theories and methodologies

Experts and Encounters

ROBERT CHODAT

IN A 2018 PIECE FOR *THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION*, MICHAEL CLUNE DESCRIBES A "RUDE AWAKENING" HE ONCE EXPERIENCED WHEN developing a new course as a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University. As was customary then at Johns Hopkins, he was required to submit a course proposal that underwent a review by a board of professors from different fields. Clune arrived at the interview ready to discuss a syllabus that, as he recalls, "purported to explain urban decay, novels, the nature of free-market economics, and the political history of the 1970s in one brilliant synthesis." But the board was underwhelmed. As Clune cited the "illustrious figures" and "hallowed formulas" he had learned to incant in literary studies, the political scientists and historians sitting in front of him—people who spend their lives researching stuff like urban decay, free-market economics, and recent political history—responded with "withering skepticism" and did something he hadn't anticipated: they "actually asked difficult questions about the reasoning behind the stars' dicta," unimpressed by "the heroes of literature-department economic, political, and historical thought." Clune doesn't say whether he got to teach the course, but the episode was the first time he began to see literary studies as "a kind of twilight zone," an "exploded discipline" with fading intellectual prestige.

What rudely awakened Clune that day was the possibility that literary critics, unlike scholars elsewhere in the university, have no genuine expertise in anything. The fact that literary critics so routinely draw on other fields—either reflexively or in a conscious effort to be interdisciplinary—might only be the clearest evidence that, at bottom, they are really just dilettantes. For the Johns Hopkins board of professors, what counts as a valid claim in literary studies seemed palpably different from what counts as such in other fields, and most of the historical, philosophical, psychological, and social themes that they—that we—address could be examined more credibly by scholars in other fields.

It's an old worry. There is "no possibility of arguing" over aesthetic issues, the philosopher A. J. Ayer wrote in 1936, and the

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purpose of criticism is "not so much to give knowledge as to communicate emotion." That is, what looks like a judgment is really just a dressed-up expression of "aesthetic feeling" (113), and like all feelings it is ultimately driven by various psychological and sociological causes: blind forces triggering feelings of pleasure or displeasure in us when we are in the presence of certain things. If critics were really dealing with facts, and if they really could argue about the arts, they wouldn't have such interminable disagreements over how to understand Dante or Toni Morrison. On this view, the history of criticism is a series not of rationally defensible claims but of more or less unconstrained expressive noises and avowals. At best, suggests Ayer, literary criticism can contribute to other, less fraudulent fields, providing some useful "data for our psychological and sociological generalizations" (114).

A still closer analogue to the Johns Hopkins committee is found in one of the first written accounts we have of how to conceptualize and interpret literature—namely, Socrates's conversation with Ion. Who, asks Socrates, can best judge the moment in the *Iliad* when Hecamede gives a healing remedy to a wounded soldier? As a prize-winning rhapsode, Ion can recite the passage more vividly than anyone else, but Socrates persuades him that the only legitimate judge would be an expert in medicine. And lines about fishing? Those are best assessed by fishermen. Lines describing chariot rides? Charioteers. Each such passage, says Socrates, takes up a different "object of knowledge," which is to say that each addresses a different "art": medicine, fishing, charioteering (Plato 15, 16). Anyone ignorant of the "knowledge of a specific work" will have "no right judgment of the precepts and practices of that art" (16). Since rhapsodes are not themselves doctors, fishermen, or charioteers, and since so much poetry is preoccupied with activities that these and other agents undertake, it follows that even the most successful rhapsodes don't really understand most of the poetry they interpret. And since rhapsodes are not experts in anything, only one thing can explain how they do what they do: they are swept up in an ecstasy, possessed by the gods, who play the role for Socrates that blind psychological and sociological causes play for Ayer.

