

Reply:

In each of the three letters to which I am asked to respond, I find more with which I agree than disagree. Yet there are a few points that illustrate how a difference of emphasis can easily be escalated into a difference of opinion. Hence I find it necessary to make a few brief remarks on each of these contributions to the Forum.

Thomas J. Farrell's suggestions are sensible and well-balanced. It is certainly true that "humility and maturity" are central twin themes of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. I wonder though whether the poem actually shows these virtues being acquired by its hero and Arthur's court. The glib acceptance of the sign of the green girdle as decorative device by the court is not quite the same as a true understanding of its significance, and, in my view, it is this ignorance that leads Arthur's knights away from innocence toward the collective culpability for which they are ultimately judged in the legend of the Round Table. Within this moral trajectory, the image of Gawain's wound functions as a sign of a deeper flaw in human nature itself, one that prevents the idealism of human institutions like that of chivalry from being fully realized.

Patrick Murphy is perfectly correct in pointing to the evidence of the poem that identifies the Arthurian court as in its infancy, but I believe that he overstates his case when he argues that one must dismiss thoughts of the court's demise when reading *Gawain*. I do not think that any audience could entirely forget that this legendary court, however pristine in this portrayal, was to eventually meet with tragedy. Indeed Murphy himself argues later in the same paragraph that what "one knows from the tradition as a whole" is pertinent to a proper understanding of the text as we have it. If this is so, then I think what we already know about the legend is useful in considering the long-term implications of Gawain's fault in relation to the entire Arthurian court. Moreover, I fail to see that my argument on the wound is as foreshortened as Murphy suggests. The conventional imagery of Christian theology that I cite makes a direct connection between the individual and the species; the quotations from Aquinas given in my paper illustrate this quite clearly. For this reason, to point out that Gawain himself stands for "the neck of King Arthur's court" is simply to restate what Guido da Pisa had already proposed, namely that the nobility represents the "neck" of the human body politic. I welcome Murphy's remarks on this extension of the meaning of the individual's wound to that of the corporate body of humankind, but I do not think my view differs from his as much as he seems to believe.

Richard Osberg's remarks are admirable for their clarity and insight and I have profited from them, yet I feel it necessary to point out that while it is true that lines 2025–40 do indeed refer to the prominent display

of the girdle over Gawain's clothing, the poem earlier says distinctly that Gawain "lays vp þe luf-lace þe lady hum razt, / Hid hit ful holdely þer he hit eft fonde" (1874–75). This action takes place before the hero's meeting with Bercilak for the final exchange of winnings. Hence the only question is whether the sash is hidden on Gawain's person or among his belongings. I prefer the former because it emphasizes his stealth a bit more openly, but the latter option also carries some weight. Either way, however, the knight's intent is unmistakable: he is not going to surrender the sash to his host. How can he? He has promised the lady of the castle not to reveal it. Hence his dilemma deepens; he is bound to betray one of his promises no matter what course of action he takes. This dilemma actually begins, as we might expect, with Gawain's decision to accept the green girdle, not with the revelation of the girdle in the last scenes of the poem. At the same time, I consider Osberg's suggestion about the significance of the sash worn on Gawain's clothing as a line bisecting (and thus breaking) the endless knot of the pentangle as a keen perception of the poem's habit of manifesting its thematic concepts through the physical detail of its plot, and I compliment him on his formulation of this use of the sign of the wound.

For the most part, then, these three comments represent original and impressive contributions to the subject of the hero's wound in *Gawain*, and I would encourage each of the authors to pursue his line of thought in more detail as a separate piece of scholarship. I am happy to have had the opportunity to read, and respond to, these letters in the Forum and I wish the authors well as they continue their research.

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The Social Self and Science

To the Editor:

In "Jonsonian Comedy and the Discovery of the Social Self" (99 [1984]: 179–93), Lawrence Danson creates a "rough" distinction between sociological and psychological versions of the self in order to describe characterization in Jonson's satiric comedies. I applaud Danson's diggings into social psychology for a language of the self, and I know literary critics can learn from the social sciences, most immediately, perhaps, that there are "versions" of the self other than the psychoanalytic one. But I wish to point out an error of emphasis in Danson's discussions of the self so that I may make a more general point about literary critics' use of the social sciences: there are dangers in a too facile application of the concepts and findings of science to the analysis of literature.

