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## METACRITICISM.

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The prefix “meta-” marks a step upward in lang. level, often characterized by contemp. philosophers and logicians as a second-order discourse about a first-order discourse. Philosophy itself is meta-discourse: philosophy of history is metahistory, and philosophy of science is metascience. Thus m. is critical and theoretical discourse about the nature and ends of crit. (q.v.). Fluidity of terminology, however, makes crit. and literary theory (q.v.) hard to distinguish from each other, and sometimes from m., esp. when some poems are implicitly “metapoetic” or self-referential (see Colie), or when some literary theories are metapoetic (see Steiner). Nevertheless, the distinctions among lit. crit., literary theory, and m. are no less crucial than in fields such as philosophy, science, and mathematics, where they were first developed and are most firmly entrenched.

The task of m. is the critical examination of crit.—its technical terms, its logical structure, its fundamental principles and presuppositions, and its broader implications for cultural theory. When a critic makes an observation about a literary work, the metacritic or theorist will characteristically ask: How does the critic know this? What sorts of evidence could establish such an observation? Is a particular concept, analogy, or method sufficiently articulated, or adequate, to serve as a critical tool? Why is the presence of, say, an archetype, symbol, tension, irony, or paradox in a literary work a criterion of value, i.e. a reason for judging it to be good or great? These questions lie beyond the scope of the practical critic, who is concerned primarily with explication and interpretation (q.v.) of the work itself.

I. RELATION TO LITERARY CRITICISM, HISTORY, AND THEORY. Lit. crit. can be said to consist of the class of all existing statements about literary works of art. And this class can be considered the subject matter of m. But a further distinction within this class has come to be widely acknowledged, that between “internal” and “external” statements. Among the remarks made about literary works are two external sorts: (1) *comparative* statements, noting the likenesses and differences of literary works or of literary works and other cultural products, and (2) *causal* statements about the influence of antecedent conditions, about the effects of literary works on individual readers or social processes, and about the ways in which literary works may be symptoms of underlying conditions. These external statements are frequently assigned to the province of *literary history*, which is thus distinguished from crit. defined, in its narrower sense, as consisting of statements about the internal properties of literary works. This distinction need not commit us to any assumptions about the logical connections, or lack of logical connections, between critical statements and the statements of lit. hist, (see HISTORICISM). The task of the critic would then be to tell us what he knows about the form and content of individual works, and that of the literary historian to trace their conditions and consequences. It is a matter of debate, inviting meta-critical scrutiny, whether, to what extent, and in what ways the performance of either task depends on the completion of the other.

Although crit. consists primarily of singular statements about particular works of lit., critics do frequently wonder whether their statements can be brought together into a system in

which some principles are logical consequences of other more fundamental ones. The theory of lit., sometimes called “poetics” (q.v.), attempts to discover and, if possible, unify such principles. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren’s *Theory of Lit.* (1956), Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Crit.* (1957), Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Poetic Closure* (1968), and Jonathan Culler’s *Structuralist Poetics* (1975) are examples of this genre. In attempting such a theory, the theorist is still on the same lang. level as the critic; the former has merely moved from the particular to the general, from isolated and intermittent generalizations to system. How far crit. can be, or ought to be, systematized in this way is itself an important (metacritical) question; but it is a fact of the hist. of crit. that no eminent and productive critic has been content to utter only singular statements without suggesting more general principles and making an effort to justify them by appeal to other general principles.

