
The Language of Criticism

MLA SPECIAL SESSION 550

December 28, 1976

SCE REPORTS #1

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PROGRAM

Papers:

1. Jerome J. McGann (Johns Hopkins):
"Rhetoric and the Function of
Criticism". 4
2. Paul Miers (Rutgers College, Rutgers):
"Language, Literature, and the
Limits of Theory". 15
3. Robert J. Matthews (Cook College, Rutgers):
"The Bankruptcy of Meaning 28

Panel Participants:

1. Jeffrey Mehlman (Johns Hopkins: Romance
Languages)
2. Matthew Marino (Alabama: Linguistics)
3. Edward Tomarken (Miami: English)

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1976

7:00-8:15 P.M.

GIBSON A. HILTON

Discussion Leaders: Leroy Searle (Rochester)
James Sosnoski (Miami, Ohio)

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PRELIMINARIES

When this seminar was announced, we had designated as the special topic, "Critical Language and Theory Choice: Prospects for an Integrated Critical Perspective."

Evidently, the prospects are no better nor worse than they should be. In selecting these papers for discussion, we were impressed by an attitude approaching consensus, that existing critical theory is marked (if not marred) by uncertainties of purpose, mystifications, and deeply ingrained preoccupations that may or may not be well motivated.

The form in which these papers are being circulated is a part of the conception of the seminar itself. These papers will not be orally presented. We believe the papers deserve to be preserved; but more importantly, we believe the issues they raise should be submitted to focused scrutiny.

Accordingly, we will observe these protocols for discussion at the seminar meeting itself:

1. The first half hour will be set aside for the authors of these papers to elaborate on their own papers or comment on others.
2. Three invited commentators will offer their observations on issues raised in these papers that require further discussion.

3. After a very brief interruption (if it seems appropriate), the concluding half hour of the seminar will be set aside for open discussion.

Since our time is limited, and the problems under consideration are complex, we urge people who will be attending to formulate their questions, observations, objections as precisely and succinctly as the intransigent materials under discussion will allow.

It is our plan to make a tape recording of the seminar, to circulate edited transcripts and other continuations of the discussion to seminar participants. The printed papers already circulated and the responses generated by them are being provided through The Society for Critical Exchange, Inc., with the cooperation of the English Departments of the University of Rochester and Miami University (Ohio).

More information concerning The Society for Critical Exchange will be provided at the seminar. Here, we call attention only to the fundamental principle on which it has been organized. The unique demands of critical inquiry are most acutely felt when generous but incisive discussion of controversial proposals and insights is either lacking, discontinuous, or impeded by the isolation of individual scholars from an avowedly interested audience.

We hope to make this seminar a continuing forum for such discussion, with papers, commentary, and associated information made available under the rubric of SCE Reports. We solicit your suggestions -- and good will.

Rhetoric and the Function of Criticism

Jerome J. McGann

In the announcement that was issued for this seminar, four questions were proposed as possible focusses for discussion. It was particularly suggested that I might be interested in writing to the third of these questions: "What is the relation of the language and rhetoric of criticism to its intended audience?" It would be easy enough to spend the rest of this paper exploring possible latent contents of that question -- to deconstruct it, as one might say. I will spare you such an exercise. Nevertheless, the question does call for some simple analytic distinctions.

First, does the question ask for an "essential" answer -- as if there were some basic and explicable relation, or set of relations, between the speech of criticism and the audience of the critic? Or second, does it ask for a substantive answer: what in fact is the relation of the speaking critic and his audience -- today (in the U. S., in England, in France?), 20 years ago, in the 18th century? As if, for example, a description of the facts of a situation -- perhaps a current one -- would help to generate a better critical practise, and/or better critical theory.

No doubt these further questions occur to me because as a literary person I am primarily interested in helping to develop greater practical discipline of mind and hand (or clarity of thought and style) in myself, in students I teach, and in those I teach with. That is to say, I see in the initial question an implicit bias to conceive the practise of criticism to be grounded in a preventient theoretical

structure. Now I do not believe that theory and practise in any discipline -- scientific, literary, political -- are related to each other in the way this question implies they are. The practise of an art or craft does not, it seems to me, ultimately depend upon, or originate in, some latent theoretical structure. Theory does not anticipate practise, it follows practise. From an historical vantage this is an evident, I would even say a universal, fact.

We have to recall that a theory is merely an hypothesis which is judged, from its practical operations, to possess a relatively long range of general usefulness. An hypothesis, on the other hand, is a conception of a subject which aims to become a theory, and hence which asks to be put to confirming -- or disconfirming -- practical use. Only in this context are we permitted to say that theory anticipates practise. But the formulation of an hypothesis (or a theory) occurs because existing practise -- the given facts -- do not conform to the rules of some other, anticipating theory. In the particular case of language and literary criticism, theory is not only a guide to practise, it is a reminder of the most efficient methods of language use which were discovered and practised "supertheoretically" (as it were), beyond and despite the theories and rules which anticipated the actual practise.

