# RECONSTRUCTING ENGLISH

by Norman Fruman

A lecture given at MCTE, May 1981.

The last time I spoke before a state council of teachers of English was in California, exactly 20 years ago. The convention topic was "Critical Issues in Instruction," and it is depressing to think back on what we then regarded as serious problems. How to cope with the flood of students advancing upon us, for example? Could we clean up the Augean Stables of composition simply by refusing to enroll students below a certain level of competence, and dropping the subject altogether, an idea that was catching on at major universities all over the country?

We didn't know it, of course, but ours were the happy problems of abundance. Between 1955 and 1965, there was built somewhere in the United States an institution of higher learning at least the size of a junior college every two weeks, while existing colleges and universities expanded frantically. Faculties burgeoned, salaries threatened to become almost respectable, and new Ph.D.'s, innocent of publication, were turning down assistant professorships in geographically undesireable places, like northern Minnesota.

When I began teaching in that happy era, there was great confidence in the theoretical foundations of our discipline. The New Criticism had triumphed. An unprecedented analytical rigor had been brought to literary criticism. Criticism was defined as reasoned discourse. A valid interpretation was thought to rest upon scrupulously observed evidence in the text itself.

It is hard to accept that the New Critical consensus is now a shambles. In its place is a broad spectrum of European ideas, mainly French, and often as mediated by Yale. These ideas are characterized by a pervasive skepticism as to the possibility of objective or stable knowledge about literary meaning. Believers in normative interpretation are on the defensive, and dwindling in number. "Literary study is at present," wrote E.D. Hirsch five years ago, "the most skeptical and decadent branch of humanistic study." From Hirsch's point of view, matters have



much deteriorated since then.

My topic this afternoon concerns what I regard as the most persistent and disturbing problem in literary studies brought about by modern literary theory, including New Criticism, namely that of interpretation. This subject arouses intense partisanship, which I would gladly avoid. The issues are crucial, however, and what I shall have to say is not intended to provoke controversy but to bring some homely evidence from the classroom to bear upon certain key problems which are too often discussed abstractly.

There is today no longer any agreement as to what constitutes a good interpretation, or on what basis one reading of a text is superior to another. In such an atmosphere, obviously, the authority of the teacher is threatened because his claim to expertise can be rejected as a pathetic illusion.

In a recent dispute over the interpretation of Milton, Stanley Fish, one of the most influential of American theorists, baldly stated that his critical methodology is "a superior fiction, and since no methodology can legitimately claim any more, this superiority is decisive [that is to say, his way of doing criticism over other people's]. It is also creative. . . it makes possible new ways of reading and thereby creates new texts . . . My fiction is liberating. It relieves me of the obligation to be right (a standard that simply drops out) and demands only that I be interesting (a standard that can be met without any reference at all to an illusory objectivity").

Fish's candor is almost disarming. He doesn't claim to be right--that standard is unnecessary--only interesting. Moreover, nobody can hope to do more. This is certainly a far cry from the stern and vigilant atmosphere of the classic New Critical texts. They not only claimed that their interpretations were correct, they more or less assumed the "interpretive inadequacy" (to borrow a phrase of Frank Kermode) of all their predecessors--all previous criticism being but a prelude to the present enlightened era, theirs.

A book like Cleanth Brooks' The Well Wrought Urn radiated interpretive authority. I recently reread his famous essay on

Macbeth, "The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness." Brooks scrutinized the passages on the naked babe "striding the blast" and the one about the daggers "attired in their bloody breeches," and wrote that though the passages are "strained," they "are far more than excrescences, mere extravagances of detail: each, it seems to me, contains a central symbol of the play, and symbols which we must understand if we are to understand either the detailed passages or the play as a whole."

I distinctly remember when I first read this sentence looking up from the page and asking myself, "Can Brooks really mean that nobody has ever properly understood Macbeth before? Would the greatest of popular dramatists make central symbols of passages meant to be heard in a theater, heard once, and if a listener did not grasp their significance he would not understand the play?"

