ANALYSIS OF THE OLD 97

LITERARY THEORIES:  
MIMETIC       (Taine)  
PRAGMATIC      (Marx, Communist Manifesto)  
OBJECTIVE      (Brooks and Warren)  
EXPRESSIVE     (Keble)

SUMMARY OF THE PROCEDURE

Each theory will look at some aspects of the poem, and ignore others. Each will present a plausible, but incomplete version of its possibilities. Some readings will be compatible and others in conflict, but the irreducibility of all conflicts to a common critical stance should be a stimulus, not an irritant to understanding. To reduce all theories/readings to a univocal stance means that we not only place the creative tensions of controversy beyond understanding, but we also miss out on the benefits that ensue when readings interact. For example, for the workers in the critiques below, Marx adds a pragmatic, historical "moral of the story" to the objectively stated critique of Taine. To the heroic theme of Brooks and Warren, Keble adds the possibility of a heroine.

THE READINGS:

TAINE: Look at all the railroad talk, (specially stanza III). The poem is about race, milieu, and epoch. The Epoch is the Nineteenth Century Industrial Revolution. The races are the inventive and courageous breed of Europeans and Africans who build the country. The natural milieu is a landscape suited to railroading. The social milieu is the policy of development and its concomitant human costs.

MARX: Look at what the capitalists do to Steve. The poem is about the Industrial Revolution, but concentrates on the social oppression of the proletariat. The bosses give you an old beat up machine and expect you to perform miracles. Steve ought to organize the white engineers and black firemen, seize the defective machines, and then put the managers to work leveling that three-mile grade. Make this work a weapon of class warfare!

BROOKS AND WARREN: Look at the theme of the hero. The conflict is not between the bourgeoisie and proletariat, but man against time and space. The climax comes with the jump. What grit! The hero accepts his own challenge ("he," not "they," gave the orders) and pushes beyond his limits. This illustrates this universal theme of human striving against all odds. Exercise a scholarly excision on the gratuitous moralizing of the last stanza.

KEBLE: Look at the last stanza, again. Brooks and Warren fail to notice that the hero is not Steve, but Steve's wife who realizes too late the irony of their quarrel (there wasn't another woman). Through her imaginative recreation of events the author expresses her own depression (Steve is way behind schedule), followed by anger (the excessive speed), and despair (condensed into the whistle), all the poignant consequences of fatal misunderstandings.

SOME CURRICULAR POSSIBILITIES:

TAINE: The poem serves as vicarious experience for disadvantaged, lower class, black students by putting them in a world they can connect with their own. Using historical and social parallels, we can show how this world is both similar to and different from their experiences. The key problems are not about language and
structure (as many English teachers assume) but of expanding the students’ worlds through a relevant literary milieu.

MARX: Advantaged, upper middle class, white, suburban high school students are unused to drawing pragmatic morals from stories. They also tend to assimilate the meaning of events to their own milieu rather than looking at the larger social picture. Although the international implications of class struggles may be muted now, they are still sufficiently embedded in revolutionary realities and rhetoric to make this a useful reading.

BROOKS AND WARREN: The text-centered objective approach of the middle decades of the twentieth century has faded fast. Students now enter graduate school unlikely to have gained a clear idea of its powers and limitations. Their secondary and collegiate education mainly consists of unreflective eclectic teaching that includes confusing admixtures of other approaches; e.g., absorption of the work into its historical context while still claiming to be an objective, text-centered approach. Close reading of text develops the analytical powers of students. After this beginning, a "utopian" graduate education should also teach the other readings so that our students, who will mostly become teachers themselves, can carry the most extensive possible repertoire of resources for teaching into the schools.

KEBLE: Consideration of the thoughts and feelings of the flesh-and-blood author could be very salutary for white lower middle class, ethnic, community college students for whom the expression of deeply felt responses to life may be difficult. The poem presents a model of the difficulties in expressing oneself and in understanding the expressions of others. These problems of communication and comprehension between authors and readers parallel those between persons in this milieu.

CAVEAT: The summary readings and curricular vignettes give some idea of the range of possibilities but radically simplify the complexity of the problems addressed. For instance, there is not much specific and particular information about the students, the references to students’ milieus are minimal, there are no actual student responses, and the curricular exemplar has no sequence of resources beyond this one ballad to deal with developing problems. Thus the vignettes provide only the beginnings of the extensive curriculum deliberations that would be required in a real situation.