

One Constructed Reading Self after Another (A Response to Thomas F. Merrill)*

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Thomas F. Merrill's challenge to my criticism of *Paradise Lost* and to "the critical persuasion" I represent gives me an opportunity to make clear what my critical persuasion is, and to examine some points of conflict with his.

The immediate point of contention is my complaint against the inconsistencies in *Paradise Lost*, a complaint that for Merrill disappears with a shift in the reader's perspective: "While such 'inconsistencies' may be apparent to those restricting *Paradise Lost* to standards of literary decorum, they cease to be so when perceived as instruments of religious insight" (257). "Religious insight" is for Merrill both necessary to and generated by a response to "religious style," which he, as his main business, shows functioning in *Paradise Lost*.

What Merrill shows, the inability of those in Hell to remove traces of the Heavenly from their words, strikes me as interesting, useful, and undeniable, whether or not I would call it a manifestation of religious style. I profit from the demonstration that what the fallen angels don't want to admit keeps breaking through, perpetually "rupturing" and "destabilizing" their discourse. These profane speakers cannot avoid evoking images of the sacred. In showing us this Merrill, holding up Picasso's *Guernica*, reminds us of a general truth about serious, including religious, readers: that exposure to images of evil will evoke in them images of good—just as exposure to social absurdity will evoke in them social good sense, the norm every social satire depends on.

*Reference: Thomas F. Merrill, "The Language of Hell," *Connotations* 1.3 (1991): 244-57.

But readers can be serious in different ways, and that's how Merrill and I part company. Assuming that we each want to know exactly what we are parting from I want to correct his identification of my party as "those restricting *Paradise Lost* to standards of literary decorum." It's not a matter of literary decorum; it's a matter of personal decorum, ethical decorum, reader decorum.

Notions of reading decorum depend on what kind of reading Self has been constructed. The Self that, under my name, was reading *Paradise Lost* thirty years ago had been constructed under the tutelage of New Critics to whom literary decorum and ethical decorum, *Self* decorum, were never separated. This is best seen in their taking sentimentality as the great violation. The cardinal sentimental response was a contradictory response, wanting things "two ways at once."¹ It violated a code in which the law of non-contradiction had an ethical value. A reader who accepted an author's invitation to approve victory in war but disapprove the necessary means to that victory had violated an ethical standard in the same way that acceptance of similar invitations encountered in the world violate it.²

The part assigned to non-contradiction shows how much this New Critical Self was constructed on the model of Socrates, a figure my own teachers certainly had in view. Theirs was the Socrates of the early dialogues, the literary figure who, following a logic yet unnamed, makes very sure each value he is invited to share is consistent with the other values he holds. Taking the law of non-contradiction, extended to include emotional or axiological non-contradiction, as a first principle superimposes on all other values the value of the integrity of the Self. The personal integrity dramatized by Plato in Socrates makes taking logic with this kind of seriousness very attractive to people of a certain moral ambition.

Not surprisingly, the New Critical tutelage I speak of produced a reader-centered criticism in which authors were conceived as issuing invitations to response which self-respecting readers had to examine closely. Sentimentality was, in fact, often defined as "unexamined emotional response." Examination was conducted by the reason, fitting responses together into an internally consistent whole—as required by the conception of an integrated Self. This was to be done seriously,

whatever the invitation. It was not the momentousness of the values that mattered so much, it was the way the soul (our Self) dealt with them, guided by a conception of its own wholeness, or health (haleness). If Socrates (I see my teachers pointing to his performance in the *Crito*), facing the hazardous real world, could take such care, with a logic still unshaped, to keep his values consistent, then we students, facing a harmless fictional world, should be embarrassed not to try, with a logic shaped to our hand, to keep our values consistent. Moral ambition fixed on such a model is not embarrassed to proceed, without descent, from Crito's invitation to betray Athens to Bret Harte's invitation to sigh at a baby's moral regeneration of Roaring Camp.

Of course the author whose invitations fit together would produce a literary whole (getting a work complimented for its "organic unity"³) but that was his or her business. The reader's business (the privilege of this early assertion of "autonomy") was to get full value out of what "stood up" to the tests of rational examination, and for the sake of Self respect, reject what didn't. Readers tutored by New Critics rejected, as we know, a lot of celebrated works because they were written in "sentimental style," one that encouraged satisfying emotional responses and discouraged inspection of what these responses were based on and how they were related to each other.