Perhaps I am idiosyncratic in this regard, but all such assertions in criticism seem to me offensively presumptuous and pernicious in their cumulative effect. By making extravagant claims for the significance of their insights about how literature worked, the New Criticism created an atmosphere in which wholly new interpretations of familiar works became commonplace. An unstated ideal was precisely this, originality. A new interpretations, however improbable, might at least produce a lively discussion. A critical essay in the old style, however sensible, was, well, old fashioned, and probably not publishable. The classical spirit in criticism practically expired; I mean that spirit which seeks to mediate between what is individual in us, and in the texts we read, and what is common or natural to all readers.

New Criticism thus produced the paradoxical, the ironic effect of undermining confidence in the objectivity of interpretation altogether. On the one hand we now have many critics, like Stanley Fish, or Jacques Derrida, who regard the goal of objective interpretation as an illusion, and on the other those critics who put forward amazing new interpretations of familiar works as resting upon genuine evidence, which perhaps nobody but the author really believes in.



An instructive example of the latter is a PMLA article on Mrs. Dalloway, with the trendy subtitle "Literary Allusion as Structural Metaphor." In the first paragraph one finds the following: "An allusion to Cymbeline, appearing at five key points, supplies the novel's central structure. The lines from the play give Clarissa's experience coherence and significance. They link events in the lives of different characters. And they create an intricate symbolic system." Does this mean that if one has not read Cymbeline the novel's "central structure" is unavailable? And what about the many who have read Cymbeline and don't remember it well enough for such allusions to work? For such readers, will Clarissa's experiences lack "coherence and significance"? Surely this is a wierd, ivory-tower notion of how novelists think. If I were a young student who had read and enjoyed Mrs. Dalloway and had come to class expecting enlightenment, I would resent being told that to understand this book I must have read another work, and remembered that work in detail. It happens that this article on "Mrs. Dalloway: Literary Allusion as Structural Metaphor" was sharply criticized in subsequent issues of PMLA, more for errors of fact than interpretive irresponsibility. One of the commentators was the distinguished novelist Joyce Carol Oates, who wrote that the dead, like poor Virginia Woolf, could not rise from the grave to defend themselves against critics running amok, but that she as a living author might be permitted some remarks. She wrote of "the bewildering and contradictory and, occasionally, quite mad 'discoveries' made about my own writing." She went on to say that "most people in our profession [she is a teacher, too] do not realize, that they are expressing their own ideas and emotions, primarily, under the guise of objective criticism."

She gave an example from an essay on one of her novels in which the critic had traced her "proper names back to their OE and IE roots, where of course they 'mean' something--as what word does not?--when I had, deliberately, chosen names from a Detroit telephone directory in order not to choose symbolic, meaning-laden names. Perhaps it is cruel to say this, but one of the symptoms of the paranoid schizophrenic is his grim

determination to see patterns and symbolic meanings everywhere, even in the arrangement of clouds in the sky." When I showed this passage to a certain critic, he reacted with angry contempt. It didn't matter in the slightest, he insisted, whether or not Joyce Carol Oates had taken her names at random from a telephone directory. What mattered was whether the critic had done something interesting with the names. There is a sense, of course, in which Oates' testimony does not foreclose discussion. She might, for example, have been lying. But to insist that her remarks are irrelevant even if she were telling the truth seems to me to display a species of critical derangement, one of the monstrous consequences of pushing the theory of the intentional fallacy--which has its cautionary uses--to irrational extremes.

As Samuel Johnson once said in another connection, there is always an appeal from theory to life. And the life of the classroom tells a very different story about truth and validity in interpretation than is common among many theorists today. We who are faced with the daily task of making sense of texts for our students know that most texts are not difficult to interpret; from most a valid, agreed-upon meaning can be extracted. This is not to say that such texts are simple minded. Far from it. But excessive emphasis on the great interpretive problems of literature, The Turn of the Screw, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "The Secret Sharer," "The Mental Traveller," and pouncing upon and lingering over every ambiguity that language is heir to, has quite unnecessarily complicated the already formidable problems of helping our students to read, understand, and enjoy the overwhelming majority of great books, poems, and plays.