The hypothetical ground of all theory is important to keep in mind; to the degree that we do not remember this fact, to that degree are we likely to forget the practical matters which determined the origin and continued usefulness of theories. Theories do not have an essentialistic but rather a functional character. We see this clearly even in the case of so-called "laws" (in science) or "rules" (in literary affairs). Laws are theories which have been granted a universal application and practise. But note that they possess this universal character only by per-

mission. The Law of Gravity, so called, has in fact never been proven, any more than it has ever been proved that gravity in fact governs the motions of the tides. The Law of Gravity is a law only by permission.

In classical literary theory -- I confine myself to the clearest case, that of rhetoric -- the pragmatic basis of the theoretical writings always remain perfectly evident. This is one of the greatest theoretical virtues of classical rhetoric, and one which modern theorists have yet fully to understand or learn from. The classical literary texts on rhetoric which come down to us are powerfully operational in nature, nor is it fortuitous that they should typically represent themselves in the form of handbooks.

This is not at all the case in our own day, when literary theory is highly speculative. It is a common enough experience that theories (or, really, hypotheses) are proposed which are based on little or no explicit practise, and which necessarily have a short life expectancy. This situation may seem odd, even paradoxical, especially if one agrees that theory follows from rather than anticipates practise. Nevertheless, the status of contemporary literary speculations seems to me more practical than one ordinarily realizes. We know, of course, that classical rhetoric has failed to mirror -- or control -- literary practise for a long time. Modern speculative theory is plainly an effort to establish self-consciously the rules which have been in operation for many years, and in despite of classical theory. But the explosion of modern speculative writing is, I believe, more than this. It represents an effort to recover, in the fields of language and literature, basic practical skills in hypothesis formation. The practise of writing imaginative and even critical prose is far in advance of the practise of writing theoretical prose. The

lucidity of classical theoreticians must be the despair, and ought to be the envy, of modern critical theorists.

Which brings me back to the initial question about the relation of critical rhetoric to the critic's audience. I will speak first to certain facts in the current situation. In practical criticism we ordinarily encounter few serious problems. Modern readers and critics share a rather long and certainly powerful tradition that extends back to the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge. But the theoretical traditions which extend across this period are much more problematic. Indeed, we do not possess a coherent (i. e., formulable) theoretical tradition any longer, and the result is that we have a great deal of theoretical practise, but little in the way of practical theory. The task is in truth difficult enough; for a practical theory of rhetoric or poetics would have to embrace not only all past practise, but classical theory as well -- i.e., the theory which modern practise seems to have successfully tried to overthrow.

This concludes the first part of my analysis, which can be summarized in two sets of observations.

(a) Much contemporary literary theory suffers from what appears to be a lack of awareness about the status of hypotheses and theories per se. They seem to be offered with the (open or covert) belief that a comprehensive theory of rhetoric or poetics has an essentialistic relation to the subject (language, poetry) about which one is "being theoretical." So one frequently encounters the idea that a theory (or model or structure) is "latent in" the content. In reality, structures and models are laid upon phenomena artificially -- experimentally -- heuristically -- in order to facilitate one's operations with the phenomena.

(b) The multiplication of modern theories -- which must be an embarrassment to the theoreticians themselves and is certainly an object of ridicule among non-theoreticians -- is best understood as the sign of an effort to reacquire practical skills in competent theoretical performance. Classical literary theory, which is more lucid, practical, and comprehensive than modern theory, both exposes the context in which modern theoretical problems have arisen, and stands as a paradigm of what modern theorists are aiming for (i. e., a lucid, practical, and comprehensive theory which is not, however, essentialistic).

We may now be in a better position to understand why rhetoric should be an important preoccupation of modern literary critics and theorists. Critical writing today almost exclusively concerns itself with (a) the literary object itself (thus: formalism), and (b) the critic's performing mind (thus: phenomenology, in its wildly variant forms). But in all matters having to do with language, the nature -- the status, meaning, form -- of any statement depends upon the use to which the statement is actually being put. This simple fact about language explains why poems etc. are subject to endless interpretation: the meaning of a poem will shift with its contexts of use. This crucial significance of actual use was clearly perceived by classical theoreticians, whose rules of decorum are guides to language manipulation which must be observed because of the factor of use-context. Although, in the treatises, the rules are almost invariably set forth from the point of view of the language-user, they have to be of equal interest to the theorist of language, for it is the rules which display why a form of meaning cannot anticipate language practise, except in an heuristic sense: For the speculative language theorist himself puts not only his own language, but the language-object he speaks about, to a use. You cannot simply "observe"

language, even theoretically. You must put it to use, institute a feedback operation.

The result of this Heisenberg effect, in a situation where the critical approach is speculative rather than operational, is to narrow one's understanding of the usefulness of a literary object. What I mean is that today nearly all critics and theorists -- of whatever variety -- approach their task as if it involved a dialectic between two poles: the literary object and its thoughtful reader. Whether this dialectic comprehends the basic geography of literature as such -- something I doubt rather strongly -- it is not the geography of the literary critic's literature. For the critic institutes not only an internal dialectic between himself and the poem (which from the critic's vantage must comprehend earlier "readers" of that poem), but also an open dialectic between himself and his "audience."

