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The Word in the Desert

At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education
A Student’s Guide to Literature

William Faulkner’s Snopes trilogy, which recounts the generation-long rise of the drily loathsome Flem Snopes from clerk in a country store to bank president in Jefferson, Mississippi, teems with analogies to what has happened to English departments over the past thirty years. Flem is not merely a solitary threat to the civilized order but the very “Father Abraham” of a barbaric tribe of Snopeses; every time he vacates one position, another Snopes with different vices immediately takes his place. Flem himself—appallingly intelligent in his quest for acquisition, untempted by the usual vanities—manages in one story to outdo the Prince of Darkness himself in what might otherwise be a Faustian bargain. When Flem comes to trade in his soul, the devils can’t find one: there’s nothing in the asbestos matchbox where it had been stored but “a little kind of dried-up smear under one edge.” As Satan tries to think what to do, Flem stands there chewing, as always; his spit hits the floor of Hell with a little hiss and pop. Since he has kept up his side of the bargain, he’s there to get Hell, as agreed. Satan finds himself trapped by the logic of it. More insistently literal than the devil himself (supposedly the master of the letter that killeth), Snopes beats him out of the ownership of the place.

R. V. Young strikes me as a natural ally of Gavin Stevens and V. K. Ratliff, the lawyer and sewing machine salesman in Faulkner’s stories who witness, comment upon, and resist, wherever possible, the incursions of Snopesism. In Young’s book At War with the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education, the era of the New Criticism in American English departments is like Jefferson, Mississippi, before Flem Snopes showed up. And Jacques Derrida, for all his sophistication, clearly holds the place of Flem in the theoretical ravages that Young recounts. Himself a former student of the deeply civilized W. K. Wimsatt at Yale and an authority on seventeenth-century devotional poetry, Young bears witness to what follows in Derrida’s wake, from New Historicism to Lacanian feminism to queer theory, each using for its own ends the techniques introduced by Derrida. The first step of the Ur-Snopes, one might say, is to acquire the uses of Hell by

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deconstructing the Faustian contract—a bargain that at least required accepting responsibility for one’s choice of power and earthly pleasures. Like Flem, who takes the beautiful Eula Varner as his wife in a kind of business negotiation, Derrida and his followers end up married to literature without even being interested in her. She is merely useful to them.

“The uses of Hell” might seem an extravagant—and certainly not comic—way to put it, but Young’s title and emphasis justify the phrase: he interprets the spread of inimical literary theory in forthright theological terms. As he shows in citation after citation, the explicit intent of deconstruction is to attack the center of the Western tradition. “Deconstruction,” he writes, “can be seen as a distillation of the (il)logic of the postmodernist assault on Western culture. This assault, in all its manifestations, assumes a radical atheism, insofar as it decries the very concept of God as origin of order and meaning in the creation.” Young’s defense of literature, in other words, is also a defense of God as the ultimate ground of the literary work of art. He draws out, in ways that they themselves do not, the theological implications of such classic New Critical pieces as Rene Wellek and Austin Warren’s “The Mode of Existence of a Literary Work of Art” and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” and “The Affective Fallacy.” To the extent that the work of literature is “conceived as an independent object” apart from the intent of the author or the effect on the reader, Young argues, it must also be seen as “a structure of significance that transcends the constraints of physical causation” at the same time that it rehabilitates the material universe. These hallmark New Critical essays were among the first attacked, of course, when postmodern criticism was carving out its place, and Young’s defense of them is a strong attempt to recover, on a firmer—that is, much older—basis, a view of the work of art not determined in advance by the assumptions of materialism.

Countering Derrida’s difference with St. Augustine’s meditations on time, with St. Thomas’s teachings on analogy, and with Eric Voegelin’s animadversions on gnosticism, Young engages the theory of thinker after thinker—Derrida, Foucault, de Man, Jameson, Lacan, Greenblatt, Fish—and reveals the unexamined materialist dogmatism that underlies the argument in each case. God is hardly disproved or rendered impossible in their critical practices; rather, His reality is merely denied in advance, so that human discourse can be treated as a closed system in which “God” becomes a constructed center who is mystified as the unexaminable guarantor of the structure—like “the author” in a text. But Christianity, as Young shows, remains curiously resistant to deconstruction, because if one already knows one’s fallibility and sinful inadequacy, one does not make the absolute claims for knowledge that deconstruction can most effectively attack. Literary form can also resist deconstruction if the critic never claims for it a completion in time. I have little doubt that Young would agree, however, that poetic form, understood as “a structure of significance,” allows the participant in it a glimpse outside time itself. As T. S. Eliot writes in “Burnt Norton,”

Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

Perhaps “to be conscious” in the ways that achieved form can make one conscious “is not to be in time,” as Eliot writes, because the “stillness” reached is the one through which time itself can be apprehended. Derrida and those in his wake have attacked, Young argues, not so much the New Criticism’s
way of reading texts as they have attacked the Word always implicit by analogy in the very being of the literary work of art.

Much as I admire Young’s thinking, I could wish this richest part of his thought presented on terms not dictated by those he opposes. As Young notes in his Preface, At War with the Word is comprised of essays published over the past fifteen years and now reworked into a single argument, unabashedly polemical. Some of that tone is owing to the original context of these essays; I remember hearing a version of “Derrida or Deity? Deconstruction in the Presence of the Word” back in 1984, when the theoretical impact of deconstruction still felt like an outbreak of ebola. The implications of these ideas still had a hot topicality that has long ago passed into other movements, and it is a little difficult now to recapture the tone of high dudgeon that one felt in those days. For all their theoretical helpfulness, the chapters of At War with the Word feel a little like the history of a passionate resistance to deconstruction and the other relations that followed it, Snopes-like, into department after department.