Literary theory, moving toward the highest generality of which it is capable, impinges on music theory (e.g. Meyer), art theory (e.g. Gombrich), and, ultimately, aesthetics as a branch of philosophy. Aesthetics encompasses the general and fundamental problems of m. But at least one species of aesthetics attempts to articulate a criterion of art, and it therefore remains controlled by certain normative considerations about what does, and what doesn’t, constitute art. Thus in its endeavors to examine the logic of critical reasoning, aesthetics is the same as m., though when it claims to possess a norm of meaningfulness or goodness, it functions as a prescriptive analytic inquiry. In the view of those who reject such inquiry, all attempts to examine other theories and to show their serious limitations are not metacritical, although they may involve metacritical analysis. Such a view implies that m. does not seek to offer an indubitably true theory of crit., or a theory of crit. as such, but rather shows the historical, institutional, and therefore changing nature of crit. and its concepts. Its objective is to enable us to understand the basis

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of lit. crit. by seeking to countervail parochial attitudes, and it helps us to perceive the complexity of the form of critical life. Metacritical inquiry is not directed toward literary works themselves; it is directed toward the possibilities of lit. and crit.

Crit., literary theory, and m. are all logically independent of each other, but the distinctions among them are not precisely marked, and every question raised does not allow for instantly recognizable classificatory categories. Questions such as—what gives the experience of reading a literary work its value? why prefer one poem to another? how or why is this experience better than another? why is one opinion about literary works not as good as another? what is a literary work? what is value?—are not always easy to classify without more context, and by treating them as if they are of the same order one is liable to lump diverse sorts of inquiry together. Sorting them out is extremely important because it clarifies the scope and limits of each of these inquiries in given contexts. Certainly, “Why prefer Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* to Tennyson’s *Locksley Hall*?” is precisely a question for the critic. But “What makes one opinion about a poem better than another?” is a metacritical question, since it inquires into the logic of critical judgment. And “What is a poem (i.e., what is the word ‘poem’ best taken to mean)?” is also a metacritical question, though once the class of poems has been marked out (if that can be done), then the question about other properties poems always, or generally, have in common is a question for literary theory. When critics engage in philosophical analysis of the

problems of crit. and literary theory, they are then functioning as metacritics. Like the advocate of a theory seeking to modify and refine that theory or to improve or change a critical practice, the metacritic can point up confusion or significance in a particular theory or practice. Unlike literary theorists, however, who attempt to provide foundations for a theory or practice, the metacritic does not intend to provide such a foundation, though he or she may certainly examine and explore the logical and conceptual bases of various theories and practices of crit.

II. THE CLASSIFICATION OF CRITICAL STATEMENTS. Crit. encompasses a variety of types of statements, each giving rise to different metacritical problems. So the preliminary task of the metacritic is to find the basic categories into which all critical statements can be sorted. Of these there appear to be at least three:

A. *Description.* A critic may say that a poem contains certain words in certain syntactic structures, a certain pattern of meter or rhyme, certain metaphors or rhetorical figures, certain imagery (see ANALYSIS). More complex descriptions are those that classify literary works into certain *genres*, e.g. sonnet, tragedy, pastoral elegy, epic (Hernadi; see GENRE).

B. *Interpretation.* If the term “interp.” (q.v.) may be said to encompass any statement that purports to say what a literary work means, we can distinguish several interpretive tasks, each having its own special features and problems: (1) unraveling an obscurity or complexity (qq.v.) in a text by showing, for example, how a syntactic construction is to be read, or by unpacking the meaning of a metaphor; (2) interpreting implicit motives or traits of character in the fictional world of a literary work; (3) interpreting the symbols (q.v.) in a literary work or identifying its themes; (4) saying what implicit propositions—e.g. philosophical, political—are dramatized in a work; (5) explaining what “artistic acts” are performed in a work— e.g. that the author evinces a certain attitude toward certain characters or events (he or she has treated them coldly, compassionately, with calm detachment, or with moral indignation—see Sircello). These tasks are not always distinguishable from one another, however; indeed they are often closely intertwined: by explicating a syntactic obscurity or complexity, for example, the critic may uncover larger themes or symbols which in turn disclose larger philosophical or political propositions dramatized in the work.

C. *Evaluation.* To say that a literary work is good or bad, or better or worse than another, is to offer an evaluation (q.v.). To say, on the other hand, “I like this poem,” or “I prefer this poem to that” is not to evaluate but rather merely to express one’s subjective preferences, or taste (q.v.), though in certain contexts such remarks may suggest that the speaker is not merely evincing his personal feelings but is making, or is prepared to make, a judgment of literary value.

