

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

Literature and Psychoanalysis

To the Editor:

At a time when the methodology and the very object of literary studies have been cast into doubt, "Literature, Psychoanalysis, and the Re-Formation of Self: A New Direction for Reader-Response Theory," by Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., and Mark Bracher (100 [1985]: 342–54), goes a long way toward answering the question raised by Terry Eagleton: "Why literature and why teach it?" The authors' answer might be: because it affords the opportunity for the formation and re-formation of the structures of self. As flattering as this claim is for the self-image of the profession, I must question it. The authors support their claims for the powers of literature through reference largely to object-relations analysis, but they fail to convey the sense of ferment and debate that surrounds this movement. This is, perhaps, a necessary failing; their article does not pretend to be a review of recent psychoanalytic literature. But this failing is critical if it leads us to believe that the teaching of literature, without any changes in our teaching practices, may produce benign therapeutic effects.

Heinz Kohut, an analyst cited by the authors in support of their position, has written that, if he were forced to answer definitively, he would say that the aim of the psychoanalytic treatment is not to help the client structure his or her self but to help the client align his or her narcissistic needs with sustaining self-objects. One such self-object that, Kohut suggests, may serve and vitalize some sorts and only some sorts of people is the self-object of culture and the ideals that it embodies. This reasoning suggests that what we are doing when we teach literature is attempting to help students align themselves with what we take to be the mature self-object of literature and the high ideals with which, especially in relation to the culture of the nineteenth century, it is identified. This insight enjoins a true task, for it requires, in what we might call an exercise of countertransference, that we examine our own pedagogical practices and the effects they may have on students' relation to culture.

The authors describe the therapeutic process as involving the two steps of interpretation and confrontation. Teachers may serve, in this process, a useful therapeutic role by confronting and correcting student

responses. In this description of the therapeutic process, the authors embrace the traditional Freudian formulation and also certify conventional classroom practices. Kohut, however, defines the therapeutic process as consisting of the two steps of understanding and interpretation. This suggests a radically different teaching procedure, in which the teacher, in an attempt to help the student maintain his or her identification with the work, would not confront or correct the student but rather would try, as a necessary first step, to understand the student's response in relation to his or her narcissistic needs. Without this step of empathy, understood as the attempt to enter the student's subjective state, no therapeutic progress is possible. Once this step is taken, the teacher may offer an interpretation of the student's response, not as an act of confrontation—although the student may experience it as a confrontation, especially if it is wrong—but as a way of helping the student to a greater consciousness of his or her narcissistic needs as these are realized in the presence of certain affects. The overall end of such a process is not to formulate or to reformulate the structure of the student's self but to help the student come to an alignment of his or her narcissistic needs with culture as a self-sustaining and vitalizing self-object.

Psychoanalysis, I believe, has profound implications for the discipline as a teaching profession. We may use literature toward psychological ends, but these ends cannot be attained unless we are willing to apply a psychoanalytic scrutiny to our own teaching practices and to the developmental needs of students. Literature is there for these ends if we wish to undertake them, but literature cannot, as the authors imply, do this work for us.

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Reply:

We would like to thank Nicholas Tingle for his reflective and probing letter. Tingle's comments about the pedagogical implications of our theory raise important issues about psychoanalytic technique and the teacher's role in the transformative effect of literature.

Concerning the issue of psychoanalytic technique, Tingle's comments introduce confusion at two differ-