This most obvious of facts is largely neglected by contemporary critics, where it was emphasized by the ancients. And the importance of the fact lies in this: that an adequate critical accounting of a literary object cannot be made unless the demands of both these dialectics are met -- i. e., unless the critical analysis explicates self-consciously the interdependent relationship that holds between both dialectics. For a theoretician this means he is obliged to make it plain that the practical critic -- in one way or another, for better or for worse -- socializes his literary object. Theorists, in other words, have to decreate the idea -- implicit in nearly all contemporary theory except certain types of Marxist theories -- that the domain of literature and literary criticism is private (or self-) consciousness.

To do this -- I am now speaking in terms of practical rather than theoretical criticism -- requires that the critic face up to, and explicate, the ques-

tion: what for? What is this poem (say) for, what is this analysis of such a poem for? Thus: not what does a poem mean, or how does a poem mean, but why does a poem mean. Why it is -- as one might now say -- meaningful, and what is the point of the analysis?

Such functional questions are answerable on several levels, from the most philosophic to the most technological. The scope or level of the functional question comes clear when we call to mind, e. g., the ancient rules of decorum. It makes a difference -- we all recognize this, though I suspect older literary people recognize it most clearly -- whether one is speaking to a group of scholars or to a group of undergraduates, or to a mixed audience (propriety of audience). It makes a difference if I speak on a literary topic as a practising poet or as a university teacher (propriety of speaker), here or in London, today or next year (proprieties of place and time). I instance these gross examples only to make plain that any analysis or interpretation always is performed under criteria of use and function. But even within the relatively narrow world of today's literary criticism functional criteria do apply -- and always are applied, whether we are aware of them or not. To teach a course in Romanticism, e. g., and to subordinate (say) Keats while one is emphasizing (say) Byron is to have at least covertly raised and answered certain large functional questions.

All these examples are simple and plain enough, which is why I raise them here. On such matters we can agree that the meaning of a literary object is intimately connected with our critical use of it. Note, however, that one's use of the object is not merely the "sign" of a meaning we say it possesses; the use institutes that meaning in the world. No one practises but what he believes, consciously or

unconsciously, and all critical practise is formal instruction in certain beliefs.

That is to say, all criticism is didactic. The idea that criticism can be "purely formal" or "structural" -- as if it could thereby, or in any other manner, avoid ethical and political concerns -- is the most pervasive delusion of the past half century. But all types of so-called "intrinsic" criticism reinforce that belief. Of course it is true that one can perform various sorts of purely intrinsic, or systematic, analysis. The delusion arises only when such an analysis represents itself as a comprehensive treatment of literary objects -- as if, in a standard formulation, all other analyses were in one way or another "extrinsic" to literature "as such." This idea about literary analysis simply follows from an antecedent conception of literature itself, as if an imaginative work were essentially an integral and self-generating system.

The facts are quite otherwise. True, for the literary critic the poem is one's center of attention, but only in the sense that it is the continuous occasion for dealing with a wide range of matters. How wide the range is will depend partly upon the poem, but mostly upon the critic of the poem. One could perform a structural or thematic analysis of War and Peace, but one sees clearly that much more could be usefully done with such a book. The example illustrates what is meant when people say that great literature exhausts criticism.

But great criticism ought to be no less formidable. Any literary phenomenon can be its subject, depending upon various circumstances of time, place, occasion. For what the literary critic teaches is not merely literature, in the restricted sense of "the literary text," but any of the values and skills which literature may occasion. It is a distinct human value to

be able to manipulate language in a disciplined way, and literature happens to be a superb occasion for teaching such skills. It is also a distinct value to be able to think clearly about human behavior -- its self-deceptions, its cant, its concealed or manifest designs and schemes; once again, literature is a useful occasion for developing these skills. And it is an even more distinct value to acquire these skills in generic analysis of large masses of socially conditioned materials. Novels are especially useful for developing these skills. In each of these cases -- more could easily be cited -- what is of interest to the critic is not the "text" itself, but the public skills which literary texts can be an occasion for developing. In many cases, specifically imaginative texts are better for these purposes than historical or philosophical texts precisely because imaginative texts reconstruct a fictive world, and provide one with complex particulars that are intentionally represented in an unanalyzed surface form. They seek to raise questions, not settle them, for the paradoxical fact about imaginative form is that it organizes its data according to laws which the poet's own analytic act of composition institutes, but which it does not comprehend. The idea is fundamentally expressed throughout Shelley's great "Defence" of poets as both prophetic and utilitarian:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

This penetrating idea falls to the literary critic as well. For, like the world itself -- the model which literature imitates -- great imaginative texts re-

quest, generation by generation, a continuing act of analysis which can never be completed.

All this is to say that, by insisting upon the purity of the isolated work, by treating the "text" as an end rather than as a means -- which is what we have been urged to do by various critics for a long time, and which is what we are still urged to do by the most au courant critics and theorists -- one may skirt, and perhaps even short circuit, the power of literature to be useful. Rather than thinking of texts as ends in themselves, we would do well to think of them as hypothetical organizations of human material designed to be put to the test of analysis. Criticism should not merely break open the text, it should observe how the text makes possible an analytic invasion of the world.