Danson describes a sociological self that, he says, assumes the biases of symbolic interactionism, a subdiscipline within sociology (190, n. 1). The concept of self Danson describes as interactionist or sociological is unstable and insubstantial, a mere “succession of roles” (187) without coherency, commitment, or continuity. While some sociologists suggest, with Danson (181), that the self is multiple, most interactionists argue that the self is a more or less unitary entity that shows the individual’s enduring, if sometimes vague, understanding of the various interactions in his or her life.

According to the interactionists, the self is constructed socially. Yet if the self is a reflected entity, the individual becomes that reflection (Berger and Luckmann 132). In *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), George Herbert Mead observes, “the fact that all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it . . . is not in the least incompatible with, or destructive of, the fact that every individual self has its own particular individuality” (201). To the interactionist, the individual is creature and creator of society. The group is essential to the development of individuality, but developed individuality is essential to the development of the group.

My point is that “the social self” is not necessarily—or even commonly—unstable or precarious in comparison to “the psychological self,” which Danson sees as integratable. All selves, interactionism says, are constructed socially and all become integrated to some extent, quite usually to a great degree.

If Danson’s unstable, infinitely reflected social self is not the version of the self most prominent in the symbolic interactionist tradition, such a concept of self is sociological. Thus, it seems Danson equates symbolic interactionism with sociology. Actually, interactionists are only a minority of sociologists, and interactionism (which has been called humanistic in orientation and method) is not accepted entirely by the majority of sociologists, whose aims and ideals are those of science. The unstable self is the self of sociological science.

That there are several concepts of self available to the sociologist or to the psychologist brings me to my more general point about critics’ use of social science. If until recently applications of sociology and psychology to literary study have been few in number and narrow in focus, one reason is that both disciplines have developed as positive science in the mold of physics and mathematics, especially in the United States. Here, in the scientific nature of most work in sociology and psychology, danger lies for the literary critic.

Overstatement, unnecessary schematization, and reduction are traps waiting for the critic who absorbs the findings of the social sciences and uses them for explanatory purposes without understanding that often those findings are based on and refer to a limited and partial view of the human being. Perhaps this fact is ob-

vious, but perhaps, too, it remains unacknowledged by the social scientist or the general public: it is part of the sociologist’s work to assume away the fact of individuality—what is personal or unique or “stable”—just as it is part of the psychologist’s work to assume away the fact of society—what is social in the individual. Each discipline simplifies its notion of the self in order to proceed as science.

Kenneth Burke reminds us that “insofar as any science has a nomenclature especially adapted to its particular field of study, the extension of its *special* terms to provide a definition in *general* would necessarily oversociologize, overbiologize, overpsychologize, or overphysicize, etc., its subject” (*International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Ed. David L. Sills [New York: Crowell, 1968]. 8: 449–50). Sociology, like psychology or economics, uses an abstract and artificial description of the individual as a tool in scientific analysis. That description is not intended to capture the whole of the human being; it is not the scientific truth about humankind. In *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1968), Ralf Dahrendorf explains, “however much we turn and twist *homo sociologicus*, he will never be the particular person who is our friend, colleague, father, or brother” (76). Nor will that person be the particular character who peoples plays and novels—unless the author or the critic reifies abstractions (which, of course, may be the case in the work of a satirist such as Jonson).

Attempts by literary critics to expand our understanding of work in the social sciences are important. Danson contributes nicely to this new wave of “applied social science” in literary criticism. Further, his advocacy of symbolic interactionist perspective for critical analysis is correct, in my opinion. But his description of a social self that is more scientifically sociological than interactionist points out a general difficulty inherent in borrowing from social science. That is, the social sciences aim not to describe reality but to construct categories that allow each social science to capture a certain part of reality in analysis. “Man in his entirety not only is safely removed from the attack of any single discipline, but may possibly remain forever a nebulous shape in the background of scientific endeavor” (Dahrendorf 22). Literary critics must know whether and how to use the part for the whole.

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Reply:

Sharon O’Dair thinks that I attribute to a “subdiscipline” of sociology, symbolic interactionism, a concept of self that is more broadly “sociological.” We disagree, then, in our interpretation of the symbolic in-