Like Clune, I see the John Hopkins board—and their predecessors, Ayer and Plato—as making explicit a problem that has always haunted literary studies but that becomes unavoidable in an age of diminishing esteem, funds, and students. On the one hand, the institutional setting of our work demands that we make clear and distinct claims supported by sound evidence. Like political scientists, historians, psychologists, sociologists, chemists, and astronomers, we're expected to refer to facts and provide reasons, all of which can be shared intersubjectively, and we're expected to explain our premises and inferences to students and peers. In our case this means justifying how a specific sequence of words on a page (movements on a screen, brushstrokes on a canvas, etc.) supports a claim about the meaning of a work, which is often construed as its significance in a wider context (an artist's biography, a decade's trends, the dynamics of the human psyche, a sociohistorical conflict). If a reader were to make an odd claim about *Moby-Dick*—that, say, it's an important book about changing marriage practices in colonial Quebec—then "That's just the feeling I have about it" or "The gods possessed me" would be a disappointing justification, and the disappointment wouldn't come from a whaling crew's telling us that the book was actually about something else. On the other hand, anyone who has ever taught a roomful of first-year students knows how hard it can be to clarify just what counts as a persuasive justification in criticism. The interpretive proposals we make in our classrooms, and the rationales we provide, all too often inspire the sort of skepticism that the Johns Hopkins board voiced to Clune. Self-doubting stu-

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dents grow anxious ("I just don't get it!"), and bolder students roll their eyes ("What b.s.").

What responses are available to these ancient and contemporary doubts? Let me sketch a couple of possibilities. One comes from Iris Murdoch, who not only knew her Plato but received her philosophical education in Ayer's penumbra. Writing about "Ion" in the late 1970s, she acknowledged the force of Socrates's suspicions: "It is indeed fair to ask a critic with what sort of expertise does he judge a poet to be great?" But Plato, she said, too readily stacks the deck, rendering Ion merely "silly": nobody can seriously accept Socrates's categorical distinction between "art," or expert skill, on the one hand, and "madness," or "inspiration," on the other. Murdoch then proposed a third option:

> Ion, looking for something to be expert on, might more fruitfully have answered: a general knowledge of human life, together of course with a technical knowledge of poetry. But Plato does not allow him to pursue this reasonable line. The humane judgment of the experienced literary man is excluded from consideration by Socrates's sharp dichotomy between technical knowledge and "divine intuition."

In the end, she says, Socrates leaves us with the "ambiguous equation 'insanity—senseless intuition—divine insight" and little more than the "portrait of the artist as sophist" (393).

Murdoch is right to find Plato's dichotomies too stark, but the "reasonable" alternative she proposes isn't itself very satisfying. "General knowledge of human life" is a lazy piece of Oxbridgian presumption. For one thing, it's entirely unclear what would *not* constitute a writer's subject matter. Chemists write about atoms, molecules, and ions; astronomers write about moons, planets, nebulae. What does the novelist, poet, or playwright write about? Chariots and fishing, whalers and wars, aged kings and blind prophets, scientific revolutions and political insurrections, unhappy families and Promethean conquests, musical genius and aging parents and substance abuse and gender oppression, sexual compulsion and racist cruelty and class resentment, fleeting glimpses of decency or love or order. . . . What could possibly count as a "general knowledge" of such disparate matters, something possessed by any single author or reader? Moreover, just as the proper subject of literature is hard to name, it's even less clear today than it was in the 1970s what model of writer or reader could legitimately pose as "the experienced literary man" with "humane judgment." The "human life" to which Murdoch casually refers is in fact composed of stunningly varied kinds of persons, who collectively have a stunningly varied range of insights, intuitions, and lived experiences. We may not have Charioteering Studies or Fishing Studies, but the various subfields and sub-subfields that have proliferated in the discipline over the last two decades reflect a skeptical attitude toward Murdoch's vision of generalized wisdom. Plato had a point: critics can't pretend to know everything.

A second response to the Johns Hopkins board is the one chosen by Clune himself, who suggests that literary studies can be a bona fide specialization after all, despite occasional appearances to the contrary. Citing Jonathan Kramnick's essay "The Interdisciplinary Fallacy," Clune proposes that a discipline is "a body of skills, methods, and norms able to sustain internal discussions and do explanatory work," and in his final paragraph he indicates why he thinks literary studies can, if it returns to "basics," live up to this definition: "Our object of study is literature; our method is close reading." Since—again—literary texts themselves thematize the sorts of issues that academic fields try to isolate and analyze, interdisciplinary conversations between literary critics and other scholars are always viable. But these conversations make sense only when we recognize what makes literary reading distinctive:

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> [C]lose reading is distinguished by a peculiar fusion of explanation and aesthetic judgment that sets us apart from the knowledge production of other fields. But the careful excavation of the complex formal objects that compose our material yields insights, the special quality of which can be ascertained by comparing them with the findings of other fields on shared topics.

