

**REVIEW**  
**NORMAN HOLLAND: *POEMS IN PERSONS***  
***AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOANALYSIS OF LITERATURE***  
New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973

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Unfortunately, there are only two good introductory texts today to psychoanalytic criticism: Simon Lesser's *Fiction and the Unconscious*, first published in 1957 (now out of print), and Norman Holland's *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, published in 1968 and still available in its hard-cover edition. Lesser's book, which concentrates on fiction and tragedy, is restrained in its use of psychoanalytic concepts, maintaining a fine balance between reductionism and common sense which often gives it the rare effect of wisdom. Yet it capably extends and elaborates the ego psychology of Ernst Kris, Robert Gorham Davis and others, and makes important original contributions of its own in the theory of binding, analogizing, and distancing in the literary process. Holland's book, in contrast, seems almost obsessive in its emphasis upon Eriksonian fixations, especially the concept of orality in the sense that we devour literature in order to be absorbed into whatever benign inclusive context appeals the most to us. Yet Holland's book is also of central importance because it explores in depth for the first time a model of affective response through introjected transformation, the effect of literature in both stimulating and controlling fantasy by means of form, language, and meaning. His approach also extends psychoanalytic criticism into the domain of poetry explication, complementing the New Critical approach by reducing its formal contextualism to techniques of fantasy management that both express and disguise the latent content of poetry.

Now, five years later in *Poems and Persons*, Holland's first book since *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, he proposes important modifications of his theory which are reminiscent in some respects of Lesser's theory of over-determination but with different implications. Somewhat abandoning his adherence to the theory of orality, he has shifted his emphasis to critical relativism on the assumption that each text justifies a variety of patterns of response in its interpretation. At least by implication, there is no single interpretation that best explains the poet's sense of the poem while writing it. Far better, Holland argues, is the "affective" task of exploring the poem's experience by variety of readers based on their individual feelings in response to its reading. Holland bases his approach on Robert Waelder's principle of multiple function (that any device or word combination serves to communicate a variety of ideas) and Hans Lichtenstein's concept of "identity theme" (that each reader possesses a unique "theme" that is necessarily reflected in his interpretation of the poem). Waelder's theory explains literary response as a product of over-determination linked with the unavoidable forces of reality, id, superego, and repetition compulsion, the latter through persistence in successful behaviors. Lichtenstein's theory, in turn, establishes a typical pattern of over-determination in the thinking of each individual based upon a relatively invariant principle of "primary identity," the common denominator of his personality that differentiates his response from others.

Combining these two principles, Holland claims that “style seeks itself”--in other words that we find in literature what we seek to a much greater extent than hitherto realized. As explained by Holland, “each reader tries to compose from the elements of the work a match to his own characteristic style,” and, as explained elsewhere, “He [the reader, but also the moviegoer] projects into the work a fantasy that yields the pleasure he characteristically seeks.” If such a fantasy cannot be found, the work is usually rejected out of hand as being boring and meaningless. The enjoyment of a text, then, involves three additional criteria to style’s self-pursuit: (1) readers must find a text’s defenses to be compatible with their own, (2) readers must be provided fantasy content that matters to them, and finally (3) readers must find acceptable some kind of moral, esthetic, or intellectual justification in the satisfaction of their fantasy. In sum total, the reader must be able to share style, fantasy, defenses, and ethical rationalization with the author’s expressive content in any particular novel, poem, or movie. The enthusiastic audience for Jane Austen is thus necessarily different from that of Dickens, Lawrence, or Bellow in fiction, the enthusiastic audience for Pope with Keats, Browning, or Eliot in poetry. At perhaps the most primitive level in the adult population today, this quadruple principle of literary identification helps to explain, for example, how young and academically challenged male readers and moviegoers are able with little difficulty to identify with macho heroes who vigorously engage in justified brutality that eradicates evil villains--of necessity “bad guys” for the purpose of excusing their violent destruction on a presumably ethical basis--and finally gains esteem and success with one or more beautiful women dazzled by his extraordinary virility. But the same principle applies, Holland insists, at every level of literary response. When a text fulfills all of these criteria at an acceptable level, readers can take pleasure in a text (or “merge” with it, as Holland insists), but not necessarily for the same reasons. Each recreates in his own imagination the experience suitable to his own “identity theme,” and often this necessitates taking sufficient liberties with the text in order to keep its interpretation interesting.