Let me begin with a basic exercise in reading. Some years ago, I came across a very surprising letter in a sports story. It had been sent by the head of the English Department at Purdue University, a Dr. Barriss Mills, to the then head coach of the football team, Jack Mollenkopf. I brought this letter into a freshman composition class as an example of a certain kind of writing, but what happened was so unexpected that I found myself completely rethinking my objectives in all the



other courses I taught. Here is Dr. Mills' letter.

Dear Coach Mollenkopf:

Remembering our discussion of your football men who were having troubles in English, I have decided to ask you, in turn, for help.

We feel that Paul Spindles, one of our most promising scholars, has a great chance for a Rhodes Scholarship, which would be a great thing for him and for Purdue. Paul has the academic record for this award, but we find that the aspirant is also required to have other excellences, and ideally should have a good record in athletics.

We propose that you give some special consideration to Paul as a varsity player, putting him if possible in the backfield of the football team. In this way, we can show a better college record to the committee deciding on the Rhodes scholarships. We realize that Paul will be a problem on the field, but--as you have often said--co-operation between our department and yours is highly desirable, and we do expect Paul to try hard, of course.

During his intervals of study we shall coach him as much as we can. His work in the English Club and on the debate team will force him to miss many practices, but we intend to see that he carries an old football around to bounce (or whatever one does with a football) during intervals in his work.

We expect Paul to show entire good will in his work for you, and though he will not be able to begin football practice till late in season, he will finish the season with good attendance.

Sincerely yours,
Dr. Barriss Mills
Head, English Department

P.S. We are delaying a decision on your request made to this department regarding a passing grade for your fullback, Pete Jarmanski, until we receive your favorable reply.

My students, all but a handful, misunderstood the point

of this letter. And this has been true whenever I have used it, at all levels of instruction. They supposed that Mills was blackmailing Mollenkopf, and were morally judgmental. They volunteered such observations as, "Passing Jarmanski may not be cricket, but putting a weakling like Spindles in the backfield of a Big Ten football team is an invitation to murder."

Class discussion of this letter has always been extremely lively, bringing forward attitudes towards all sorts of interesting subjects. But in every class there is always a small number of students--in one class a single, embattled female--who thinks that Mills is sarcastic. When I ask, "How do you know whether Mills is serious?" There is always a worried pause, an anxious rereading, and a certain amount of immediate wavering by a few students. The majority, however, are grimly prepared to stick to their guns. Nobody likes to be wrong on a matter like this. So we begin to analyze the letter, sentence by sentence.

Time obliges me to touch only on key points. Would the head of an English Department write, "Paul Spindles has a great chance for a Rhodes Scholarship, which would be a great thing for him and for Purdue"? Is he mocking the football coach's speech? Maybe. But students will say it's just as probable he is using language likely to appeal to the coach. There are potential lawyers in every class and their blood is up. So we go on. Dr. Mills suggests that Spindles be put in the backfield. That's a bit much, to be sure. Third-string defensive-end might be a more reasonable request. Argumentation along these lines will not get the teacher far. "We realize Paul will be a problem on the field, but . . . we do expect him to try hard, of course." Would Dr. Mills go out of his way to emphasize that Spindles is a poor athlete? Is the phrase "to try hard, of course," another echo of Mollenkopf? Maybe. More students are now wavering, but most will need much harder evidence than this before they will admit even to themselves that they have misread the letter.