The prevailing language and rhetoric of criticism continues to obscure this functional aspect of literature and criticism. This is my final, summary point. The more we think in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic criticism, the more we continue to write about "the text" and to urge people to think of imaginative works in systematic, structural, or formal terms and metaphors, the more we perpetuate the idea that the philosophy of literature and the arts is aesthetics. In fact, aesthetics is the narrowest generic conception of literature that one can hold, and it is hardly philosophic or even analytic, except in the most primitive sense. Do we really believe that is what the "text" is for? If I were a student, and were taught such things, I would hardly waste my time, or money, in a literary classroom or seminar.

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Language, Literature, and the Limits of Theory

Paul Miers

Signs of intellectual crisis, we are told, are everywhere; and such signs, as they appear in various fields, seem to be intolerable symptoms of imminent chaos for those engaged in the normative work of these disciplines. But a state of crisis, as Thomas Kuhn has argued, can also lead to a positive reformulation of the whole order of knowledge which underlies conceptual thought. Such is the case now, I believe, in literary theory. Our sense of a crisis in literary studies is largely caused by the assimilation of conflicting models from many extra-literary fields, exemplified in the last decade by the explosion of theory from Paris. While some might wish that literary criticism keep its purity and put its own house in order first, the vast array of complex work being done on many fronts in the study of human consciousness and language makes this goal a utopian dream. A crisis engendered by interdisciplinary thought can only be resolved through interdisciplinary methods. Consequently I want to suggest a way of mediating various literary models from the perspective of system theory developed by Anthony Wilden in his synthetic work, System and Structure (London: Tavistock, 1972). Wilden calls system theory "the science of models." I want to propose that we use this "science" not to formulate a single new language of criticism (a task I believe to be theoretically impossible), but rather to outline the operational limits of various theories, to define the range and domain of their applications, and finally to show that the conflicts which arise between different models are complementary and not contradictory ones.

I want to begin with a simple definition of theory used by Wilden: any theory must be logically more powerful, that is of a higher logical type, and yet conceptually simpler than the phenomenon it describes. For certain low order, closed systems it is possible to develop a single descriptive model which satisfies these criteria: semiotic models of simple cybernetic systems for example (see Umberto Eco, A Theory of Semiotics, 1976). However, as many scientists now recognize, natural systems are neither simple nor closed, and therefore no one model is sufficient to describe the whole system. There are certain limits or indeterminacy inherent in every model. Human language and literature, as natural systems, display such characteristics so that no single theory can both satisfy Wilden's criteria and encompass the richness of what it describes without distortion and a reification of its own limits in the phenomenon itself.

This problem of limits and reification has troubled many contemporary critics such as Paul de Man who take the present "crisis" as an indication of the impossibility of human knowledge. From the perspective of system theory, however, such limits are actually the very basis of knowledge: they impose on us the task of clarifying rather than mystifying the various boundaries of human thought. Wilden's definition of theory offers a means for such a clarification. When we describe complex natural phenomena such as language and literature, we usually face a "trade off" between logical power and conceptual structure; one is almost always gained at the expense of the other, and a model which emphasizes one over the other will tend to define the phenomena it describes in terms of what it favors: "The relation between higher levels of organization and higher levels of logical typing is inverse: the higher the logical type, the lower the level of organization (complexity). Similarly, the lower the level of organization, the more preponder-

ance structure has over system; and the higher the level of organization, the more 'semiotic freedom' in terms of 'characteristic response' the system under consideration may be assumed to have" (Wilden, p. 239).

In terms of literary theory, then, we can make the following kinds of rough distinctions. If our model of language or literature emphasizes conceptual organization, it will lose logical power and tend to be as complex as the phenomenon it describes. Such a model will obtain richness in terms of semantics or meaning, but will lose information or the syntactics of the system, by emphasizing the continuous, analogical nature of language as opposed to the discontinuous or digital punctuation that structures the system. It will assume that codes are functions of the message, that syntactics are reducible to semantics. On the other hand, if our model emphasizes logical power, it will lose conceptual organization, tending to be reductively simpler than the phenomenon it describes. Such a model gains the ability to define information (syntax, code, or structure) in the system at the expense of semantics or meaning. It defines messages in terms of codes and describes semantics as being governed by syntactics.

The important point to remember is that language is both analogical and digital, a complex system of semantics and syntax; and that even these distinctions are ones made for operational purposes. Syntax and semantics, Frege's concept of Sinn and Bedeutung, and analogical and digital are not either/or divisions (a digital concept), but rather they are overlapping relations of different logical types. Neither type of model I have described is wrong about the way it views language or literature, but no one type is sufficient for a full account. What each kind of model defines as meaning or interpretation is of a different order

from the other; however, since each model tends to assume that it contains the whole or "real" nature of language, the results obtained from the application of different models are usually perceived by the respective proponents of the models as being in conflict.