Holland also seems to be pushing critical relativism to an extreme, at times implying that any identity theme is as good as another--or, in reverse, as limited as another--in the appreciation of poetry. He acknowledges that communication occurs at least to the extent that “the writer creates a structure which his reader recreates for himself,” but stresses the role of the reader as a “re-maker of the poem,” as if the poet has simply offered a large variety of psychic possibilities to be sifted and remolded by readers in their own image. All well and good, but it also seems essential to recognize that each text is a unique psychological subsystem provided by the author to be introjected into our personalities, as explained by Holland himself in *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, thereby sustaining the author’s original intentions to a remarkable extent in the most competent readers. Except for the most exploitive potboilers, authors do not write simply to stroke the feelings of a broad readership, whatever these might consist of. Quite aside from the benefits of universality, for example high sales, there is also an authorial effort to communicate feelings and attitudes otherwise unavailable to readers. In the end, this is fiction’s *utile* beyond *dulce*’s lure emphasized by Holland, such, for example, that Dostoevsky’s imbalance favorable to *utile* vastly exceeds that of James Bond for readers able to cope with Constance Garnett’s translations, and in poetry the same imbalance presents itself favorable to Shakespeare as opposed to rock lyrics. I.A. Richards’ theory that the final judgment of poetry can only be the choice of the whole personality accordingly becomes an even more challenging question--how well any particular reader can grapple with the alien and potentially threatening implications of fiction’s introjected subsystem during the experience of reading. Those able to

experience rapport with the poet or of sufficient flexibility to suspend disbelief in order to gain this rapport are the most likely to formulate an adequate critical response, and the job of critics is to put themselves as much as possible into both categories--at least tentatively and with critical discrimination. Holland does not take sufficient pains to grant this necessity.

The weakness of Holland's relativism can be seen, I think, in his comparison between interpretations of H.D.'s poem, "There is a spell," by Saul and Sandra, two students participating as subjects in his investigation. A summary of discussions with these two occupies a goodly portion of his book, as does the creativity of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), an analyst and good friend of Freud for perhaps four months in 1934, when she wrote the poem. As indicated by Holland, her later book, *Tribute to Freud*, published in 1944, emphasized her indebtedness to Freud at the time. The rest of Holland's book explores at length his latest psychoanalytic assumptions based on his findings relevant to this collection of behavioral data inclusive of both H.D.'s poem and her later book. It should also be mentioned that both Saul and Sandra were subjected to psychological testing (the Rorschach test, the T.A.T., etc.) as well as one-on-one interview situations not entirely different from those experienced during therapy, in which they were asked to explain their response to this particular poem relevant to both its specifics and total effect. Saul seems to have felt threatened by the experience and could offer little useful insight, while Sandra was far more effusive, either because she felt a basic rapport with the poet (whom she assumed to be a male) or because she possessed enough flexibility to "try on" this rapport--I suspect more the latter than the former. Nevertheless, Sandra's local responsiveness seems to have finally obstructed any sense of a final idea or "message" by the end of the poem. For that matter, Holland's interpretation also seems to fall short of H.D.'s fullest intentions, apparently justified by his tacit assumption that such a possibility exceeds the appropriate concern of literary criticism. This oversight is best indicated, of course, by quoting the poem in its entirety:

There is a spell, for instance  
in every sea-shell:

continuous, the seathrust  
is powerless against coral,

bone, stone, marble  
hewn from within by that craftsman,

the shell-fish:  
oyster, clam, mollusk

is master-mason planning  
the stone marvel:

yet that flabby, amorphous hermit  
within, like the planet

senses the finite,

it limits its orbit

of being, its house,  
temple, fane, shrine:

it unlocks the portals  
at stated intervals:

Prompted by hunger,  
it opens to the tide-flow:

but infinity? no,  
of nothing-too-much

I sense my own limit,  
my shell-haws snap shut

at invasion of the limitless,  
ocean-weight; infinite water

can not crack me, egg in egg-shell;  
closed in, complete, immortal

full-circle, I know the pull  
of the tide, the lull

as well as the moon;  
the octopus-darkness

is powerless against  
her cold immortality;

so I in my own way know  
that the whale

can not digest me:  
be firm in your own small static, limited

orbit and the shark-jaws  
of outer circumstance

will spit you forth:  
be indigestible, hard, un giving,

so that, living within,  
you beget, self-out-of-self,

selfless,  
that pearl-of-great-price.

Holland correctly recognizes the contradiction between the open form of the poem and its apparently obsessive theme of enclosure, and he appropriately suggests the poem might be about its own creation (as I would agree it is). However, he fails to recognize the importance of the basic organizing principle in the advancement among pronouns from *it* to *I* and finally *you* with reference to herself in the last nine lines. A close reading of the poem confirms that H.D. is referring to nobody but herself with these lines. This tripartite sequence may accordingly be understood to provide the “real” form of the poem, effectively disguised by nesting major transitions within couplets instead of between them. The “it” stages at the beginning is limited to seascape symbolism of a closed shell pitted against threatening exterior forces in the ocean. The “I” stage links this symbolism to H.D.’s identity, and finally the “you” state consists of her telling herself, and anybody willing to listen (Freud, for example), the lesson to be drawn from this symbolism. Perhaps, but not necessarily, this threefold division was intended to reflect Freud’s three categories of Id, Ego, and Superego, with Id expressed by Thalassic symbolism to be successively interpreted on a cognitive and more inclusive ethical basis.