"During his intervals of study"--note that wonderful word intervals--"we shall coach him as much as we can." Can't you



just hear Mollenkopf assuring the head of the English Department that though his players will miss classes they will be coached? Is Mills needling him? Spindles' "work in the English Club and on the debate team will force him to miss many practices, but we intend to see that he carries an old football around to bounce (or whatever one does with a football) during intervals in the work." The effect now is electric. Everybody realizes that no American is so ignorant of football--certainly no professor in the Big Ten--that he doesn't know that footballs aren't bounced, or whatever one does with a football! Illumination is flashing all over the class. Embarrassed, hangdog expressions, but also many good-natured smiles of illumination. It's as if they never actually encountered the sentence before, and they are wondering how they could have been so blind. And in a very real sense they haven't seen this sentence before. Having decided within two or three lines what the purport of the letter was, everything else was read to conform to it. And this is one of the most important truths about reading that a student can learn--and about reading reality in general--namely, that one is not to stop analyzing the data that impinge upon the mind. Meanings change, significances alter. One must not go through life, or a text, wearing blinkers. Everybody now understands that Mills is refusing to pass Jarmanski, and ridiculing Mollenkopf's ignorant assumption that he and his assistants can coach English students in Shakespeare or composition, which makes about as much sense as English teachers coaching Spindles in how to bounce a football, or whatever one does with a football.

I raise a final question. Is there a Paul Spindles at all? You find that almost everybody believes there is such a person. They look at me suspiciously. Does this mean they are going to be hassled some more? In some ways students are extremely naive. They believe that people and texts say what they mean. Is it just an accident that he has such a feeble-sounding name--Paul Spindles? Would the letter have a different effect if the student's name was Bronco Grigorovitch? What is a spindle, anyway? Well, it's a slender rod or pin that

holds yarn and bobs around in the same spot with a kind of herky-jerk, spastic motion--not a promising name for a backfield player.

Now although most students can be persuaded that no such person as Paul Spindles actually exists, I don't believe the teacher should insist on this point with those who remain doubtful. The interpretive point cannot be made conclusively.

Now here is a case where students find a text to have a specific meaning, commit themselves publicly to an interpretation, and yet are prepared to change their minds, publicly, which is always hard, when you come forward with convincing evidence. We should never forget that students look upon us teachers with great respect, until experience deprives them of that confidence. They really do think we know more than they do, that we have knowledge they would like to have, and especially when they don't feel isolated and constitutionally incompetent in their misreadings, they are prepared to be instructed. In this case, a valid interpretation is not just a matter of opinion.

The misunderstanding of imaginative literature, especially of poetry, often derives from various small misreadings of the type we have just encountered. Again and again it is a case of not seeing some variant of, "we intend to see that he carries an old football around to bounce." Here is an example of this process playing havoc with a poem. It consists of three four-line stanzas, and is titled "Piano." Again, I will read without interpretive emphasis:

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.

In spite of myself the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cosy parlour, the tinkling piano our guide.



So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamour
With the great black piano appasionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

Most students dislike this poem intensely. It is "silly, maudlin, sentimental twaddle, perfectly nauseating," and so forth. Apparently the setting of a woman singing in the dusk, the child sitting at the feet of his mother, the Sunday evenings at home, the hymns in the cosy parlor, all this reinforces a decision about the poem made in the first few lines, and that decision is maintained in the face of all signals to the contrary.

So it is in vain that the poet writes, "In spite of myself the insidious mastery of song/Betrays me back . . ." In spite of myself, insidious, betrays--all this is simply edited out of consciousness. The poet, D.H. Lawrence--it makes a difference when you know the name--is saying that music can trigger memories and falsify experience so that even though one knows better, one can weep like a child for the past. "The glamour of childish days." Glamour--delusive, deceptive glorification. "My manhood is cast down." Here is a poem about the insidiousness of memory and nostalgia. It is an anti-sentimental poem.

Surely the basic meaning of this poem is ascertainable and objectivity not an illusion. Analyzing it in class, and the nature of the student responses, is a lessen in reading and also in life. There are intellectual and emotional rewards in paying attention to the obvious, what is actually there, palpable, up front, before we jump to symbols, ironies, and what is between the lines. All too often what is between the lines is white space invested with meaning by excessively ingenious interpreters.