As Kramnick puts it, "disciplines explain the part of the world to which they are directed," and for "any particular level of explanation" there is a "method and norms adequate" to it that need to be respected (68). Do your job.

Clune and Kramnick are persuasive here. In our STEM age, nothing should be more emphatically underlined than the distinction between different levels of explanation, as well as the conceptual pluralism that the distinction entails. Moreover, their claims have the virtue of modesty. Critics need not be credited with anything as grandiose as a "general knowledge of human life." But nor are they entitled to the equally self-important forms of (in Clune's phrase) "anti-disciplinary thought" that have marked so much literary theory—the flouting of disciplinary norms that all too often masks ignorance, sloppiness, or abusive cults of personality.

There is a danger, however, in emphasizing disciplinary practices. Something gets lost, I think, if we insist univocally on the "methods," "skills," and so on of literary studies. First of all, referring to the field's "object of study" implies that our domain of inquiry has been settled. It hasn't, for better or worse; what counts as a novel or poem—to say nothing of a great novel, great poem, or for that matter great literature—is almost always disputable in ways that the meaning of *atom* or *nebulae* is not. Similar doubts could be raised about close reading, which names not one specifiable method but varied forms of mindful attention and varied types of inferential patterns. Clune and Kramnick call to mind a remark by Arthur Danto, who once sketched two different reactions that philosophers have tended to have toward art. Either they have tried to "ephemeralize and hence defuse" it, treating it as "autonomous," separate from the real world, or they have granted it a degree of legitimacy by treating it as a version of philosophy, thus draining away its dangerous and unruly energies, taming it by "absorbing it into concepts" (7). To my ear, the language of "skills" and "methods," of "explanation" and "knowledge production," smacks a bit of the latter approach. Talking of "norms" that are "adequate" to literary texts doesn't do enough to acknowledge the messily improvisational quality of compelling criticism, its untidy ways and ad hoc insights, and its tendency to leave disagreements unsettled. After years of reading undergraduate- and graduate-level work, I've come to see creativity—noticing surprising connections, taking a thought in unforeseen directions, imagining different avenues that a poem could've taken—as a key to success as vital as the skills of critical thinking are. There is an art to describing art.

Contrast, then, the remarks of Murdoch and Clune with this brief passage from the start of Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, on the question of how to approach Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

> "I will say . . . that there is no approach to it, anyway I have none. Approach suggests moving nearer, getting closer; hence it suggests that we are not already near or close enough; hence suggests we know some orderly direction to it not already taken within it; that we sense some distance between us and it which useful criticism could close."

Left "without an approach," we can only seek "a blur or block from which to start, a turn in Wittgenstein's thought" that will allow us a way to explore the text at hand (6).

Two things stand out here. One is Cavell's sense of how fragile his undertaking is. By the time *The Claim of Reason* was published, Cavell had been teaching Wittgenstein for

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two decades, gotten tenure at Harvard, published three books, and been recognized as a distinctive contemporary philosophical voice. But for all that, he wants to avoid conveying a sense of complete mastery over Wittgenstein's famously dense, eccentric text. On Cavell's telling, I can't say unequivocally what "approach," what "orderly direction," will help me understand a text. Or at least I am no more certain when I open a book than I am when I meet a new person or enter a new room. In every case, I bring my existing expectations, habits, and desires (I don't shed them permanently), but those things may fail me. They may render me clumsy, unable to go on with the thing at hand. Indeed, when we meet a new person, enter a room, or open a book, we may realize that we don't actually know what existing expectations, habits, and desires we even have. And thus we cast about, struggling to make both ourselves and the other thing—person, room, text—a little clearer. As Wittgenstein himself puts it, the "evidence" for our judgments in such situations may seem "imponderable," "subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone"—differences that "I may be quite incapable of describing" and whose "indefiniteness" we struggle to put, "correctly, without distortion" (239–40). This doesn't mean we're always wholly at a loss. Some people can read a stranger or a room better than others, and some people have better intuitions about texts. But there are no guarantees that any of our reading will come off, no procedures that will assure us that we will have a full comprehension of something at the end.[1]

