

SECOND EDITION

**CONTEMPORARY
LITERARY
CRITICISM**

**LITERARY AND
CULTURAL STUDIES**

**ROBERT CON DAVIS AND
RONALD SCHLEIFER**

CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM

LITERARY AND
CULTURAL STUDIES

Second Edition

Robert Con Davis

University of Oklahoma

Ronald Schleifer

University of Oklahoma



Longman

New York & London

Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies, Second Edition

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Longman Inc., 95 Church Street, White Plains, N.Y. 10601

Associated companies:

Longman Group Ltd., London

Longman Cheshire Pty., Melbourne

Longman Paul Pty., Auckland

Copp. Clark Pitman, Toronto

Pitman Publishing Inc., New York

Executive editor: Gordon T. R. Anderson

Production editor: Louise M. Kahan

Text and cover design: Steven A. Krastin

Production supervisor: Eduardo Castillo

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Contemporary literary criticism.

(Longman English and humanities series)

Includes bibliographies.

1. Criticism—History—20th century. I. Davis,
Robert Con, 1948— . II. Schleifer, Ronald.
III. Series.

PN94.C67 1989 801'.95'0904 88-6780

ISBN 0-8013-0154-8

88 89 90 91 92 93 94 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface

READING LITERARY CRITICISM

This book derives largely from our experience teaching literary criticism in undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Oklahoma, the University of Tulsa, and Knox College. Additionally, we were enriched, and this book has benefited, from discussions about contemporary criticism with faculty and students at the University of Hawaii, Kenyon College, Marquette University, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, the Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, as well as a few other institutions. Finally, this second edition has been greatly improved by the help and good advice of a host of people who have used the first edition. Many of these people were friends and colleagues, but at least equal in number were the many who simply wrote to discuss their experiences using the book in class. In all of these ways, then, the book has been designed and shaped by more or less formal teaching situations.

All of us who have attempted to teach contemporary criticism have repeatedly watched some students struggle with this “exotic” and “difficult” subject. Many other students, however, have few difficulties from the beginning, do well in class and on papers, and clearly enjoy studying criticism. We are convinced that the second group knows something the first does not—namely, how to study this subject, or, better, how to do things with criticism. For literary criticism is not intrinsically a discipline to isolate and study. It is, by definition, always related to something else, and as such it is an activity, a doing in the human sciences, which, as we argue in the introduction, opens onto the largest questions about the relationship of people to culture. “Doing” criticism, in this way, is one of the more important things a literate person can do.

Students who do well with this material not only recognize criticism as essentially an activity to be performed but also see it as important. Other students tend to regard criticism as simply a body of knowledge to be learned, in which failure is always lurking so that each new critical position or school they encounter could be something to confuse and confound them. They imagine that successful completion of the course means getting through it unscathed, “mastering” criticism, but basically remaining untouched by the critical positions they have examined, their own views on literature still intact. In “Psychoanalysis and Education” in Section VIII Shoshana Felman discusses these two versions of “learning.” They are related, as she demonstrates, to Jonathan Culler’s discussion of “Convention and Meaning” in Section IV, and tutored by the recent turn in psychology and psychoanalysis discussed by Jacques Lacan, Barbara Johnson, and Jerry Flieger in Section V. The “performative” version of learning encourages students to view a course in criticism as a tour on which they will explore a number of worlds from the “inside.” When students read the New Critics, for example, as much as possible they should “become” New Critics and see a text held in tension by irony and paradox—

organized, as Cleanth Brooks says, by the structure of the imagination. When they read poststructuralism, they should come to know a text as decentered by the play of difference and learn to read while undoing the fixation of hierarchical authority. As Marxist critics, they should try to understand a text as situated within an ideological superstructure in relation to an historical and “material” base, while as feminist critics, they should (whether they are men or women) self-consciously read, in Elaine Showalter’s words, “as a woman.”

