

The difference in moral environment stems from different conceptions of human nature, and it is clear that the Friar thinks the Wife's view is ridiculous. Look, he says, rapists can't be regenerated by simple questions, people do not willingly give up sovereignty to one another, miracles don't happen, hags don't turn into sylphs. The two tales therefore do not differ in expressing the universal dominance of good or evil (as I am charged with saying) but in setting forth contrasting views of human nature, the Wife's wishful and romantic, the Friar's cynical and pessimistic.

The point of my Prufrockian ("That is not it at all") quibble is that Brown and Egge's major disagreement with me—that the Friar's Tale "is the reverse perspective of the same medieval morality expressed earlier"—argues against a point that does not appear in my paper. However, the idea deserves consideration on its own merit, because it raises an important question of general interest to readers of Chaucer, viz., to what extent these tales are moral. I do not think a moral approach to these tales is necessarily undesirable; in raising some questions about *maistrie* as the governing idea of the Marriage Group (pp. 392–93), I was asking whether a moral rather than a marital problem might not be central to all of them. Furthermore, Brown and Egge's conceptions of two parallel morality lectures and of contrasting moral progressions for the heroes are ideas appealing for their symmetry. But I have serious doubts that the moral meaning of the tales, the "lectures," or the progressions of the heroes is anything so simple as "orthodox goodness and evil," in the Wife's Tale and the Friar's Tale, respectively. There is space to indicate only one of the ways in which such an interpretation seems inadequate.

Brown and Egge's theory advances a moral interpretation without taking into account dramatic contexts which considerably complicate the meaning of apparently moral speeches and actions. For example, it may be true that taken in isolation, the *gentillesse* speech and the green yeoman's sermon on evil seem like orthodox homilies on good and evil. But they are delivered not from a pulpit but in forests and bedrooms by hags and devils, and their meaning for the tale can be neither identified with nor limited to what they actually say. The import of the *gentillesse* speech is considerably complicated, if not overturned, by the fact that the Loathly Lady will benefit in a material and marital way by the knight's belief in it; and that having proved that a beautiful face is not what *really* matters, she makes herself beautiful; and that behind her lies the teller of the tale, the Wife of Bath, whose gat-toothed beauty might also derive some benefit from the doctrine that beauty is inward and who has previously acquired quite a reputation for distorting orthodox scriptural truths to serve her own quaint ends. To equate the meaning of these speeches with their content is too

easy (witness the Merchant's pseudoencomium on marriage). The truth of the matter is that for Chaucer, even more than for Jack Nicholson, there are no easy pieces.

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UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF

To the Editor:

Norman Holland's essay "UNITY IDENTITY TEXT SELF" (*PMLA*, 90, 1975, 813–22) is so full of hedges, equivocations, and contradictions that it is difficult to take issue with him. The equation "Unity is to text as identity is to self," on which his comparison of criticism and psychology rests, is no sooner set up than it is mocked as a "neat little equation" which "is not neat at all" (pp. 815–16). Similarly, the distinction between the invariables "unity" and "identity" and the variables "text" and "self" is repudiated almost immediately: "*text* and *self* show difference or change, or, more exactly, *both* sameness *and* difference, *both* continuity *and* change" (p. 815). The equation, it is said, comes "very close to applying the Aristotelian idea of essence both to literary texts and to people." But on the same page it is left open whether or not essences such as unity and identity inhere in physical beings. Still on the same page, we read that "In more modern terms, we can think of *text* and *self* as data and *unity* and *identity* as constructs drawn from the data"—as if the use of words like "construct" and "concept" involved merely a change of terminology rather than of epistemology. Finally, the distinction between an objective and a subjective way of comparing different readings of a text (pp. 814, 816) is canceled when Holland declares flatly that "all of us, as we read, use [!] the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves" (p. 816). It is no surprise, therefore, that the objective way is never mentioned again in the rest of the essay.

Holland mocks his equation because he believes that its psychological terms (identity, self) cannot be eliminated from its literary terms (unity, text). I shall deal with this point presently. There is, however, a more valid reason for questioning the equation. The self as the lived life of a person (p. 815) changes with time, whereas the text (whether written, printed, or recorded) is fixed. Therefore, the true analogy is between the self and the *history* of the text—its changing interpretation by successive generations of readers. But the comparison lags even when amended. A text is not obscured by its history as childhood is obscured by manhood and old age. Thus the critic who would construe the unity of a text is both helped more and constrained more than is the psychologist who would construe the identity of a self.

