Epistemology and the Interpretation of Literature*
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I. The professional and academic study of English literature came about as a consequence of a specific 18th century literary "cause celebre." Thomas Percy, a young Anglican priest, accidentally discovered an old manuscript containing authentic medieval romances, and some early renaissance (15th and 16th century) ballads and shorter pieces. He published them in 1765 under the title Reliques of Ancient English Poetry, with a long introductory "dissertation" claiming that the unknown medieval minstrels who wrote the poems in the collection were noble knights and high born retainers of the king. Percy's essay on the minstrels gave his collection status as literature representative of the highest virtue and manners of the English nation. Percy's Reliques went through four editions in his lifetime, and he was made a Bishop, probably as a reward for his contribution to English letters.

A contemporary radical lawyer named Joseph Ritson, with a talent for bitter invective and an encyclopedic knowledge of Medieval English language and literature, became convinced that Percy's essay about the minstrels was wrong, and that some of the texts Percy printed as authentic had been "improved," and some had been falsified or invented. He accused Percy in print of these deliberate falsifications, and wrote a long essay showing that the minstrels were unlettered wandering public entertainers. The resulting conflict divided literary scholarship into two camps that corresponded exactly to the political divisions between reformers and Tories. Percy refused to allow his manuscript to be seen by Ritson or any representative of his view, on the grounds that their manifest lack of manners and "good taste" disqualified them as literary commentators.

One hundred years later, at the urging of the American scholar Francis Child, the Percy manuscript was reviewed by independent scholars, and Ritson's criticisms were confirmed in every particular.

In the meantime, many societies for the preservation of early English literature were founded in order to insure the publication of accurate texts and historical and biographical information. Theoretically, in these societies the right to comment on older English literature came about only through competence in early language and history, and care in the faithful reproduction of texts. The "truth" that was sought was no longer correspondence with the will of God, or even with the cultural values of the dominant class. Scholars of the Chaucer Society, or the Early English Text Society all believed theoretically in a kind of literary positivism; accurate description of the literary artifact was equivalent to "truth." There were several of these scholars who allowed their personalities and their prejudices to interfere with the purity of their descriptions, but these were aberrations of human frailty, and not attacks on the ideals of literary scholarship.

At the same time, Matthew Arnold's essays asserted the existence of an English tradition that could provide cultural standards for evaluating literature. Arnold's "high seriousness" reasserted the existence of extra-literary moral and aesthetic standards, which, though not derived from spiritual faith, nor from Aristotle, nevertheless had their permanence in the specifically English cultural tradition of democracy, regard for the rights of the individual, devotion to the continuity of their nation, and a respect for tradition in law, manners and art.

(Cont. on p. 10)

*This paper is a response to the questions posed by Mark Weinstein (See "Philosophy, Criteria, and Scholarship" in this issue) at the outset of the first series of faculty seminars on the Epistemology of the Disciplines, led by Weinstein and Naomi Liebler. Other papers from seminar members will appear in future issues of Inquiry.