In other words, “becoming” a critic is making the assumptions particular critics make about literature and culture in their reading and understanding. Learning (and “doing”) criticism, like learning to play the piano, is something one practices to do, that one does by *doing*. Students may eventually reject some or all of the critical schools covered. But while studying each school, they can try to see it as one of its adherents might view it. Becoming a “member” of the critical school we are studying constitutes a methodological wager that valuable insight can be gained from a sympathetic entry into a critical system, as opposed to an “objective” scrutiny of a foreign object—or a wary tiptoeing around a danger. At the end of this book, essays will examine the most fundamental assumptions of these schools themselves and situate the practice of criticism in larger social contexts of the classroom, the profession, and society at large. But even these macrocosmic approaches to criticism—these broad “stances”—are positions to be assumed by students.

Seeing criticism not as a set of monuments—or dangers to avoid, as the case may be—but as a set of activities undertaken with others who have made a record of their explorations in literary studies makes a critical stance something that one tries out, tries on, lives in, lives through, and digests. It is an experience that one actively engages in rather than a difficulty that one avoids or fends off. In short, doing things with criticism makes it possible to understand and to enact criticism rather than merely to know it.

READING CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM

This book is intended to help readers to do things with—to explore and interrogate—contemporary literary criticism and theory. To that end, it provides the immediate background for current criticism with essays from the Modernist and Formalist movements. The book then presents criticism from six major paradigms, or large systems of thought—rhetorical, structuralist, poststructuralist, psychological, historical, and gender-based—and a final section (the longest in the book) examines the ways that contemporary criticism has taught us to reexamine and “critique” (a concept explicitly discussed in the introduction to Section IV) the practice of literary studies themselves in terms of the “ethics” of criticism, the profession of teaching, and the formation of literary canons, of what comprises “literature.” This is not an inclusive listing of contemporary approaches to reading literature—it presents little that deals with traditional literary history or, at another extreme, the homosexual dimensions in literature. And it touches too little on the rich, recent work demonstrating the relationship between reading and writing. But the eight areas covered are arguably major developments that suggest and connect with many of the others and are likely to spawn other developments in this century and beyond.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SECTIONS

A significant feature of this book is the manner in which each section is structured. First of all, we have chosen the first essay of each section to provide a relatively clear and basic description of the school or approach of the whole section. Burke, Culler, Williams, Brooks, and Showalter each provide a lucid introduction to a way of thinking about literature—a way of performing, enacting, criticism—which helps to situate the essays that follow in each section. Even in Section III we have attempted to introduce the interdisciplinary work of structuralism with Saussure's technical but illuminating attempt to reorient students to language study. In the first and last sections, the opening essays have a conspicuous function. T. S. Eliot's famous "Tradition and the Individual Talent" begins *Contemporary Literary Criticism* by reminding us that "criticism is as inevitable as breathing." Northrop Frye's equally famous essay then begins the last section by attempting to define the "function" of criticism at the present time. Both of these essays help to situate the activity of criticism in general in relation to wider areas of concern addressed in the book as a whole.

Moreover, the essays of each section were not chosen for their harmony with one another. While the essays in Section V dealing with what is perhaps the most formidable language of contemporary approaches to literature, that of recent French psychoanalysis, build upon one another to reinforce understanding through reading and rereading, every other section is designed to include in its last selection a work within its particular paradigm that raises important questions about the approach of that section. Viktor Shklovsky's essay in Section I, for instance, offers a version of formalism that participates in and yet transforms the Western Formalisms of T. S. Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, and Wimsatt and Beardsley. Patrocino Schweickart, in Section II, offers a feminist overview and critique of the versions of rhetorical criticism described in that section. Julia Kristeva's haunting essay in Section III both presents and undermines the scientific semiotics examined in that section. Perhaps most striking is Stephen Greenblatt's "new historicism" in Section VI that subtly transforms the "base/superstructure" model of Marxist criticism into a more "textual" model—a "superstructure/superstructure" model as it were—of the new historicism. Michel Foucault offers a similar "reorienting" of deconstructive criticism in Section IV, and Gayatri Spivak, in Section VII, brings the kind of social critique that feminist studies have incorporated within their critical practice to alter the practice of Western feminism itself. Even the difficulties of Section V that we attempted to mitigate with more "harmonious" selections are subject to the scrutiny of Jerry Fliieger's overview of Freudian and Lacanian readings in relation to feminism. It is our conviction—supported by our and others' experience—that these conflicts and the diversity they represent will enable students to explore contemporary criticism productively beyond the eight paradigms represented.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Like the other sections, the essays of Section VIII, "Ethics, Profession, Canon," are designed to raise questions about one another, and in this section we have included a version of the Miller/Abrams debate discussed in the introduction