From this understanding I think we can see more clearly the nature of the various critical systems that now seem to be in such a "crisis" because they offer what appears to be mutually exclusive conclusions. Systems which start from the analogic nature of language and claim to be of a higher logical type than literature seek to account for the digital or structural aspect of language. They tend, therefore, to emphasize overdetermination by describing the multiple meanings and richness of the semantic field in terms of a single mechanism. These systems work from a model of equifinality, that is, a single end reached by multiple paths; they stress historical genesis over logical genesis and define memory as the trace of the system's evolution through time. Such critical models are naturally ones of creativity or writing, and they assume that the reading and interpretive process is the reverse of the generative process which produced the system. Traditional Freudian psychoanalysis is the classic example of such a theory; and, of course, one of Freud's central insights was the concept of overdetermination as a multiple set of meanings in the manifest content being controlled by a single mechanism in the latent content of the dream. The primary processes of mental life for Freud are essentially analogic, images and things being prior to words. Freud's continual problem throughout his writing, the problem which confuses our attempts to sort out his system, was the need to articulate a systemic and dynamic theory of mental functioning which was not simply structural or schematic. In its traditional literary applications, Freudian theory is a hermen-

eutic, that is an interpretation of a hidden meaning, and essentially a theory of the creative process which is then applied in reverse to the problem of reading, as in The Interpretation of Dreams.

Models of language and literature which start from the digital nature of language and claim to have a higher level of organization, have to account for the analogic or semantic aspect of language by underdetermining meaning in relation to information or syntax, that is positing a multiple set of possible structures which can account for the surface content. Such critical models are ones of reading which assume that the writing process is the inverse of the reading process; they emphasize semiotic translation rather than semantic interpretation. The purest examples of such models in literary theory are the various forms of structuralism and semiology, which have become in practice, as Jonathan Culler has recently argued, largely theories of reading. Such models, because they are of equal or lower logical type than what they describe tend to be subsumed by the phenomenon itself, a point which Levi-Strauss readily acknowledges about his mythic structures. These underdetermined systems can define the intrinsic boundaries of the system but they have great difficulty delineating the total field from its ground or mediating between their own models and the system. Thus in structuralism all modes of writing are defined as being of the same logical type (texts or écriture), and any model is simply a reworking of the same finite set of codes.

Because such models are underdetermined there is only a weak sense of causality and a very strong emphasis on discontinuous structures and multifinality, that is dissimilar ends reached by alternative paths from similar initial conditions. In their most extreme form such systems are stochastic ones in which each state of the system is definable as a binary

choice determined only by the previous state. These systems have no "memory" of the process which generates them, but rather can recall at any moment the underlying operations on which they are founded: the state of the system is its "memory." Logical genesis is given conceptual priority to historical genesis, the later concept being defined as largely illusory. Foucault's archaeology of knowledge tends in this direction, presenting a discontinuous set of structural relations which constitute history and a reduction of semantics to syntactics (episteme as opposed to "worldview"). The notions of origin, subject, and authorship are problematic in this model and can be defined only in terms of the structural elements which convey information and the "mythic" entities which are posited by the system of thought being studied. Any message can be analyzed through the set of codes in which it is expressed, and therefore reading and writing are defined as operations of decoding and recoding, the original code being attributed to some inherent structure of the system itself.

I have described the characteristics of these two kinds of models in a generalized fashion, and no single literary model ever demonstrates all these elements. In practice models often show internal confusion about their own modes, and it is just as important to be able to pick out these internal contradictions, which are usually the mystified limits of the model, as it is to mediate between various systems. In this way we can understand how a critic whose model is often never fully articulated and/or conceptually clear can nevertheless gain intuitive insights of great power. It is important to be able to determine when someone is "right for the wrong reasons," and "wrong for the right reasons," a distinction related to the trade between logical power and conceptual organization, and one which

explains that phenomenon of critical systems which De Man calls "blindness and insight." One kind of model reads the digital in analogic terms, and the other reads the analogic in digital terms.

Again Freudian theory furnishes the clearest example. In the crucial sixth chapter of the Interpretation of Dreams, we can see Freud struggling with these kinds of distinctions between digital and analogic and yet never mastering them. At one time he seems to suggest that the unconscious is a structural arrangement which transmits information about the state of the system, while at other times he seems to be describing a semantic exchange of meaning. Freud's notion of symbol is consequently ambiguous, sometimes defined as an analogic relation integrally bound to what it represents, and sometimes defined as a wholly arbitrary sign or marker in the unconscious system. Jacques Derrida has shown how this conceptual confusion runs throughout Freud's work as a search for an adequate model of consciousness which would be both analogic and digital and could account for both memory and retrieval. As Derrida points out, the 1895 "Project for a Scientific Psychology," is the buried "machine in the ghost" of psychoanalysis, the digital model of brain which Freud abandoned for an analogic model of mind.