Saul, Sandra, and Norman Holland correctly emphasized H.D.’s self-conscious use of enclosure symbolism, but they seem to have been unaware of its successive reinterpretation in the final two stages of the poem, culminating in the intended paradox of the last line to the effect that the tight defensive shell-fish (finally specified to be an oyster) produces a pearl-of-great-price, undoubtedly the poem itself additional to the poet’s creativity in writing it as a product of interior safety to be shared beyond itself. With totally new implications in the context of the poem, this pearl of great price symbolizes high attainment that has only been possible through successful adaptation to external forces (life, therapy, social demands, etc. as symbolized by the sea) through internal inspiration whose source is mostly impervious to these forces. The grain of sand that becomes a pearl is from without, but its creation as a pearl is strictly within. In its intended Biblical sense (see Matthew, 13:46), the pearl-of-great-price also provides the best possible offering to be appreciated by God, a Hebraic supernatural power otherwise irrelevant to the Darwinian symbolism at the beginning of the poem, where the survival of the fittest is everywhere paramount. Godhead accordingly seems appropriated from religion to convey her secular gratitude for Freud’s patriarchal benevolence--Jewish and with intrusive insight (perhaps even a potential lover), but primarily a revered authority figure able to recognize her “gift” in every sense of the word--her creativity as an aesthetic gift at least partly resulting from her successful defenses against excessive self-disclosure, for example resulting from Freud’s analysis, but also her offering as a personal gift in thankfulness for his having helped to teach her how to negotiate the appropriate limits. So H.D. presented Freud with her pearl-of-great-price, the poem itself as her articulation of gratitude, confident that he at least (and perhaps others as well) can fathom its fullest implications. Thanks she said in her own way, and that was thanks enough.

Holland, if not Saul and Sandra, interpreted the poem aware that H.D. was a patient of Freud when she wrote this poem, so he should have paid more attention to possible connections.

For example, both sex and the threat posed by psychoanalysis itself seem to have been implied in the threatening sea-thrust symbolism of the whale and shark-jaws, necessitating the defenses of coral, bone, and locked portals. Non-sexual matters seem to have dominated symbolism at the conscious level, but overdetermination cannot be overlooked that piggybacks sexual implications as well. Also, the paradox is asserted that H.D. can only achieve selflessness (creativity as an act of communication with others) through a “small, static, limit orbit” gives her sufficient defenses (“indigestible, hard, ungiving”) against external demands. Again, sexual considerations cannot be entirely discounted though the intended symbolism implies something entirely different. This sets the stage for the poem’s kicker, its message to her venerable mentor: “I used to be inhibited, but only to give you something better--now please take me as I am, accept my gift, my pearl of great price,” a product of both sea swell and internal defenses.

The interpretation I am suggesting here could of course be expressive of my own identity theme, but I also consider it to be the most adequate explanation of H.D.’s final strategy in the poem, one that brings her from her initial lines of seashore phenomenology *a la* Bachelard (with many thanks to Freud) to her intended paradox that concludes the poem with a highly suggestive Biblical allusion appropriately transposed to the seashore (where pearls were found even in Biblical times). So the poem’s dominant “message” consists of H.D.’s assertion of her role as a successful poet who is reluctant to be totally deprived of her psychological defenses and is thus grateful that Freud’s recognition of this necessity. Of course there is always enormous risk, as Holland insists, in submitting to explication the poetry of anybody conversant in psychoanalytic theory--and what poet could have been more acquainted with Freud’s theories than H.D. at the time she was under therapy with Freud himself? But there does seem to be a more inclusive interpretation of H.D.’s intentions in her poem that necessarily subsumes alternative possibilities such as those by Holland, Sandra, and even Saul, if without obliging their total rejection. One need not have an absolutely clear sense of this message, but it does seem important, at least, to recognize that the final two couplets summarize the total experience, just as the final couplets of Shakespeare’s sonnets do, with the birthing symbolism of selflessness begotten from the self, of verbal creativity as her particular version of procreation. The man in her life: Freud; the child: her poem to Freud. Maybe something else is intended, but it can be fathomed at this level of interpretation.