In interpreting literature with our students we often proceed at far too high a level of complexity, long before they are ready--some may never be ready, although they are perfectly capable of enjoying literature, even very good literature, at its

available surface level, which is not to be despised. Tolstoy was not entirely wrong when he said that much of the world's great literature could be immediately understood by ordinary people. When Wordsworth writes at the end of one of the Lucy poems:

She died, and left to me
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;
The memory of what has been,
And never more will be,

We hardly need a skilled interpreter to mediate between the poem and the student. He understands such lines directly and will be moved by them to the extent that he has not been put out of touch with his feelings. Though it is too often denied, much of the world's great literature does speak directly to us. However, even when a poem's meaning rests on an irony or metaphor that results in confusion, the condition need not be permanent. Thus, when a student reads the beginning of Keats' "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer,"

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen,

he may already be in an alien ball park and not know it. If you ask what are the realms of gold, you will often hear something about tropical countries under blazing suns, the equator, or perhaps the mythical Eldorado where the streets were paved with gold. The title--"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer"--seems to provide no useful guide as to what the poem might be about, even with a note which explains that Chapman translated Homer. (Some were perhaps anticipating that the poem was about an outstanding athletic achievement.) The pattern previously described repeats itself here: a premature response becomes fixed and the text is accommodated like one of Procrustes' guests, stretched or amputated to fit a certain bed of interpretation. That the realms of gold refers to the world of great books is not at all obvious, and the interpretive problem for an inexperienced reader, which is mostly what we have these days, is greatly complicated by metaphors which do not draw attention to themselves. Keats' sonnet as a whole, however, does not



offer unresolvable interpretative difficulties. Students, unless incorrigibly oppositional, will accept that the poem is about the excitement of discovering what great poetry is like because they see that such an interpretation makes sense and accounts for all the important details.

What about poems that really are obscure, where no amount of analysis produces a fully convincing interpretation? Take Blake's "The Sick Rose":

O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

This is a marvellous poem with which to discuss symbolism because it produces so powerful an effect even when imperfectly understood, which is the case 100% of the time. It is easy to show that we are not dealing here with diseases of plants. Obviously, something more is involved, if only because of the emotional intensity that blazes out of the poem. But what is that something more? What is the howling storm? The invisible worm? "I think the invisible worm is a phallic symbol," a young woman declared in one of my classes a few years ago. To which another young woman replied, after a pause, "If you think the invisible worm is a phallic symbol, I think you should get another boyfriend." Well, why not? The Worm and the Rose have been interpreted to mean practically everything else. Almost a generation ago, Laurence Perrine surveyed the bewildering variety of readings this poem has received and addressed the following crucial question:

> if the rose can mean love, innocence, humanity, imagination, and life; and if the worm can mean the flesh, jealousy, deceit, concealment, possessiveness, experience, Satan, rationalism, death (and more), can the two symbols therefore mean just anything? The answer is No. The rose must always

represent something beautiful or desirable or good. The worm must always represent some kind of corrupting agent. Both symbols define an area of meaning, and a viable interpretation must fall within that area.

This confidence has proven misguided, for Harold Bloom seems to think that the Worm has been so frustrated by the Rose keeping herself hidden--her bed of crimson joy has had to be found out--that his love becomes destructive. The poor Worm. The Rose had it coming to her for playing hard to get.

Consider "The Clod and the Pebble":

"Love seeketh not Itself to please,
Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

Almost every reader is instantly going to approve of the loving, sacrificial Clod.

So sung a little Clod of Clay,
Trodden with the cattle's feet,
But a Pebble of the brook
Warbled out these metres meet:

"Love seeketh only Self to please,
To bind another to Its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
And builds a Hell in Heaven's despite."

One expects the poem to go on, but it doesn't. That's it. On the face of it, three cheers for the Clod and curses on the Pebble, whose selfish hedonism creates a hell on earth. One thinks one understands the poem easily enough. Where is there any difficulty? I think it significant that there are always some students who are not comfortable with the obvious and morally satisfying reading of this poem. It's too pat. It doesn't answer to their experience of love. Blake seems like a Sunday school preacher rather than a revolutionary. Is true love so unselfish?