These categories are distinct only at an analytic level, for in practice, the three activities are too closely integrated to allow for any easy or absolute separation. The critic who identifies certain syntactic patterns in a poem also interprets and values them in certain crucial ways, and when he interprets certain thematic concerns or philosophical propositions in a poem he also places them in a certain evaluative context in the sense of remarking on the artist’s success or failure in realizing them (see EXPRESSION; INTENTION).

III. PROBLEMS OF METACRITICISM. The problems of m. arise from analysis of the grounds and implications of making particular critical claims. The following list is a representative selection of such problems, one that explains briefly the concerns and methods of m.

A. When explications conflict, as will happen, questions arise which m. seeks to explore and, if possible, answer. The first question concerns the possibility of deciding whether one of

the incompatible explanations is correct; the second concerns which procedures the critic may employ to decide whether a particular explication is correct; and the third focuses on the implications for crit. if the impossibility of deciding conclusively between two or more incompatible interps. is ac-

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cepted. The problem of interp. is highly controversial: some theorists (e.g. Hirsch) argue for the importance of reading literary works in terms of their authors' intended meanings, whereas others (e.g. Gadamer) reiterate the inevitability and limitations of our own cultural horizons and contexts of presuppositions in making interps. of (historically and culturally) alien literary works. This is a central metacritical issue still open to further analysis. It leads to fundamental questions in the philosophy of lang. such as the nature of meaning (see SEMANTICS; MEANING; SEMIOTICS), and to the consequent question of how such meaning is expressed in poetry.

B. Although the grammatical and syntactic forms of literary lang. are similar to those found in other lang. uses, in other respects literary lang. appears to differ in crucial ways (see POETIC FUNCTION). What are the distinctive features of literary lang., and how do they differ from nonliterary lang.? This has been one of the central topics of structuralism (q.v.). It is also a matter of dispute (and metacritical relevance) whether ordinary lang. is indeed ordinary in relation to literary lang. And there is the question of the propositional truth or falsity of the sentences in works of lit.: are they "true" in the same way declarative sentences setting forth facts in a newspaper are true, or are they neither true nor false, but exempt from ordinary semantic categories (see SEMANTICS)?

C. When evaluations conflict, as very often seems to happen, is there an objective procedure by which one judgment can be shown to be more reasonable or more acceptable than another? Those who hold one or another version of relativist metacritical theory deny that any such procedure exists, esp. since disputants may frequently differ from one another even concerning description and interp., not to mention cultural values or personal tastes. Nonrelativist metacritical theory, on the other hand, stresses the role of reason in critical discussion. The problem of resolving conflicting evaluations becomes more intractable, however, when the question is raised whether critical evaluations can be supported by genuine reasons. This is a question that leads to fundamental axiological problems about the nature of value, esp. the kind of value sought in lit., and its relation to literary response and critical practice.

D. Whether or not the specific sentences of a literary work are taken to be true or false, referentially, works seem to embody implicit theses of a more general sort—philosophical, political, religious (see PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY). The problem of truth in lit. is a problem of whether the truth or falsity of such embodied propositions has any logical bearing on the literary goodness or badness of the work. This problem is closely connected with, though not identical to, the problem of belief (q.v.) which deals (roughly) with the relation between the reader's beliefs antecedent to experiencing the work, the effect of that experience on those beliefs, and his or her consequent evaluation of the work. Analysis of these problems depends in part on what has become known as hermeneutics (q.v.).

E. Also analogous to the problem of truth is the problem of the relation between art and morality: whether any facts or implications about the moral aspects of a literary work

(undesirable political effects of propaganda, for example, or asocial actions resulting from pornography) have a bearing on its *literary* goodness. Though the issues involved here trouble the metacritic less today than at earlier periods, they have perennial features and continually arise in new forms.