Holland's redefinition of the terms "text" and "self" to include both sameness and difference, both continuity and change, results in a totally different statement, not (as he says) in a more exact statement. The inclusion leads Holland later on to use "self" and "identity" indiscriminately and interchangeably and to describe "experiencing" and "perceiving" indistinguishably as one act (p. 820). Now it is true that a poem must be experienced before it can be understood. But to experience is not the same as to know. Experiencing is an irrational or intuitive act which, with both scientists and scholars, is followed by the rational activities of precise observation and reflection. Only by skipping these later stages of cognition is it possible to assert that the psychological terms of Holland's equation cannot be eliminated from the literary terms. He proposes a psychological determinism according to which the unconscious reigns supreme and the conscious mind has no powers at all.

Holland's appeal to Aristotle can be disposed of very quickly: it is unfounded. An essence and its manifestations exist independently of the human mind. The manifestations are interpreted either correctly or incorrectly, and the essence is either grasped or not grasped. There is no room in Aristotle's thought for Holland's "overarching principle" that "*interpretation is a function of [the interpreter's] identity*" (p. 816).

In substituting "data" for "manifestations" and "construct" or "concept" for "essence," Holland shifts from Aristotelian to transcendental philosophy. Strangely enough, however, he rejects the latter more firmly than the former, although it comes closer to his own position. The reason is that transcendentalism tries to establish the principles of human thought in general, whereas Holland believes that all thought replicates the identity themes of individual thinkers. It is this belief that allows him to assert that "Psychoanalysis enables us to go *through* science" and that "any way of interpreting the world, even physics, meets human needs" (p. 821). What Holland chooses to overlook is that science is a collective enterprise. Its answers must satisfy the whole scientific community, at least at a given time and until better answers are found. Holland's substitution of "person" for "time and place" (p. 821) marks the exact point where he differs even from modern scientist-philosophers such as Heisenberg.

What Holland's essay boils down to is that he is *interested* in the unconscious rather than the conscious, in spontaneous rather than considered responses, and in individual rather than collective inquiry. That is his privilege. But his predilection hardly allows the conclusion that "we" now proceed from the scientific question "How?" to the psychoanalytic question "To whom?" (p. 821). It is quite possible that uncritical readers, and even professional critics when first confronted with a text, will seek self-confirmation. But

that is not the only way to read a literary work. We can take a second look, we have second thoughts, and we correct our initial responses. Holland's theory makes no allowance for self-criticism, for the discipline imposed upon the individual critic by criticism as an institution, or for the regulative force of the text. Edmund Wilson at first read *The Turn of the Screw* in purely Freudian terms, but modified his interpretation greatly when other critics urged that his construction of the unity of the story failed to account for all its details. If it were true that interpretation is a function of identity, Wilson's interpretation could not have changed without a prior change of his identity—an impossibility by definition. What actually happened is that Holland's objective criterion, which he mentions only to brush it aside, triumphed at least in this instance.

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Mr. Holland replies:

My essay rests on empirical evidence: the studies of readers reading mentioned in the notes and the analysis of Frost's reading and perceiving offered in the text. As I interpret this evidence, literents—a word that includes hearers and watchers of literature as well as readers—perceive and experience texts in terms of their identities. The identity of a self I define by analogy to the unity of a text: a statement of a constant theme against which the individual plays a sequence of variations; a principle or style that permeates all that the individual does, including (and this is the epanorthosis that so bothers Heinrich Henel) any statement of unities or identities.

Henel, however, addresses not this evidence but the shape and consequences of the argument. He is troubled most because I have canceled "the distinction between an objective and a subjective way of comparing different readings of a text."

"Objective" and "subjective" often pop up when someone says reading is a function of personality, and this is a good forum for questioning the usage exemplified by Henel. By "objective" people usually mean: having to do with a material object as distinguished from something mental. "Objective literary criticism," then, is a contradiction in terms, if we use language carefully, a criticism divorced from critical intelligence.

So with "subjective": within someone's mind unaffected by the external world or existing only in the mind. A "subjective literary criticism" could be neither criticism nor literary. It is equally muddling to label the principle that perception expresses identity "subjectivity," since perception is *of* something. One simply cannot separate subjective from objective ways of reading or of comparing readings.

Objecting to a pure "objectivity," however, im-