When one looks at the poem more attentively one finds that the unselfish Clod sings his song while being "trodden with the cattle's feet." Is this the philosophy of the world's losers, who make a virtue out of their helplessness? The Pebble



"warbles," while the Clod "sings," Should one make anything of this? The Pebble warbles out these metres meet--a word meaning suitable, fit, appropriate to the situation. Suddenly we are in real interpretive trouble. Can Blake possibly prefer behavior that creates hell rather than heaven? But Blake is the author of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, where Hell gets all the good lines, where the Devil speaks wisdom and whose "Proverbs of Hell" contain some of the profoundest insights in world literature.

In interpreting a poem like this in a classroom it is crucial not to claim too much. Critics rush in where angels (or Blake's devils) fear to tread. Perhaps the appropriate principle here is Wittgenstein's breathtaking dictum: "wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen," "upon that which one cannot speak, one must remain silent." We are not obliged to interpret everything. We often overinterpret. The student should learn that interpretation is sometimes very uncertain, that speculation can be a dazzling kind of intellectual game, but dangerously intoxicating. Blake is an extraordinarily difficult poet, and certainly uncharacteristic. To believe that anything goes in interpretation because certainty is impossible leads to a kind of anarchy whose consequences not only can trivialize literature but induce a profound skepticism towards all knowledge that cannot be quantified.

He who shall teach the Child to Doubt [wrote Blake]
The rotting Grave shall ne'er get out...
If the Sun and Moon should doubt,
They'd immediately Go out.

I don't happen to agree with Blake here, but I do get his point.

Fifty years ago John Middleton Murry reviewed William Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity in the Times Literary Supplement and deplored some of Empson's readings as unnatural and tending to destroy one's capacity to respond to a poem as a poem. "For after all," Murry wrote, "a poem is a poem not least by virtue of its power to ward off these vagaries of intellect [by which he meant Empson's ingenious interpretations]. It [a poem] is to some degree an incantation compelling the wandering mind to response of a certain order; and only so far as the

receiving mind restrains its speculations within the limits of this order is it speculating about the poem at all. For, paradoxical though it must sound, the poem and the words which compose the poem are not the same thing. . ." Murry's statement will, of course, seem hopelessly reactionary to those who regard any text as an opportunity to perform the critical circus act, and everything that restrains the freedom of the speculating mind as a kind of oppression.

Last fall I had a striking experience with a stanza by Keats which I have read and taught innumerable times, but which I had no idea offered such potential for interpretation as a group of my students found in it. I was teaching an undergraduate Honors Seminar in Keats to a dozen very bright non-English majors and had assigned a short paper based on "The Eve of St. Agnes." Each student was to select a single stanza, scan it, analyze its metrical features, and comment upon whatever was notable by way of language and imagery. Four of the twelve students actually chose the same stanza, number 36. Since there are forty-two stanzas in the poem, this result was astonishing. The story up to this point is as follows: the lovely Madeline has gone to bed supperless on St. Agnes Eve so that, as the legend tells, she will see in a dream her future husband. Porphyro, the young man who loves her in a Romeo-and-Juliet, medieval-castle, family-feud situation, has, with the help of Madeline's ancient servant, hidden in a closet. While she is asleep he emerges, spreads a glorious feast, and awakens her with a song. Madeline opens her eyes, sees Porphyro kneeling at her bedside, looking at her piteously. "How changed thou art!" she says. "How pallid, chill, and drear!" It's not clear whether she is awake or thinks she sees him in a dream.

> "Give me that voice again, my Porphyro, (she says)
> Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
> Oh, leave me not in this eternal woe,
> For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go."

Now comes the stanza which four young women choose to analyze:

> Beyond a mortal man impassioned far
> At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
> Ethereal, flushed, and like a throbbing star
> Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;



> Into her dream he melted, as the rose
> Blendeth its odour with the violet,
> Solution sweet--meantime the frost-wind blows
> Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
> Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

Without exception, the entire class, male and female, took this stanza to represent an explicit sexual consummation, which is no doubt why it attracted such enthusiastic attention. "Look at the final lines of the previous stanza," one student wrote. "'Oh, leave me not in this eternal woe, / For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go.' This 'eternal woe' means she is sexually frustrated, and there is a pun on 'diest,' because to die also means to have an orgasm, according to a teacher I once had in Shakespeare."