F. Finally, there is the problem of the nature of the world portrayed (realized, reflected, imagined) in literary works—in philosophical terms, the problem of the ontological status of art, its mode of being. Are there explicit, unique, and constant purposes embodied in literary works, and if so, are there stable means of realizing such purposes? If, on the other hand, literary works exhibit purposes and means of realizing those purposes which are undefinable or ever-changing, what is an adequate ontology of lit.? These questions have been answered in a variety of ways over the history of critical theory, from Plato and Aristotle to New Criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction (qq.v.). M. examines the logic and presuppositions underlying these theories and explores the implications of the conflicts and consonances among them.

IV. METACRITICISM AS PHILOSOPHY. Broadly speaking, i.e. construed as philosophy of crit., m. deals with all aspects of crit. requiring or inviting philosophical scrutiny: its lang., its procedures, the scope and function of its presuppositions and theories, its functions and values. M. may undertake a systematic classification of critical approaches or methods, or in its prescriptivist form devise and propose new strategies, for example the “modes” of crit. distinguished by McKeon. But its central concern is with the *logic of criticism*, wherein problems fall into two groups: those arising in an attempt to understand and clarify the meaning of the key terms in which crit. is conducted, and those arising in the attempt to analyze and appraise the *logical soundness* of the critic’s arguments in support of his statements.

If there is no such thing as a logic of crit., as some theorists have held, then m. (on one view) becomes fairly limited. However, some theorists argue, rather, that there is simply no single logic of crit.—that critical practices and concepts are grounded in specific cultural, gender, historical, and institutional contexts which undergo change, all of which undermine the notion of any unitary and monolithic logic we might otherwise ascribe to crit. It has sometimes been suggested that critical statements work in a special way and that critical argument is not argument in the usual sense. Objectivist metacritics reject this stance as

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depriving critics of any important critical function at all, since it would strip crit. of genuine statements altogether.

The metacritic’s first enterprise—the analysis of meaning—raises a conflict within m. concerning the scope and limits of m. *Semantic descriptivists* take the technical terms of crit. as the critic uses them and are content merely to study and make explicit the way these terms are used, modified, and refined by critics. *Semantic revisionists* are uneasy about stopping there: they consider it part of the metacritic’s job to point out where critical vocabulary goes astray and, where possible, to recommend clearer definitions or new terminology. They do not necessarily have any intent to standardize all critical lang., but they think that critical discussion would be improved and much less discussion wasted if critics at least used key terms in the same clear, explicit, and agreed-on senses. A broader and historically more informed form of m. would embrace the tasks of both descriptivists and revisionists, seeking to show why critical vocabulary cannot be standardized or improved (in the sense of being logically grounded)

beyond a point, and how a sound and intelligent critical practice need not remain strictly bound by a particular set of criteria. This form of metacritical analysis discloses the historically situated and changing nature of crit. and its theories and acknowledges the internal modifications and refinements within them.

The metacritic's second enterprise—the logical appraisal of critical reasoning—raises a second conflict within m. about the ultimate relationship between crit. and philosophy. Does crit. rest on more general aesthetic foundations, and must it be justified by philosophical arguments? The autonomist view is that crit. is independent of philosophy and needs no justification. M., on this view, attempts to make clear the actual reasoning underlying various critical practices, bringing out their tacit assumptions and thereby helping critics better understand what they are doing. The *heteronomist* view is that crit. necessarily rests on philosophical foundations whose truth, or at least reasonableness, can be established only by philosophical inquiry. If explication presupposes certain propositions about the nature of meaning, if evaluation presupposes certain propositions about the nature of truth and value, then (on this view) the critic may talk nonsense, or go wildly astray in his or her work, unless the propositions presupposed are philosophically sound. The historicist (or pragmatist) view, on the other hand, considers crit. and its theories to be quasi-autonomous rather than fully autonomous, and shows them to be situated in particular historical, institutional, and cultural contexts. See now ANALYSIS: CRITICISM; EVALUATION; INTERPRETATION; POETICS; THEORY.