Perhaps the best approach to explication is to treat each poem as a subsystem of the poet’s personality that has its own identity theme to be probed as well as possible by readers, forcing them to be more flexible and responsive to this theme evident in the tone and persona evident in the unique context of this poem. As additional poems by the same poet are interpreted on the same basis, a more inclusive interpretation of the poet herself becomes possible, but this is only after a sufficient number of explications have been conducted on this basis. Meanwhile, the reader is saddled with the task of psychoanalyzing the text in and of itself, with only the most tentative understanding of how this might accord with the far bigger task relevant to the entire corpus of writings by the poet. Holland skirts this consideration by maintaining that the psychoanalysis of literature is a contradiction of terms, since only people can be psychoanalyzed, not texts, thus permitting as many valid interpretations of a poem as the number of its readers additional to the poet herself. But not so. A text is in fact verbal behavior, and verbal behavior comprises most of the data available to therapists. Almost everything they know about a patient is conveyed by language. There might be less verbal behavior in a poem than, say, a hundred

hours of therapy, but this is a matter of degree, not kind, and the verbal density offered in poetry by such authors of H.D., regardless of how much it is revised, seems far more useful for the purposes of interpretation than the telegraphic psychobabble that dominates most therapy sessions: “I guess so,” “Who can tell,” “You can’t exactly say that,” *undsoweiter*. Here Louise Rosenblatt’s distinction seems relevant between text and poem: that a poem is a text communicated by being brought into the consciousness of the reader, whereupon it can of course be psychoanalyzed as a subsystem with a stable effect induced among a variety of readers.

Holland also neglects the problem of transference in Saul and Sandra’s response to poetry, which might likewise be helpful in explaining the relative competence of their interpretations. Saul’s defense repulsion as well as Sandra’s recurring concern with cooperative separation might as likely be a product of their relationship with Holland as with the text, especially in their one-to-one explicative sessions. For any two individuals to explicate a poem while alone with each other (professors and their students as well as everybody else) easily degenerates into at least the consideration of romantic possibilities, and this unavoidably bears an impact on the level of analysis found acceptable. For just as H.D. was possibly ambivalent about her imagery relevant to her relationship with Freud, both Saul and Sandra might have been responsive to such a possibility with Holland and thus, appropriately, avoided the exploration of thematic implications tending to support such a possibility. Just as H.D. was probably setting the limits in her relationship with Freud in the poem, they were probably aware of comparable limits in their cooperation with Holland while interpreting the poem on a strictly experimental basis. The two situations were analogous, but with the essential difference that H.D. was able to disguise her feelings at the same time as she expressed them. For the students the better choice was simply to avoid the topic, thus letting the disguise continue doing its work. Whether they were at all conscious of such intentions is open to question, but it doesn’t really matter. Then again, it seems highly unlikely they were entirely free of this concern. As a result, Saul’s lack of insight just might have been homophobic blockage that totally prevented adequate interpretation, and Sandra’s local insightfulness might have served as a compromise formation with lots of useful explicative ingenuity at least indirectly relevant to embarrassing heterosexual considerations. As all therapists know only too well, the patient’s pattern of transference with his/her psychiatrist is always a major consideration, and, under the guidelines imposed by Holland, the same difficulties just might have played a role in Holland’s interpretive sessions to an extent he did not fully recognize. Such a possibility will hopefully be neutralized in Holland’s next book, *5 Readers Reading*, in which his approach will be considerably expanded.

*Poems in Persons* remains quite useful both as a primer in affective psychoanalytic criticism and as a major theoretical contribution and the best bellwether of current trends in this criticism since Holland’s last book. In its affective extremism it raises as many questions as it answers, particularly with regard to its theory of communication. If Holland’s theory often poses serious difficulties, the issues he introduces can be appreciated for encouraging alternative explanations perhaps more acceptable--but perhaps not. As Holland insists, a poem “poems” the reader, just as the reader “poets” the poem, and at the time he wrote the poem the poet had originally deep “readered” it to put all this in motion. However, as emphasized by I.A. Richards in *Practical Criticism*, published almost fifty years ago, the most basic issue remains the effective communication of poems in the relatively simple sense that the original meaning of poets is understood by their readers. In the context of current trends in psychoanalytic criticism,

well beyond Richards' purview, this necessarily entails a sufficient transaction between poets and readers at both conscious and unconscious levels. Variation between their grasp of a poem is of course inevitable, especially at unconscious levels, but not to such an extent that the reader becomes totally indifferent to what the poet was trying to say. Lack of communication had been a major problem for Richards in his effort to obtain adequate response samples from his Cambridge students during the mid-twenties. It remains a problem for Holland today, quite aside from his willingness to justify interpretive variation at levels Richards himself would never have tolerated.

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