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Norman Holland's importance to me

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For the past forty years Norman Holland has been the "Dean" of American psychoanalytic literary critics. He was one of the first proponents of reader response criticism, the theorist of reader's identity themes, and the author of a baker's dozen of books that have become classics in the field, including The Dynamics of Literary Response, Five Readers Reading, and Holland's Guide to Psychoanalytic Psychology and Literature-and-Psychology. In addition, he is the creator and moderator of PSYART, the online Literature and Psychology listserv that has over one thousand subscribers, and the guiding force behind the annual International Conference on Literature and Psychology, in which we are all happily participating. More than anyone in the country, indeed the world, he has insisted that if psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic literary criticism are to survive, they must be based on "good" science rather than on speculation.

I never had the pleasure of taking a course with Norm when I was an undergraduate at SUNY-Buffalo in the early 1960s, but I found myself drawn irresistibly to his writings when I was in graduate school and began experimenting with psychoanalytic criticism. His groundbreaking work on reader-response criticism and identity theory awakened my own interest. His commitment to psychoanalytic pedagogy inspired me thirty years ago to ask my students to write a weekly Freudian diary. He has been a role model for me both professionally and personally.

I have learned so much from Norm's books. To begin with, I learned that studying psychoanalysis is a lifelong passion, one that requires not simply an understanding of Freud's writings but also an awareness of the historical evolution of psychoanalytic theory. Norm has insisted that as important as a reading knowledge of psychoanalysis is, it is not enough. One must explore one's own unconscious processes and, if one has the time and money, to undergo a personal analysis. He has also encouraged us to be aware of developments in related fields, such as clinical psychology, biology, and now neuropsychology, all of which he has eagerly and systematically studied. Though trained as a New Critic, he was one of the first truly interdisciplinary literary critics. As he writes in Holland's Guide, "in my experience, the more you study psychoanalysis per se, especially clinical psychoanalysis, the better psychoanalytic criticism you will write. It is a mistake to read only psychoanalytic literary criticism and then try to practice it" (3).

Reading Norm's books, I have learned to value clarity. His conversational prose style makes him accessible to scholars and nonscholars alike. He writes with wit, verve, and urbane intelligence. He often writes about polymaths, but he is one himself: his interdisciplinary knowledge is extraordinary, but he is never showy. Long opposed to "lit-crit" jargon, he writes with a transparency that is never condescending or reductive. He uses his knowledge not to demolish opponents but to show them how

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conflicting theories can be synthesized. His own theories are controversial, and he has long been a lightning rod for the opponents of psychoanalysis, yet he remains a model of scholarly grace in his argumentation. He always speaks respectfully of his opponents, and he goes out of his way to credit those from whom he has learned. I have never encountered a more generous scholar.

No less than Freud, Norm's work has evolved over time, and he has had the courage and flexibility to modify his beliefs. His 1968 book The Dynamics of Literary Response developed a model of literature based on ego psychology, the study of psychological defenses. This was a convincing literary model, but it revealed little about the author's or reader's relationship to the text. Norm then became interested in identity theory, basing his research on the work of psychoanalyst Heinz Lichtenstein. In his now-famous Delphi Seminars with Murray Schwartz at the Center for the Psychological Study of the Arts at SUNY Buffalo in the 1970s, Norm developed the first psychoanalytic pedagogy. Their new book, Know Thyself, recently published by the PsyArt Foundation that they both helped to found, explores the dynamics of transactive reading. One of Norm's most important ideas, first introduced in the Delphi Seminars and then worked out in painstaking and persuasive detail in his influential 1975 book Five Readers Reading, is the concept of the reader's identity theme, which has become the cornerstone of reader-response criticism. He demonstrates how our identity theme is influenced by our characteristic defenses, fantasies, and transformations. He argues that the reader's identity theme is relatively continuous and stable but capable of change over time, like a variation on a theme. The fact that "we perceive the world in the terms of our own subjectivities has a positive, freeing side," he observes in Five Readers Reading. "It is only by being different from one another that we can have the experience of sharing" (231).