Obviously this kind of tutelage is liable to generate an over concern for consistency. It makes readers pick at the margins of a work, for they must be integrated too. (The Socratic, like the Christian, saint sees *every* invitation as a crisis.) It tends to make them intolerant not just of contradiction but of ambivalence. At its worst this tutelage produces a reader to whom the fruits of ambiguity and mystery are denied. Even at its best, though, careful distinctions (like that between ambivalence and contradiction⁴) are required.

No reading Self is constructed without hazards, however, and different tutelage equips us to see another's hazards better than we see our own. Such perspicacity is always an impediment to sympathy. The impediment to my sympathy with Merrill, and maybe an indication of a real hazard for him, is my inability to distinguish the "religious style" he speaks of from "sentimental style." I get an invitation from Milton to disapprove of the unfallen Mammon admiring "the riches of Heav'n's pavement,

trodd'n Gold" (I, 682), and through this to disapprove of gold as an object of enjoyment alternative to "aught divine or holy else enjoy's / In vision beatific" (683-84)—a disapproval in harmony with my Christian estimate of material riches and display, summed up in "gold." But elsewhere I get an invitation to approve of gold in Heaven, notably at the point where Satan is reminded of his "sad exclusion from the doors of Bliss" (III, 525). The doors appear to him, arrived from Hell, as

a Kingly Palace Gate
With Frontispiece of Diamond and Gold
Imbellisht . . . (505-07)

How am I to take "gold" here? As an emblem of the divine or holy that's to be "enjoy'd / In vision beatific"? That's all I can think of. It's the only way I can integrate it into *this* context. And that makes trouble if I want to integrate the whole poem.

This complaint may be marginal but there is no doubt that responding to these two inconsistent invitations sympathetically throws me into violation of what I consider reading decorum. It may not be what we usually think of as sentimentality but it does what sentimentality does: it destroys the integrity of the reading Self that I (or agents working in or on me) have constructed.

What would make me call what I am responding to "religious style" rather than "sentimental style," and so reconcile the invitations and feel some sympathy with Merrill's construction? Only a demonstration that what I see is not an "inconsistency" but really a fruitful ambiguity. That is just what Merrill provides, but he does not provide it for me. He provides it for those who, with a different tutelage, see the fruitfulness established when an inconsistency is called "linguistic transsubstantiation" (244), "dynamic entanglement" (246), or "religiously salutary confusion" (251). I can't see through these terms to what is supposed to be fruitful. I can't see what is salutary in the confusion. And I can't see how, unless I abandon reason and "the common sense point of view" Merrill reproaches me with (254), I'm going to see more.

So there is no ground for sympathy (feeling alike) between Merrill's religious reading Self and my reading Self, which I suppose would be called classicist. I do, however, see ground for sympathy outside those

Selves: they are both getting harder and harder to construct. Both Christian and classicist materials are losing the strength once conceded them. Neither of us, however, can blame postmodernism in general for this loss, for both of us draw on developments within postmodernism, Merrill, as I read him, drawing mainly on developments in continental theory and I drawing mainly on developments in American theory. For my part I am very happy to put the moral ambitiousness of that New Criticism reading *Self* under the shelter of reader-response criticism, where its autonomy, if not its arrogance, gets much fuller theoretical justification than it had back when reader-response lacked even a name that would let us locate it in the New Criticism—that is, back before Stanley Fish introduced reader-response criticism with (tickling connection) a book on *Paradise Lost*.⁵

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NOTES

¹Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946) 272. The kind of response criticism I see in these New Critics went on at the same time as but was different from the structure criticism that came to dominate the New Criticism, and establish the current conception of it. The response criticism appears mainly in undergraduate textbooks, beginning with Cleanth Brooks, Jr., John Thibault Purser, and Robert Penn Warren, *An Approach to Literature* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1936) and Brooks' and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt, 1938). I distinguish it and argue its importance in the New Critical revolution in "The Heritage of the New Criticism," *College English* 41 (1979): 412-22.

²Joseph Heller in *Catch-22* (New York: Dell, 1962) provides an example of such an invitation. I offer a full analysis in "Sentimentality and the Academic Tradition," *College English* 37 (1976): 747-66.

³The use of "organic unity" is quite different from its use in structuralist New Criticism, where it came under postmodernist attack. The expression was used (in my undergraduate classroom, at least) to depreciate "mechanical unity." The latter unity could be found in a tragedy that adhered to the classical "unities" but it would get no compliments in response criticism unless it contributed to an affective unity.

⁴I discuss this distinction at length in "'Sentimentality' in Teaching," *The Philosophical Forum* 17 (1986): 217-41.

⁵*Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1967).