Reading, on this view, is best regarded as an *encounter*—a term that, more than "a general knowledge of human life" or the "method and norms" of criticism, evokes the sense of risk and vulnerability that always pervades criticism. And this is closely related to the second thing that stands out about Cavell's remark: this encounter is irreducibly *mine*. That is, *I* am at stake in my engagements with art, at least more than I am in many other domains, where familiar customs and shared standards of evaluation usually serve well enough. No doubt we're all powerfully shaped by social experiences and history, but the anomalous nature of artworks draws attention, with particular intensity, to the first-person dimension of our utterances and convictions. Explaining what I see in a work sometimes seems to require referring to a limitless train of other thoughts, experiences, desires. And this may make me hesitant, feel exposed, uncertain about what I want to present to others. Encounters are had not only with works but also with each other. "So what did you think of it?" is more than a question about the play or film you and I have just watched. It is a test of whether the same things stand out to us, and thus of how much we share a sense of what matters.

Whatever my hesitations, however, I do often want to risk taking such tests. Reading a text, listening to music, studying a sculpture: these are solitary activities, but not ones we want to keep to ourselves. Artworks elicit an intimacy among audience members that isn't found with most (I hardly mean all) other objects we meet, and it's not an accident that new friends and lovers test each other out with gifts of poems, music, or art. As Cavell puts it—and as connoisseurs of French painting or bossa nova or anime know—not sharing an aesthetic judgment is a particular kind of "burden," the way that not being believed or not being trusted is a burden (*Must We Mean* 192). Such judgments occasion what in a late essay Cavell calls "passionate," as opposed to "performative," utterances: one is moved to speak, to reveal oneself and one's desires, yet one does so in a context that, unlike a marriage ceremony or court of law, has no uniform or widely accepted procedures and in which one's standing must be declared rather than assumed or inherited. Futher, one's declaration—and this is what disquiets—can always be refused ("Performative

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and Passionate Utterance" 177–83). To some observers, the rise of postcritique over the last decade or so has seemed merely sentimental, a wish to stop thinking; all postcritique really wants us to do, it's sometimes implied, is to swoon over great poems. For all I know, some postcritique work may really want just that. But it may be the case that, like Cavell, such scholars are asking us to acknowledge the wishes and needs that drive us to share our judgments in the first place, whatever the content of those judgments. They may be noticing that testing our attunements is what criticism is ultimately doing, whether our stance is suspicious, celebratory, or something else.[2]

Do such tests consist of "arguments"? Perhaps. But arguments about particular works of art presuppose that other people *care*: care either about the work itself or about their relationship with you. And such caring isn't generated by reasoning alone. Engaging with art involves a distinctive mixture of perceptual intensity, intellectual challenge, existential excitement, and moral risk: a sense that you have been invited to imagine a piece of the world in a specific way, to regard it from a particular angle, and that it's up to you whether or how fully you want to accept it. Criticism is an account of one's response to that invitation, and this account tends to consist less of arguments than of, as Arnold Isenberg once said, "directions for perceiving" (336). To develop an account, to give good directions, is a very difficult task, one that requires learning and practice—methods and skills. But again, as Plato intuited, there are no conclusive or stable criteria for judging when, in this context, one's learning and practice are complete. In the coming few decades, universities may decide that such inconclusiveness no longer has a defensible place. The odd character of criticism—its ambiguous sense of expertise, the unpredictability of its encounters—may cause more administrators to decide that the field no longer deserves even the modest financial and institutional support that it now receives. If that were to happen, criticism would become an ever-more-marginal field, supported only by the most world-historically wealthy institutions of higher learning. In such circumstances, one question would be what other sorts of venues, or forums, could sustain such reflection, in lieu of the classroom, the course, the degree program. The impulses that lead us to such reflection run deep and are no more likely to go away than is the need to make sense of our friends, family, and neighbors.

Notes

1. Compare Moi, who also cites the passage I have quoted from Cavell: "Understood as the work of reading, literary criticism has no method. There simply is no 'suspicious' as opposed to 'gullible' method of reading. . . . Clearly, our mood colors the expression of our insights and interests. But a mood is still not a method" (178–79).

2. On the complexities and vulnerability of such encounters, see also Cavell, *Claim* 359–60.

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