Jacques Lacan's structural psychoanalysis, however, turns Freud inside out. By increasing the level of organization, it gains an analytic ability over the syntactic information being conveyed in human discourse, but only at the expense of the logical power of Freud's original model. In Lacan we can take our psychoanalysis without the Freudian "myths," but we may find Lacan's own system unintelligible in terms of any kind of conceptual coherence. This near unreadability of Lacan is due, I think, to the fact that, even as he inverts

Freud, Lacan attempts to reincorporate the Freudian themes of overdetermination, the Oedipal conflict, etc., back into his structural system. Wilden's recent work on Lacan in System and Structure goes a long way toward clarifying Lacan's opaque theory.

We can see a similar kind of conceptual difficulty in Chomsky's theory of language. Essentially Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance is a distinction between reading and writing, between an overdetermined semantic system which puts multiple meanings into one sentence and an underdetermined syntactic system which can derive multiple meanings from a single sentence in terms of deep structure operations. Chomsky assumes that the act of reading and writing are reversible and that, therefore, the generative state of language at any given point in its development is totally recoverable by reversing the logical genesis of the deep structure operations. In practice Chomsky's system is a theory of reading which offers us a gain in information and syntax against a loss in ability to describe semantic elements of language, an emphasis not on how we produce ambiguous sentences but rather on how we are able to interpret them. Ambiguity in Chomsky is presented as multiple structures embedded in a single sentence having multiple meanings, It is significant, I think, that in his most recent work, Reflections on Language, Chomsky has made fundamental revisions in the theory to accommodate the power which case grammar has demonstrated in restoring semantic richness to surface structure. Thus Chomsky admits that the idea of reversibility and recoverability of the logical genesis of some uniquely linguistic deep structure in the brain is a conceptual "fiction," a necessary assumption for describing the syntactic nature of language. Most

importantly Chomsky now accepts the notion of a trace in the surface structure, the fact that certain surface operations seem to erase the deep structure transformations to which they are tied and leave only trace indications of the operation in the surface structure. Chomsky's original extreme theory of reading is now gradually moving back towards a theory of writing.

By the very terms of my own argument here, we should realize that overdetermined and underdetermined systems themselves are distributed over a continuum which begins to "shade" together at the middle. On each "side" of this continuum the far range of one type of model, the overdetermined kind, for example, increasingly begins to resemble the other side, in this case underdetermining its own overdetermination. This fact explains the strange similarities between seemingly unrelated systems, for example between Northrop Frye and Levi-Strauss. Frye's system demonstrates a peculiar blending of over- and under-determination. Frye attempts to generate a digital or syntactic description of literature wholly from the analogic or semantic content, an heroic act of self-creation related to Frye's roots in Blakean mythology. The great problem with Frye's system is that it is both of the same logical type as what it describes (the generic structure of literature) and of the same order of complexity. In its pure form it conveys neither information nor meaning, but simply transmits itself as a closed system. However, Frye tempers this problem in his critical practice by recognizing that the closure of the system is a fictional construct. In theory Frye's system has neither logical nor historical genesis, but in practice Frye often traces both the logical and historical construction of literary forms.

In the "middle" of this continuum we might expect to find certain kinds of theories which are neither over nor underdetermined, which stress neither reading nor writing. In theory, new criticism is such a system which rejects both a theory of reading or a theory of writing (the "intentional fallacy" and the "affective fallacy"). The tendency of new criticism is to collapse the analogical and digital into the same mode, to treat message and code, syntactics and semantics, as the same. Such a move solves certain problems of confusing the model for the phenomenon, but it gives up any ability to mediate between the phenomenon and its observer. Therefore in practice new criticism tends to move toward either a reader or a writer theory, to emphasize the rhetorical effects achieved by a poem or to focus on the way in which a writer uses various strategies to achieve these effects. Hirsch's theory of interpretation is clearly a writer's version of new criticism which assumes that a poem has one meaning which is recoverable from the writer's "intention."

In this light we can also understand the mixture of digital and analogic thinking which Jacques Derrida has derived from his grounding both in phenomenology and structuralism. Derrida uses this mixture to play off one system against another, to "deconstruct" the overdetermined limits of traditional theories and to expose the underdetermined boundaries of structural systems. By moving from one side to another as he chooses, Derrida is able to demonstrate how all conceptual systems continually mystify themselves and achieve closure by "supplementing" their own structure. Most of Derrida's cryptic terms such as differance are conflation of both digital and analogic concepts; yet they are neither wholly one or the other. Derrida emphasizes the concept of memory trace against the structuralist notion of retrieval, while at the same time playing off the structuralist concept of writing against the traditional privilege accorded

speech. It is interesting to note, however, that as Derrida moves around the far boundaries of the two kinds of models I have described here, his work sets up a strange interaction with its anti-type, new criticism, which lies in the middle of the continuum. This relation can be seen in Murray Krieger's recent engagement with Derrida in Theory of Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976), where Krieger and Derrida continually turn around each other over the presence or absence of "the word," each one the shadow of the other. Krieger's real problem is not to "refute" Derrida but to avoid becoming Derrida's shadow, to show that his negation of Derrida's negation is a positive turn on the dialectic wheel of criticism when Krieger's contextualist brand of new criticism actually contains no intrinsic principle of dialectic.