as well as Edward Said's critical look at the nature of contemporary critical "debate" altogether. But we have also designed this section to answer, in the wider context of the "cultural studies" discussed in the introduction, the various approaches *Contemporary Literary Criticism* presents, and to engage in "debate" with many of the essays from other sections. Here again, Frye's introductory essay addresses, among other things (including the "pluralism" of M. H. Abrams's approach in this section), the formalism of Section I and the "textual rhetoric" of Section II, and it offers a rationale for the systematization of structuralism in Section III. J. Hillis Miller's essay catalogues the various "grounds" represented by various schools of criticism (Sections III, IV, V, VI, and VII), even while it attempts to argue with the Arnoldian premises of literary historians like Abrams (Section VIII) and rhetoricians like Ong (Section II). Said examines the debates of criticism from an "historical" view that, implicitly and explicitly, examines the historical approaches of Section VI, and Felman expands the view of psychoanalysis (Section V) to include teaching. Gates offers a social-historical reading—in relation to Afro-American culture—of the "signifying" of structuralism and poststructuralism (Sections III and IV), and Robinson examines feminist studies (Section VII) in relation to the literary canon.

In other words, the essays of this book are closely interrelated, and the last section attempts to make that interrelationship clear. There are two other ways we have attempted to clarify this. The introduction to each section provides a list of "related" readings at its end. These alternative readings address the concerns defined by the paradigm of that section from a different vantage point. Further, each section provides cross references to essays in other sections as well as to a variety of readings not contained in the book. In this way, students and instructors can choose to follow a thematic rather than paradigmatic exploration of contemporary literary studies. But more than this, the introduction to each section also offers an overview of the paradigm governing the essays contained in it, which aims, as far as possible, to relate that section to the others. Just as, earlier in the preface, we attempted to relate our discussion of ways of reading criticism to the two definitions of teaching Felman examines in Section VIII—and then offered a short list of essays in the book that help define her approach—so the introduction to each section offers discursive relationships among the sections themselves.

We have substantially redesigned *Contemporary Literary Criticism*—substantially changing the essays from the first edition—so that there are twenty-five new essays, and only nine remain from the first edition. We have also substantially redefined and reordered the section headings. The most striking addition, we feel, is the expansion of the general introduction and the eight section introductions. We have attempted, in these introductions, to offer a short overview of contemporary literary and cultural criticism, and we believe that one possible way of reading this text is to begin with the introductions, as one integrated discussion and as a kind of intellectual history of contemporary thought about literature and discourse in general. To this end we have extensively interrelated the discussions across sections. The general introduction examines contemporary criticism and the "humanities" in relation to the concept of the "human sciences" and in relation to cultural studies. Later, the introduction to Section IV, drawing on essays from throughout the book, attempts to define the crucial term "critique" in ways that shed light on all the modes of contemporary literary criticism. And the central introduction, that of Section V (the longest sectional introduction), attempts to

offer a wide discussion of literary studies before and after the advent of “poststructuralism” in the context of psychological approaches to literature: it discusses the introduction of archetypal criticism in the 1950s and the earlier “genetic” criticism of ego-psychology before introducing the specifics of its section. In this, it attempts to situate not only psychoanalytical criticism but all the various forms of criticism “post” structuralism—deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, and the wider cultural critique of Section VIII, including, of course, the “semiotic” Freud of recent psychological criticism. The last introduction in many ways sums up all the other sectional introductions, and the introductions together comprise a history—a coherent narrative and survey—of contemporary critical thought.