Norm's interest in reader identity themes compelled him to write his 1995 novel Death in a Delphi Seminar. The book has not received the critical and popular attention it deserves. It is a fascinating murder mystery set in the mid 1980s at SUNY-Buffalo. The story is so lifelike that some readers may believe that he is actually describing a murder in one of his own psychoanalytic literary seminars. As the novel opens, we learn that a female student in Holland's graduate seminar has been poisoned, presumably by another member of the class. The narrative arises out of the conflicting texts surrounding Patricia Hassler's death: transcripts of police interviews, student essays, department memos, newspaper accounts, the professor's private journal, and the inner musings of Lieutenant Norman "Justin" Rhodes, who is in charge of solving the murder. All eight members of the Delphi seminar are suspects – the seven students plus an untenured assistant professor who is sitting in on the course to learn more about Holland's psychoanalytic approach to literature. Holland himself is a suspect, for he has, along with the others, the motive, means, and opportunity to do away with the obnoxious Hassler, whose strident views alienate everyone in the seminar. Before her murder is solved, a second corpse appears, that of an ominous interloper who has been secretly disrupting the seminar by writing hate letters to the other students. Lieutenant Rhodes's task is to solve these two perplexing crimes. He succeeds, largely by enlisting the help of Holland's controversial theory of reading.

Death in a Delphi Seminar may be considered a "theoretical thriller" in that it dramatizes the challenges to traditional humanistic scholarship posed in different ways by Holland, the deconstructive philosopher Jacques Derrida, and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Although the fierce theoretical disputes of the academy may not be of much interest to those outside its ivy towers – the reason academic politics is so vicious, Henry Kissenger, a former academic, has famously observed, is because nothing is at stake – Holland's story reveals that these battles have far-reaching consequences.

I was never a member of the Delphi Seminar, but it appears that the novel accurately conveys its formal structure. In the first half of the seminar, students write about their free associations to various poems and stories. These free associations, which the students then circulate to their classmates, resemble those of a patient in psychoanalysis. In the second half of the seminar, the students analyze their own reading styles, and in doing so, they are arriving at their identity themes. It is during the second half of the semester that the Delphi seminar becomes interesting – and sometimes problematic. Each week a different student is "it," as in hide-and-seek: the student receives interpretations of his

or her identity theme from the other students and must react to these interpretations. Although Holland tells his students to censor highly personal material – they are to disclose themes in their lives, not actual events – some students may become angry or defensive. Self-disclosure is notoriously difficult and fraught with peril; psychoanalysis, as Freud well knew, brings out the worst in people. It is not clear whether any of Holland's real Delphi seminars in Buffalo, where he taught for close to twenty years, and at the University of Florida in Gainsville, where he now teaches, has become emotionally explosive. In the novel, however, a fatal problem arises, not so much because of the seminar itself but because of the instability of two students: Hassler, who, it turns out, is victimized by her own murderous rage, and Christian Aval, a young Frenchman who first met Hassler at Yale, where they studied literature together and came under the influence of Yale's famous English Department, with its French poststructuralist approach to literature. Following the breakup of a stormy love affair with Hassler, in which each accused the other of plagiarizing an honor's essay, Aval followed her to Buffalo, where they both enrolled in "Holland's" seminar, despite the fact that their Franco-American views on literature are in sharp opposition to his Anglo-American ones.

Ironically, the students' instability accurately reflects their deconstructive belief that everything in language is built along a series of linguistic differences and that, consequently, every text reveals internal inconsistencies. Taking deconstruction to its most nihilistic conclusion, Hassler and Aval assert that nothing exists outside of language, which they claim is inherently duplicitous. In the novel's brief account of postmodernism, Nietzsche argued that the subject is only a fiction or construction; Foucault came along and proclaimed that the author is merely a projection of how we think about literary texts; then Roland Barthes followed with the claim that the reader is a composition of other texts of linguistic codes. In such a postmodern world, neither writers nor readers exist, only language. Gone, too, is the human self.

In seeking to exorcize the specter of postmodernism, which he regards as theoretically flawed, Holland insists that any totalistic philosophical system that abrogates human identity, autonomy, and free will is dangerous. Yet despite his critique of the more radical assumptions of postmodernism, he agrees with its premise that there is no real, true, or objective reality. The difference between Holland and other postmodern theorists is that whereas many of them privilege language over readers, he affirms that readers create their own interpretation based on their characteristic identity themes. Whereas most postmodernist theorists seem to be dismissive of actual experience, preferring to see things as they wish, not as they are, Holland has sought to examine real readers by studying their interpretive responses to literary texts. He would certainly agree with Freud and Charcot that theory is good but it doesn't prevent facts from existing – facts that each reader perceives differently.

