lawrence, are said to be writing in the same tradition, defending the same values.

Lawrence's novel is a far more turbulent and unsettling text than Goodheart's argument allows. The idea of the book is, in fact, Lawrence's doubt about what he values and his uneasy recognition that value systems cannot be securely separated from and set against each other. *Women in Love* begins with questions, debates and disagreements and it ends in the same way.

Modern American criticism is extremely generalized, condescending in tone, and out of touch with the language of the texts, though some of the authors, such as F.R. Leavis and L. Trilling, have received considerable attention recently. *The Living Principle* by Leavis contains some essays on judgment and analysis that is highly valued by the public. Leavis is committed to "English" as a "discipline of thought", and he declares its authority and continuity to be essential for the "health" of society. He speaks forcefully about the value of studying literature, and it is a sign of a sorry condition of this discipline in the society and academic studies.

The author states that judgment is a necessary part of the critical practice. To deny the place of judgment and to dismiss it (as Northrop Frye does) is to undercut the discipline. The readers and critics should be confident enough to say where they stand, and to argue for what they believe is good.

In Maria Ruegg's view, making judgments is precisely the function of criticism. And making value judgments about some "reality" (social, historical, literary) is the necessary function of any society. At the same time judgments are a form of force, often denying the creative "collaboration" that his principles would seem to encourage.

So, any critic's judgments should be met with readers' own questioning and resistance. By engaging in this kind of exchange, and by defining and explaining their valuations writers, critics and teachers can help to restore the *critical function* of the discipline. Judgment-making and debate have their dangers, but they seem better than the deconstructors' assembly-line processing of texts.

The process of evaluation is not final, made once and for everybody to follow. It is tied to the formation of the literary canon, the life of the critical community, the value and immediate relevance of teaching and the process of making judgments as a necessary part of the society's common pursuit.

### Literature

1. *Blackmur, P. The Lion and the Honeycomb* / P. Blackmur. – New York: Methuen, 1965. – 152 p.
2. *Goodheart, E. The Failure of Criticism* / E. Goodheart. – Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976. – 249 p.