Thus, *Contemporary Literary Criticism* offers alternative tables of contents in the cross-referenced essays in the introductions, and it offers, as well, a text-survey of the field of criticism and theory as a whole. Many who offered suggestions and criticism based on using the first edition expressed a need for such guides for students and classes, and we hope that these innovations will prove to be useful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As we mentioned, a large number of people assisted us in redesigning the second edition of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. As in the first edition, Gordon T. R. Anderson of Longman helped us immensely and gave much encouragement. Many colleagues and friends at the University of Oklahoma lent books, read material, made suggestions, and endlessly discussed this collection with us. They include James Comas, David S. Gross, Nancy Mergler, and Alan R. Velie. Also, several colleagues and graduate students wrote some of the biographical headnotes for the critics represented in the book, as follows: John C. Orr—W. K. Wimsatt, Monroe C. Beardsley, and Cleanth Brooks; David S. Gross—Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton; Thomas Elliott—Peter Brooks and Tzvetan Todorov; Jeannie Rhodes—Elaine Showalter and Julia Kristeva; Joyce Zonana—Sandra M. Gilbert; Suzanne Rose—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Hélène Cixous; Tom Argiro—Walter Ong, S. J.; James Comas—Kenneth Burke and Michel Foucault; Susan Williams—Jonathan Culler and Edward Said; Elizabeth Hinds—Jacques Lacan and (with Thomas Bowden) Mikhail Bakhtin; Pamela Liggett—Ferdinand de Saussure; Dorie Glickman—T. S. Eliot; Kate Meyers—Patrocínio Schweickart and Shoshana Felman; Betty Neal—Barbara Johnson and Lillian Robinson; Justin Everett—Northrop Frye; T. Roring—Stephen Greenblatt. Our greatest debt, however, is to Thais Morgan of Arizona State University who, as in the first edition, offered superb general advice and helpful specific suggestions beyond what we could have hoped for. In addition to all of this help, we received much encouragement and practical advice from Nina Baym, Shari Benstock, Paul Bové, Peter Brooks, Régis Durand, Stanley Fish, Barbara Foley, Sandra M. Gilbert, Norman N. Holland, Juliet McCannell, Patrick McGee, J. Hillis Miller, James C. Raymond, Russell Reising, Edward Said, and Elaine Showalter.

Dr. Kenneth Hoving, Vice Provost for Research, and Dr. Robert Hemenway, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, kindly supplied two research assistants, Christy Leiter and Jeannie Rhodes—wonderful and tireless helpers without whom there would be no second edition of this book. Also, we wish to

thank Dr. George D. Economou, our department chair, for continued support including the valuable assistance of Paula Stacy and Resa Masopust, who did much work and solved many problems for us—we still owe them lunch.

We are profoundly grateful to all of these many friends for their help.

*Robert Con Davis
Ronald Schleifer*

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INTRODUCTION: THE STUDY OF CRITICISM AT THE PRESENT TIME

AN APOLOGY FOR CRITICISM

It should not surprise any reader of an introduction to literary criticism to encounter defensiveness and apology. Matthew Arnold established the genre of the *apologia critica* when he began "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864) by mentioning the "many objections" to a previous "proposition about criticism, and its importance for the present day." He had erred, he quoted his detractors as saying, in that the "importance . . . [he] assigned to criticism . . . was excessive." Arnold then pointed out that there is creativity in criticism as well as in literature: "If it were not so," he said, "all but a very few men would be shut out from the true happiness of all men." Northrop Frye also took this apologetic stance in the introduction to *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), an introduction first published in 1949, and reprinted in Section VIII of this book, as "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." In that essay Frye worried that the critic was being viewed as an "artist manqué" and that criticism was taken as a "parasite form of literary expression," a "second-hand imitation of creative power." Appearing fifteen years after this text and apparently confirming Frye's fear, Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* (1966) scolded all critics for their interpretation of literary texts, for their claims, in particular, that "X is really—or really means—A. . . . That Y is really B. . . . That Z is really C." More valuable than this misleading activity, in Sontag's view, was "transparence," "the highest, most liberating value in art"—that is, "experiencing the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are." Interpretation, she concluded rather sharply, is simply pointless. David Lodge disputed this attitude in his foreword to *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (1972) and imagined a cadre of "teachers of literature who believe that students should be discouraged from reading criticism, on the grounds that such reading blunts their capacity for independent response and judgment."