I kept my cool through all this and will now provide you with a composite explication which draws upon the four readings, with contributions from the rest of the class. Parts of the analysis are cast in the form of a playlet.

"Beyond a mortal man impassioned far / At these voluptuous accents"--voluptuous makes it clear that Madeline spoke to him a sexy way and was inviting him into bed. And an accent is a beat, a stroke, a rhythm, which prepares us for what is to happen. "At these voluptuous accents, he arose"-- he arose: clearly there is a double meaning here, the reverse of synecdoche, for the whole now represents a part, he standing for a certain part of Porphyro. "He arose, / Ethereal, flushed, and like a throbbing star"--throbbing (murmurs of "Hey, wow!" throughout the class). He is throbbing, her voice is beating--the rhythm of sex. "Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;/Into her dream he melted"--into her . . . he melted, what could be more direct? And this has been foreshadowed by the words mid and deep in the preceding line, which implies what is about to happen to Madeline. "He melted"-- what was solid or firm has become soft. Already? Boy, he must have been excited! Poor Madeline! C'mon, that's a crazy interpretation! Why?--it happens! That's not the point; Keats wouldn't be such an idiot! You just ruined the whole poem for me! But that's what it says, "he melted." That may be what

it says but that's not what it means. Can we just scratch the whole suggestion, professor? What do you think? Well, there is always the problem of what to do with what Middleton Murry called the "vagaries of intellect." Unless you can come up with some supporting evidence, a premature caesura, for example, this particular interpretation may be a little hard on Porphyro. But do go on. I'm dying to get a clearer picture of what all this is leading into.

"As the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet"--we are back to the word rose, which represents Porphyro, unmelted, and she is the violet, which of course is a pun on violated. "Solution sweet"--this is the solution to Madeline's sex problem, but solution also means fusion, they are being fused. "Meantime the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window-panes"--the sharp sleet is painful, since this is Madeline's first sexual experience, and there is a pun on window-pane and the pain she is feeling: the window is an entrance, fragile and once broken, broken forever. "St. Agnes' moon hath set"--is a symbol of lost virginity because the virgin Diana, goddess of the moon, is hiding in shame.

There was a great deal more to this which I shall have to pass over, but let me at least mention some other highlights, or lowlights, or colored lights, from the discussion. The word impassioned was declared to contain impasse and shunned: Porphyro is shunning the impasse the young lovers find themselves in. A momentary skeptic wanted to know how a rose can represent Porphyro, a male, since roses traditionally symbolize women: "my love is like a red, red rose; go, lovely rose." A short, concentrated pause followed, and the suggestion came forth that as a rose has a thorn, and can draw blood, it is an appropriate male symbol in this context.

The response of today's post-pill generation to stanza 36 takes for granted what no previous generation would have, namely that two young lovers alone in a bedroom will of course post with haste to tempestuous sheets. No matter that Madeline is a medieval maiden who prays to the Virgin before going to bed, asking for heaven's grace, and boon ("she knelt, so pure a thing



so free from mortal taint") or that Porphyro had sworn on his soul's salvation not to harm her in any way if allowed into her closet. It happens that we have an unusual amount of documentary evidence bearing upon stanza 36. It was regarded by Keats' puritanical publisher, John Taylor, and Keats' good friend Woodhouse, as perfectly chaste and proper, without a single indecent suggestion. Of course they may have been obtuse, but they were intelligent contemporaries much in touch with literary affairs. Perhaps more persausive is the fact that Keats himself obviously thought the lovers too inert, and the stanza perhaps too bare of passionate implication, for he produced a revised version, in which Porphyro goes so far as to put his arms around Madeline, explicitly, presses her "heart to heart," and melts into her now "wild" dream. The extant correspondence shows that Woodhouse became alarmed at this and "apprehended" that the poem was now rendered unfit for women. Keats flew into a rage and declared that he didn't want ladies reading his poetry, only men. Taylor announced that he would certainly not publish anything fit only to read by men, since--I quote--"even on their Minds a bad Effect must follow the Encouragement of those Thoughts which cannot be raised without Impropriety." And so the apparently chaste original stanza went out into the world--to delight ladies as well as men, especially my honors students.

