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LETTER AND NOTE

**Response to Albert Rolls, and a
Brief Institutional History of
Literary Hermeneutics**

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A response to Albert Rolls's recent letter.

I thank Albert Rolls for his thoughtful response to my article on Pynchon's "Entropy" and William Gaddis's *J R* in *Contemporary Literature*. Whenever someone goes to the effort of writing a critique of one's work, one wants to start by identifying points of disagreement. Let me dispatch the most unambiguous (and least important) one first. I did not, in fact, describe Saul as treating his list of information-theory terms as "synonyms," but instead as implying they were "near synonyms." I believe Rolls essentially stipulates that this is true, so there should be no dispute.

So where else do we disagree? Actually, just about everything Rolls argues in the body of his response is compatible with my article. Parts of it, I believe, are already implied, particularly those surrounding the idea that Pynchon runs into paradoxes when trying to schematize entropy allegorically. What, then, is the source of conflict between us? Whatever it is, it causes Rolls wrongly to think my article implies that Pynchon's limited understanding of the story's title concept "renders it worthless [...] and [suggests it] should no longer be read." I made no such suggestion. In fact, my last paragraph praises the story exuberantly.

I think the dispute exists on a higher level than any specific viewpoint either of us holds about "Entropy." The problem emerges most clearly when, early in the response, Rolls claims that, as readers, we must "accept Saul's explanation" of entropy. Why does he say that? Not because he thinks fictional characters are incapable of error, surely. Neither can he think authors are personally omniscient when they write, since (again, as Rolls stipulates) Pynchon admitted to not having a firm grasp on entropy when he wrote the story. So to whose ineffable understanding of entropy must we submit, according to Rolls? "Entropy" itself—*the story's*.

The argument I am about to make is not really targeted at Rolls. He uses a common formulation for approaching literature, one to be found in classrooms and scholarly articles throughout the Anglophone world. A rigorous refutation would require a long article and probably a full monograph. Once, I drafted 80 pages of such a book, but as I've left the academy now, I probably won't ever finish it. But since I'm no longer an academic, I'm at liberty to make that argument here more briefly and loosely.

In short: the notion that a story can have an “understanding” of any subject is patently absurd. “Understanding” is an aspect of higher cognition. It can be possessed only by human beings or by other creatures with a well-developed cerebral cortex. It can be ascribed to fictional characters inasmuch as we conceive of such characters having human-like properties within their fictional worlds. It cannot be ascribed to a story, though, which is merely ink-marks on a page, or abstractly a sequence of characters. One of the key maxims in the aforementioned unfinished manuscript is one that ought to be trivially obvious yet which stands in contradiction to the majority of academic literary practice: *books do not have brains*.

How did the bizarre notion that stories *themselves* can understand a concept, possess a viewpoint, or hold opinions come to be accepted not only as a perfectly reasonable perspective but in fact as the dominant position within an academic discipline? My theory is that this notion has its roots (in the Anglophone academy—I’ll let others speak for elsewhere) in the academic institutionalization of the New Criticism, though in many respects the chief New Critics fought against this idea. The New Criticism originally formed as a movement supporting the revolutionary sentiment that literary criticism, and not just literary scholarship, was a vital element of a university education. Prior to World War II, literary criticism was generally considered beneath English departments, because such work could not constitute a rigorous discipline: all one needed to be a literary critic, after all, was an opinion, and any idiot could have an opinion. To professionalize criticism into an academic discipline, one needed (as John Crowe Ransom famously wrote in “Criticism, Inc.”) a more systematic method. Hence the standard questions of journalistic literary criticism—e.g., “Is this poem good?”—were converted in academic literary criticism to (to quote the title of John Ciardi’s primer) “How does a poem mean?” Academic criticism would not concern assertions of taste, then, but would analyze the aspects of aesthetic form on which judgments of taste could be made. But despite Ciardi’s emphasis on the defamiliarizing “how,” his question could not help but degrade into “What does a poem mean?” Determining a poem’s meaning feels to the academic mind like a more systematic and objective (and hence properly scholarly) activity

than those mushy matters related to aesthetic judgment. At some point around the 1950s, the chief emphasis of the academic study of letters transformed from its historical aims—moral improvement, *belles-lettristic* appreciation, the history of language and culture—into hermeneutics. The subsequent arrival of structuralism and myth-based approaches accelerated and finalized the transition. This was an understandable, possibly inevitable, and utterly catastrophic mistake.

The religiosity of many leading New Critics (not to mention the secular apotheosis of literature found in academic criticism descending from Matthew Arnold) likely exacerbated this process. Textual hermeneutics derive, fundamentally, from religion. If one believes in God, interpreting his revealed text is necessary, since the mind of God is only really accessible through scripture. But why interpret fiction? Its authors are human: as Socrates demonstrated to Glaucon and Ion, they are privy to no special knowledge, and even if they were, they are not so inaccessible to us as God—if you really wanted to know their meaning, you could just ask them. Of course, academic critics do not usually commit the intentional fallacy anymore—actual authors being so frequently disappointing when we learn about their real selves—so our discipline has had to displace the authorial function onto the text *itself*, such that critics can unfalsifiably ascribe whatever beliefs they wish to it. (Sometimes, perceiving the absurdity, academics instead project a quasi-human implied author, who has all the necessary cognitive qualities but none of the inconvenient corporeality of a real author.) But why do that? Works of literature are not mystical artifacts. They are sequences of words that a few people once found sufficiently interesting to publish, no more and no less. There is no secret knowledge, no worldview, no “vision,” contained within them—if there were, where would it be located?

Rolls complains that discarding Saul’s approach to entropy leaves the story “uninterpretable.” I believe he takes that to be an obviously bad thing. I do not, because the interpretation of fiction is a foolish activity. Since we understand fiction to be autonomous from its author, in fact, fiction does not and cannot mean anything. The questions I am concerned with are solely aesthetic ones, since those are the only proper subject of literary criticism. For example, what is an adequate response to this text? What thoughts and emotions does it evoke, and why does

it evoke them? Most of all—the question that academics, still residually afraid they might be dubbed opinionists, have refused to ask throughout my lifetime—given the unthinkable large number of stories that exist in the world, which few of them, during our finite lives, are the most worth reading?

That, really, is where Rolls and I diverge. Rolls, seeing that I have challenged the coherence in how the narrator and characters treat entropy, recoils because, to his perspective, such a challenge implies that the story's meaning must be confused, and if the meaning is confused, the story itself must be deficient. But I do not care about the story's meaning. As I implied in my article, I think literature is often at its best when authors don't entirely know what they're talking about, because it lets them plunge into the knotty problems of life and work through why they're always harder to sort out than we expect. That is why—against Pynchon's own view—I think "Entropy" is an excellent story. It is also why I can agree with nearly every point Rolls makes about it while still maintaining that neither Pynchon nor Saul demonstrates a clear understanding of the concept. It's important to allow for that incoherence. If we simply defer to Saul, we may need to torque a half-understood concept awkwardly into a half-coherent interpretation, and that can only leave us needlessly confused.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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