More recently, Geoffrey Hartman wrote his own version of the *apologia critica* in *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), the epigraph for which he took from Arnold's "Function of Criticism" essay. Beginning with T. S. Eliot's assurance that "criticism is as inevitable as breathing," Hartman explores "the gulf between philosophic criticism [in Continental Europe] and practical

criticism [in England and the United States]," repeatedly assuring us that "criticism" must be accorded its status as "a genre, or a primary text," too. In this Hartman is shifting the grounds of anxiety associated with criticism—or at least making them more apparent. This anxiety is occasioned by the possibility that criticism might be more than just commentary, more, in fact, than "just" literary. Along this same line, J. Hillis Miller in "The Search for Grounds in Literary Study" (Section VIII) focuses his discussion around Arnold and contemporary understandings of his critical practice in order to isolate an "imperial" element in literary criticism. Beginning in the eighteenth century at least, Miller argues, literary criticism—as well as "contemplating" and "explaining" literary works—has attempted to address wider areas of cultural practice beyond literature. The study of literature, Miller says, "has been weighted down in our culture with the burden of carrying from generation to generation the whole freight of the values of that culture, what Matthew Arnold called 'the best that is known and thought in the world.'" Miller explicitly raises the questions of why this should be—what historical events in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries might have contributed to this practice, and what implications it has for the study of literature. But whatever its implications, this phenomenon has occasioned repeated apologies for criticism, repeated discussions and much anxiety about the nature and goals of literary study.

THE CONTRARIETY OF CRITICISM

In this context undergraduate and graduate literature students could well have their own anxiety about the *apologia critica*. They may wonder what they are getting into when the critics themselves are unsure about what they are doing. Is this *apologia* a gesture of modesty cloaking the grand—perhaps presumptuous—ambitions of traditional literary study? Is it an indication that critics are simply nervous about the usefulness of what they are doing? It is historically true that from Dante's time on, writers also have been critics. The coupling of poetry and poetics, therefore, should not be startling to anyone. Why, then, should critics—at least since the time of Arnold—be nervous or even unclear about what they do, especially now, when so many "do" criticism during what can legitimately be called "the critical age"? Indeed, most of the "literary theorists" in world history, those who actually try to formulate the principles of literary study, are probably alive at the present time.

Despite the wide practice of criticism and formulation of theory, the conflict within critical practice that Arnold articulates and Miller describes gives rise to great anxiety and great intellectual debate. This conflict is the contradiction between the modest activity of creating a situation in which the best that is known and thought can have wide currency (Sontag's "transparency" or Frye's description of the job of criticism "to get as many people in contact with the best that has been and is being thought and said") and the imperial "burden" of maintaining cultural values in general (Frye's description of the "verbal universe, in which life and reality are inside literature" and which only the methods of criticism can help us to understand). In fact, the very function of criticism has changed or become more self-reflective in recent

time. Contemporary criticism has expanded its horizon to include a vast array of questions (Miller's "freight") that heretofore seemed outside, or only implicit within, its purview. This includes questions of politics, semantics, the philosophy of language, sexual and social relations, and probing concerning the nature of literary study—its responsibilities and its very objects of study.

Such expansion has occasioned much controversy and debate, exacerbating rather than resolving the contradiction within criticism and the anxiety of its practice. The exploration of wider cultural questions has come in recent times to be called literary "theory," and while literary theory is not always explicitly apologetic, it often meets tremendous opposition, especially within the academy, since it has tended to make explicit the very contradiction in criticism that occasioned Arnold's anxiety. Moreover, the apologies for criticism we have examined are forms of self-consciousness in critical practice, and in one sense literary "theory" is always apologetic precisely because it self-consciously explores and situates what it is doing. Thus, from the first articulations of modern literary theory in the early nineteenth century when Friedrich Schlegel imagined criticism to be a "reconstructive" process whereby a critic enhances the development of art, it has self-consciously explored its practice and social situation. In so doing, as Schlegel imagined (and Hartman later claimed), the critic actually elevates criticism as a genre to the level of art. Schlegel's romantic view of criticism as an organic outgrowth of art survives in the poetics of the English Romantics and in the theory of such neoclassicists as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as well as in much current thinking.

The contrary view, however, also present in the early nineteenth century, says that criticism merely supplements art and, at worst, is a parasite draining away its lifeblood. At best it is a "hermeneutics" whose aim is to recover the intentional meanings of the artist and then, mission accomplished, quietly disappear. Only on occasion, in this view, does criticism marginally increase our appreciation of artistic form, thereby giving support to art in a limited way. This separation of criticism from art is also implicit in Frank Kermode's idea of genre as a "consensus, a set of foreunderstandings exterior to a text which enable us to follow that text." Kermode, thus, believes that criticism is totally dependent on literature, and he therefore has little sympathy for the conflicts, and convolutions, of current theory. Criticism is merely an adjunct to literature, and the two—as Kermode believes—belong in different areas of culture anyway.