Let us grant that they raised some important questions about this scene in the "Eve of St. Agnes." The narrative obscurity as to what happened, which they exploited, may well reflect a divided purpose in Keats' mind, which his revised stanza would suggest. But the meanings they assigned to so many words and phrases came to be seen by them--without pressure from me--as probably reflecting more of what was on their minds than on Keats'. Does it matter? It does, if you think that Keats' mind and creative process are to some extent knowable and take precedence over one's personal associations. Practically everybody grants that, except certain literary theorists.

I have concentrated on problems of interpretation in the classroom because it is there, in the classroom, that so many of today's students will learn to care about literature or to be

confirmed in their indifference. Whatever may prove to be the ultimate value of literary theory since the rise of the New Criticism, I see no evidence that students today are either better or more committed readers than those of previous generations. On the contrary, evidence accumulates that unremitting stress on complex interpretive questions, on the formal properties of literature--verbal relations, symbols, structure--and hostility to all approaches via ideas, society, psychology, authorial biography--in short the things most readers care about--evidence accumulates that many students, including some of the best, have become estranged. Here is the pained testimony of an idealistic young teacher, with degrees from Wellesley and Harvard, who found herself unprepared to teach literature to today's students.

> At Wellesley what I read moved me deeply; in so many words I was told that my feelings didn't matter, that it was "form" that did. What I read often moved me to reflect on my own experience; I was told essentially that literature was timeless, above the petty details of any one person's daily living. I loved literature; when I reached graduate school I was given to understand that loving literature had nothing to do with literary professionalism. I dimly felt that literature must give life exaltation, specific moral sense; I was told that Western civilization dictated the values of pure form, of universality.

John Stuart Mill relates in his Autobiography how reading Wordsworth's poems helped him overcome his mental crisis and severe depression. A scholar comments, scornfully, "Mill read Wordsworth for what the poems could do for him rather than for what they were in themselves . . . the intrinsic merit of poiesis yields to the utilitarian value of reading." Isn't that just terrible? Of Lionel Trilling, one of the most influential teachers and critics of the past helf century, René Wellek writes: he "belong, with Edmund Wilson, to critics of culture, and he is often concerned with questions of politics, pedagogy, psychology, and self-definition, which are only remotely related



to literature!

It has been the steady and growing pressure of attitudes such as these that has widened the gulf between literature and our students, a relationship already exacerbated by television and the restless quest for instant gratification, so much a feature of modern culture generally. For 2,000 years the justification of literature rested on its power to delight and to instruct. One rarely hears Horace's aut prodesse aut delectare anymore, and the costs have been very heavy. It is easy to forget that art is a social activity, born in religion and arising from our deep need to externalize and share ideas and emotions of all kinds. For the overwhelming majority of us, and of all the students we have had or will have, literature is primarily an experience, emotional, intellectual, religious, political, vicarious, adventure, wish-fulfillment, whatever--but an experience whose value, sometimes incomparable, is ratified first on the pulses. Milton's definition or rule of poetry was that it ought to be simple, sensuous, and impassioned, and I cannot help but believe that approaches to literature which inhibit, frustrate, or needlessly confuse the reader's response is bad criticism and bad pedagogy.

We are an embattled profession, in a time of troubles. The cry of "Why Johnny Can't Read" is becoming, "Why Johnny Can't Teach." We are beset by problems beyond our control--in society at large--but also by disintegrating forces from within, which threaten to undermine the foundations of literary study. We are divided in our aims and purposes. Our greatest strength rests on our love of books--which is what brought us into the profession in the first place--our belief that literature matters, our conviction that great literature really does embody, as Matthew Arnold said, the best that is known and thought in the world, and that these thoughts are available to the attentive reader. In times of trouble it is always wise to fall back on one's strengths.