Whatever one may think about the ultimate implications of Derrida's work, his continual play between systems is perhaps the best antidote that critical theory could now have against taking itself too seriously. Once we understand critical models in terms of system theory, the paradoxes which Derrida cultivates are no longer so mystifying. As Wilden has argued, following Gregory Bateson, paradoxes always arise whenever one makes a meta-communicative leap between two levels of logical typing, but it is these very paradoxes which allow there to be any possibility of structure or meaning. Our traditional criteria for evaluating conflicting interpretations, the rules of parsimony and falsification, apply only within any given system and not between systems. We should not assume that any two models are themselves of the same logical type; if they are not, then one model cannot falsify another. And, depending on one's perspective any model will be both more complex and too reductive in terms of another. The use of models always involves us in some kind of circular process in which

the results achieved are predetermined by the way the system is punctuated. Both overdetermined and underdetermined literary theories tend to privilege certain types of literature or historical periods and then read the rest of literature in these terms; this tendency is particularly evident in structuralist criticism which overtly construes everything as an underdetermined text. What is interesting then about the play of theories is that they are continually generating new "texts" out of old ones by the occult process of reading and enriching the texture of old literature by adding to our understanding of how human imagination works through language.

Derrida's emphasis on writing as simply the free play of textual signs may be only a rhetorical ploy to correct an imbalance or it may be the limits of his own system (a system, of course, continually being destroyed in order to prevent it from becoming a system). Nonetheless we must recognize that the foundation of speech, writing, and all other semiotic structures of meaning is human consciousness. But the word consciousness must be understood also in a systematic way, a concept we have limited in the West since Descartes by our punctuation of the subject/object and inner/outer dualisms. The caesura that divides these terms (and the speech/writing distinction) is operationally variable depending on our needs. Consciousness contains the subject, and it is also structured by language, writing, semiotic codes, and the "wired in" cognitive states of the brain. Consciousness contains all these "models" plus something else -- its own self-referentiality, its meta-communicative capacity. From the perspective of our dualistic thinking, self-reflexiveness appears problematic, an infinite and alienating regress. Self-consciousness, however, is simply the ability of the mind to re-punctuate its own conceptual mapping. All such reformulations

are carried out as means toward some end, and it is these ends which are the ultimate determiners of our theoretical activities.

Literature, like all activities, has its own good; it can be pursued as an end in itself. But it is also a means towards reintegrating imaginative life and the lived world. The first task of criticism is to clarify its methods and define their limits, but this task is only a preparation for the more important questions of human meaning, use, and value represented in and by literature. We have at hand today an enormously sophisticated repertoire of conceptual tools. What we require from them in humanistic study is nothing less than a poetics of consciousness.

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The Bankruptcy of Meaning

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The announced purpose of our seminar is to consider the relation between the language of criticism and the conceptual frameworks which serve to organize it. In particular, we have been urged to be especially concerned with the bases on which critics choose to adopt (or reject) specific critical terms, concepts, and orientations. The anticipated results are to be practical as well as theoretical, for we have been asked to focus on, among other things, the relevant logical, philosophical, and evidential criteria for evaluating these concepts and terms. Now, formulating such criteria is certainly an important metacritical task, especially if one hopes for what the organizers of the seminar call an "integrated critical perspective." Indeed, achieving such a perspective presupposes the existence of such criteria.

Although I have strong reservations about the merits of seeking an integrated perspective, I wish to voice reservations of another sort in the present essay. In particular, I wish to express my doubt that we are prepared to undertake the task of determining the relevant criteria for evaluating critical concepts and terms. Critical tools (i.e., terms, concepts, etc.), like their material analogues, must be evaluated relative to an intended use; in other words, we can raise the question of relevant evaluative criteria only after we have settled the question of the goals and purposes, indeed the very nature, of criticism. But as far as I can ascertain, this latter question remains

unsettled, or at least settled wrongly. I am not going to attempt to settle this question here; that would require a full-blown theory of criticism. Rather I shall attempt only to suggest in very general terms a way of thinking about criticism that may facilitate this task. In particular, I should like to steer metacritical discussion away from its preoccupation with meaning, towards a view that emphasizes the activity of criticism. The crux of my proposal is the replacement of meanings by propositions as the primitive elements of critical analysis. I attach great importance to such a redirection of metacritical attention, for I think it very improbable that any significant advances in critical theory will be forthcoming if we continue to think of criticism in terms of meaning.

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If one were to speculate a priori as to the view of criticism that a consumer culture like our own would construct for itself, one might imagine something like this: works of art are consumer goods, produced by artists and marketed by critics. These salesman-critics would on occasion be guilty of various professional failings and weaknesses, ranging from simple ignorance of their merchandise to gross exaggeration of its worth; yet when they performed their task properly, they would provide an indispensable service to the art-consumer: the critic would enable the consumer to choose his merchandise intelligently by informing him truthfully of the essential properties of the art-good. In addition to this reportorial function, the ideal salesman-critic would provide comparative evaluations of the different goods that were available, informing the consumer which was the "best buy." Of course, critics might do other things, some of which would

even diminish his usefulness to the consumer; nevertheless, his essential activities would involve reporting on and evaluating works of art.