Current theory, lacking Schlegel's belief in unity and Kermode's in separation, has intensified this debate. Contemporary criticism, in fact, is stranded between these two views—"nervous" about criticism's having a separate identity, and yet it constantly undermines distinctions separating fiction and poetry, or prose fiction and expository prose, and even (despite what Kermode says) the basic distinction between criticism and literature. Certainty about the discreteness of critical and literary texts has been vanishing for some time, and we are left with a hybrid critical "thing," which Henry James's term for the novel as a genre could describe—a baggy monster, that is, criticism and literature intertwined and intermixed, and mutually implicated. In other words, we consistently find it more difficult than Kermode suggests to place the implicit "and" between criticism/literature and cannot say precisely how the two relate, either merging or forming a relationship. As we have been asking, why does it make critics nervous to formulate the relationship of criticism and literature?

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

We can focus on these questions by looking at a specific dispute, the recent controversy over the criticism/literature relationship between M. H. Abrams and J. Hillis Miller. In a review of Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971), Miller—who genuinely appreciates Abrams's work—grants the fundamental claim of Abrams's historical scholarship, namely that “Blake, Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and the rest have ‘translated’ the supernaturalism of the Platonic and Christian tradition into a humanism” and that what followed this “translation” is the fact of Romanticism itself. But Miller goes on to add the qualification that “Abrams’ presuppositions [in such a study] . . . are themselves a version of Western metaphysics, even a version which might be defined as romantic. *Natural Supernaturalism* therefore presents the familiar spectacle of a book about Romanticism which is permeated through and through with Romantic assumptions.” Miller is arguing that Abrams, unconsciously drawing upon Romantic assumptions in his work, unwittingly blurs the distinction between criticism and literature, even though it is this distinction upon which his “criticism” is based.

In a description of his work Abrams says that “in retrospect, I think I was right to compose *Natural Supernaturalism* . . . by relying [almost solely] on taste, tact, and intuition rather than on a controlling method,” because the rules of Romantic discourse “are complex, elusive, unsystematic, and subject to innovative modification; they manifest themselves in the intuitive expertise of the historian; and the specification of these rules should not precede, but follow practice.” Thus, whereas Miller demonstrated that Abrams wrote a Romantic (though “critical”) fiction in *Natural Supernaturalism*—a “fiction” in the genre of “criticism,” a fiction that reiterates the characteristics of other Romantic fictions—Abrams, like Kermode, claims that he was simply working intuitively to discover the threads of Romantic influence that are located with objective validity “out there,” actually in poetry. Abrams saw no such Romantic stance in his own work, no mixing, or contamination, of poetry with criticism. Literature and Criticism, for Abrams, like “life” and “art,” are intelligible only as distinct entities, the “and” in this coupling indicating total separation.

Further, Abrams also sees criticism as a fundamentally derivative pursuit that draws its life (parasitically) from literature’s body. Criticism, if the world were a little better place, would not be needed. In contrast, for Miller the “and” implicit in “criticism/literature” is a moment of “aporia” designating varying and reversible priorities wherein we may see—upsetting Abrams’s schema—the “critic as host” to literary texts. This is a reversal, as Miller writes, in which “both word and counterword [“host” and “guest”] subdivide. Each reveals itself to be fissured already within itself, to be” in Miller’s term borrowed from Freud, “uncanny.” In other words, literature is the host, as Abrams claims, or criticism and literature participate in a “literary” discourse where “host” and “guest” are significant and reversible alternatives—phases, so to speak, in the process of reading. In sum, for Miller, criticism (nurture) is inherently “fictional,” and fiction (nature) is deeply “critical.” For Abrams, on the other side, the two clearly are not interchangeable in any way that challenges their distinctness or intelligibility as categories.

The Abrams/Miller debate points up, among other things, the range of possibilities in current theory for positioning criticism in relation to literature. If we use Abrams and Miller to mark extremes, we can further divide