Unlike Lacan, Holland maintains that we control our language more than it controls us. He also believes that the ego can reconcile the competing claims of the id and superego. Holland is in the tradition of Heinz Hartmann and Ernst Kris, who emphasized the adaptive, integrative functions of the ego. In further contrast to Lacan, Holland has created a psychoanalytic model of identity that is consistent with the findings of cognitive psychology and neurophysiological research into the functioning of the brain.

Although some readers will take issue with Holland's critique of postmodernism and his faith in the future of psychoanalysis, others will enjoy his satirical attack on the "New Cryptics," whose willfully obscure language has produced so many unreadable academic texts. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Holland's ideas, he is never guilty of linguistic mystification. Literary and psychoanalytic theory come alive in Death in a Delphi Seminar in ways that seldom occur either in textbooks or in classrooms. I suspect that an increasing number of graduate students and professors would secretly agree with the statement of one of the members of the Delphi seminar, who, exasperated by the dominance of theory in the academy, yearns for a return to the study of imaginative literature: "What I didn't anticipate was that the study of literature wouldn't be the study of literature. It would be this dreary 'theory.' That's why I'm taking this seminar. It has to do with real people reading books" (p. 223). If Death in a Delphi Seminar does not ring the death knell for theory, at least it reminds us of the enduring power of literature, which can never be reduced to ideology.

Norm's persona in the novel closely resembles the one he has portrayed throughout his scholarly writings – that of a man who is erudite, affable, witty, and passionately devoted to literature and psychoanalysis. Liberal in his social and political views and conservative in his lifestyle, he is totally committed to the life of the mind. If there is a darker side to his character, he keeps it carefully hidden. In one of the most autobiographically revealing statements in the novel, "Norman Holland" observes about his own identity theme: "I think my own motivation is, if I go deep enough, that I'd like to know what makes people tick, but I don't want to get close enough to find out" (p. 140). Those of us who have long admired and benefitted from his seminal contributions to psychoanalytic literary criticism will be delighted with Death in a Delphi Seminar, but we will have to wait for a psychobiographer to tell us the driving impetus behind his life and work.

"Immature poets borrow", T.S. Eliot quipped; "mature poets steal". I have stolen so many of the statements Norm makes in his books, such as "when psychoanalysis is good, it is very good; when it is bad, it is horrid." I regularly tell me students, echoing Norm, that "all knowledge is personal." At psychoanalytic conferences I politely but firmly avoid talks on Lacan, finding from experience that a diet on what Norm calls "French fried Freud" gives me heartburn. I have always appreciated Norm's heartfelt dedication of each book to his beloved Jane; I dedicate my books to my beloved Barbara, who was my muse in life and now in death.

I want to end on a note of respectful disagreement with Norm. "One repays a teacher badly if one remains only a pupil," Nietzsche observed wryly, and I think that Norm has never sufficiently appreciated the role of the teacher in general or his own teaching in particular. And here I want to draw a parallel between the therapist-patient and the teacher-student relationships. The existential psychiatrist Irwin Yalom states in his masterful novel The Schopenhauer Cure that "It's not ideas, nor vision, nor tools that truly matter in therapy. If you debrief patients at the end of therapy about the process, what do they remember? Never the ideas – it's always the relationship. They rarely remember an important insight their therapist offered but generally fondly recall their personal relationship with the therapist" (62-63; italics in original). Yalom makes a similar observation in his book Love's Executioner: "It's the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals, the relationship that heals–my professional rosary" (98). The same is true about education. Students remember best those teachers who have made a difference in their lives, who have encouraged and supported students rather than simply imparted knowledge to them. Were it not for Norm's professional endorsement of my work, I might not have received tenure in the late 1970s. My tenure committee judged my 1977 psychoanalytic study of Joseph Conrad unacceptable, and on the basis of that book concluded that I was "deficient in my ability to handle a literary text." The rejection was devastating because it spoke to that part of me that felt I was indeed intellectually deficient, not worthy of tenure. What saved me were the outside scholarly letters, especially Norm's. I still have his letter, which he sent to me afterwards. What I will always remember about Norm is not his publications, as important as they are, but his confidence in me, a confidence that I desperately needed at the time and that I have tried to instill in my own students.

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