From this distance, almost thirty-five years after the emergence of deconstruction, it is possible to see it, demystified, as an extremely close reading that takes into account the assumptions out of which discourse emerges. That, of course, has always been part of reading or listening well, as both the New Critics in their way, and Leo Strauss in his, had already taught. If the habit of thinking “deconstructively” settles down into a kind of vernacular, it becomes something like the recognition that we always have to be aware of the implications of being in time and in a determining circumstance, because consciousness itself, moment to moment, might all too easily become a rhetorical display performed before ourselves as audience, as Hamlet or Iago have shown us.

In “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Blake writes that “Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy,” and he is right at least in this sense—that as the energy of movements such as deconstruction dissipates, their fruits become known and their boundaries discernible. After all the furor, a certain good sense can perhaps prevail. Derrida, these days, looks very different. Yet Young’s writing in At War with the Word seems geared more to defense than offense, at worst to a kind of insider sarcasm; but in convincing those usually subjected to a highly politicized opposition but open to the truth, a more relaxed manner with the air of natural authority might have served the purpose better.

And what is that purpose? Regardless of our pieties toward the New Critics, it seems to me that the moment is right to stop treating the true dimensions of literary criticism as a defense. An excellent new generation of students has grown up watching the vanities and self-indulgences of not-ready-for-adulthood professors play themselves out into a stalemate and exhaustion strangely symbolized by the recent election. (Stanley Fish draws this uncannily pertinent remark from Young in his chapter on “Constitutional Interpretation and Literary Theory”: “We are thus reduced to witting or unwitting players in a furious political game with ruthlessly enforced but uncertain rules, which are constantly subject to change without notice.”) This new generation possesses a canniness, a depth, and a hope in reality that Pope John Paul II, for one, has seen all along. I have the distinct sense that something heroic will be asked of them in the decades to come. They thus need a way through the absurd tangle within which literature now lies, like Sleeping Beauty, with all the lineaments of Eula Varner.

R.V. Young’s work bravely takes on the tangle of thorns, if (like Gavin Stevens) he
remains a gentleman about the means of waking the sleeper. I very much admire his work, with this reservation: not the truth, but the rhetorical force, of his own theoretical improvement on the New Criticism is diminished when it presents itself as a reaction—"what we already knew in our tradition"—rather than a bold advance in its own right. The New Critics, traditional as they certainly were, knew how to harness contemporary energies, not least by appropriating the word "new." Criticism now, if it is to transform students encountering serious literature for the first time, has to give them once again a way of thinking in and with the Shakespearean or the Homeric imagination, instead of offering them means to paralyze the text with the latest theoretical weapon because it would otherwise have victimized them. Criticism has to call them to what is higher and nobler than they had thought of being, yet at the same time move them from where they find themselves; it has to let them discover the tradition and make it new.

In this regard, I find Young's shorter work, A Student's Guide to Literature, more appealing. His task here is to provide an overall approach to literature, which he does by speaking of its major genres and providing short biographical accounts of the major literary figures in the Western tradition. His choices of emphasis, of course, are debatable, but debatable in the best and most fruitful terms. I would not have called poetry, drama, and prose fiction "genres," as Young does; I would have followed the Aristotelian scheme of the fundamental gestures of the imagination in epic, tragedy, comedy, and lyric. I would not have chosen to write accounts of Horace and Ovid, if I had to leave out Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Aristophanes to do it. Virgil gets a much more substantive entry than Dante, Shakespeare draws a defense against being the Earl of Oxford, and Milton earns the longest entry of all, but one finds in it this somewhat puzzling sentence: "The case of Milton shows us the kind of works that the 'unlearned' Shakespeare would have produced had he enjoyed the extensive formal education and worldly advantages that disdainers of the man from Stratford think he should have had in order to write his plays and sonnets." In a long entry on Alexander Pope, Young writes that Pope's couplets are said to be the essence of Enlightenment rationalism, "but, as William Wimsatt decisively demonstrates, rhyme is inherently antirationalist in its juxtapositioning of words on the basis of sound alone." This remark, at least as it stands, seems to me misleading—in fact, almost deconstructionist—when I put it next to Paul Fussell's remark in Poetic Meter and Poetic Form that the closed couplet "seems to imply a...vigorous enclosure of [its materials] into a compact and momentarily self-sufficient little world of circumscribed sense and meaning." Whatever arguments one might have with Young's Guide, however, they seem to me exactly of the right sort, provided that they rise to the appropriate intensity.

On occasion, an essentially conservative movement has been able to harness the energies of a generation, and these have been movements toward form, such as the American Founding and the New Criticism. In the neglected stanza of her famous hymn, "America the Beautiful," Katherine Bates advises America, "Confirm thy soul in self-control, / Thy liberty in law." The soul: that is, the capacity for imagination and aspiration and exercise of power. Liberty: that is, the sense of having a great, rich wilderness of choices. R. V. Young's two books make me hope, against the grain of mere probability, that we are at a post-Snopesian moment when soul and liberty can again find their realization in the achievements of significant form.