Now, in a society possessed of such a view of criticism, much metacritical discussion would be directed towards cautioning against unscrupulous practices that obstructed the proper task of criticism. Thus, for example, critics would be cautioned against an Intentionalist Fallacy that consisted in focusing on the intentions of the producer rather than on the product itself. Also to be avoided would be the Affective Fallacy of thinking that the value attached to a product by consumers was indicative of its true worth. Marxist and Freudian critics would have to be warned against a Genetic Fallacy, which consists in thinking that the history of production, be it socio-economic or psycho-biographical, is relevant to an evaluation of the art-good. Other failings could be added to this list; however, the point should be clear: criticism would lack a Better Business Bureau only in name.

My speculations as to the view of criticism that our society might be expected to construct for itself may be unsound; they are certainly sketchy. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that the views one finds expounded in recent years, especially by New Critics and their progeny, have strong affinities with the view I am sketching here. Critics are typically seen as neither producers nor consumers, but rather as middlemen whose job it is to report on the essential properties of works of art. Indeed, there has been fierce resistance to the suggestion that critics might play a part in their production. Metacriticism has often amounted to nothing more than codes of business ethics. How else are we to interpret the metacritical preoccupation with critical fallacies to the nearly total exclusion

of any effort to characterize critical praxis? And when critics (and philosophers) have attempted to provide such characterizations, what have we received but accounts that privilege reporting on and evaluating works of art? Existing critical theory has thus made a virtue out of simplicity: pursued properly the business of criticism is exceedingly simple; only when this business is pursued improperly does it become complex and difficult to understand. Hence, insofar as critical theory is concerned with the proper task of criticism, that theory will itself be exceedingly simple.

But if, to carry my speculations a bit further, the ideal critic would focus exclusively on the art-good itself, elucidating its essential properties, then what precisely would be the nature of those properties? This much is clear: whatever the nature of these properties, they would have to be inherent in the work itself. They would have to satisfy other conditions as well, some of which might differ from one art form to another. Yet for the case of literary works, there would be only one serious contender: meanings. (What other property of linguistic tokens satisfies the necessary condition of being preserved under translation?) But this choice would be a good one: while clearly vague enough to be serviceable, the notion would have a theoretical counterpart in linguistics that promised an eventual explication. Thus, even if critics didn't know precisely (or even roughly) what meanings were, they eventually would. But in the meantime, critics could provide what they called "explications of meaning." Critical praxis would be secure, even though critical theory was incomplete. The important business of criticism need not wait for the development of theory, any more than other businesses have had to wait for the development of economics.

Matthews: The Bankruptcy of Meaning

It is hard to exaggerate our long preoccupation with meaning, or at least with something critics call "meaning." For the last fifty years (a period marked roughly by the appearance of I. A. Richards' Practical Criticism), critical and metacritical thought alike have been little more than an extended meditation on the subject. And understandably so, since under the pen of New Criticism literature itself came to be defined in terms of meaning. The precise nature of literary meaning has been the subject of much debate; however, the privileged position of the concept has not been questioned. Nor, until very recently, has there been serious questioning of the corollary view that the proper task of criticism is the disclosing of this meaning. As Monroe Beardsley put it, "to explicate a poem is to declare its meaning." Yet despite this preoccupation with meaning, one discerns only with greatest difficulty instances of these "meanings" that the critic, speaking as metacritic, takes to be the essence of literary works and hence the object of his scrutiny. Of course, one does discern explications of meaning, which supposedly explicate the "meaning" of the work; however, it is not at all clear how these presentations of the critic are related to inherent properties of the work under consideration. The disparity between meanings actually inherent in the work and those "meanings" discerned by critics is most evident in instances of criticism in which there has been a conscious attempt to employ a concept of literary meaning that does constue meaning as an inherent property of linguistic tokens. One is struck by the inability of the critic to present those "meanings" that we have come to expect without first abandoning the strict construal of meaning in favor of a much looser one. And in those cases where the critic seems to have been successful, close examination reveals a pervasive metaphorization of the concept

of meaning. The "meanings" of the praxis are not those of the theory.

This impracticability of what might be called the "metacriticism of meaning" does not establish its untenability; however, recent developments in linguistic theory do raise serious doubt. Proponents of this metacritical programme, it will be recalled, look to linguistics to provide a theory of meaning upon which an adequate theory of criticism might eventually be erected. But although they have left the task of constructing this theory of meaning to linguists, they have nonetheless stipulated that this theory must satisfy one crucial condition: The theory must provide for the explication of the "meaning" of a literary work solely in terms of the meaning of the sentences comprising the literary text, which will in turn be explicable in terms of the syntactic structure of these sentences in conjunction with the lexical meanings of the sentences' constituents. (Let us call this the "inherence condition.") I should emphasize the word "solely," because it is only through the assumed sufficiency of the text alone to determine the work's "meaning" that we preserve the requirement that literary works be evaluated on the basis of inherent qualities. But this is precisely where a serious difficulty arises. Linguistics is not going to provide a theory of the sort envisioned here. Semantics can provide an account of sentence-meaning that will explain the meaning of a sentence in terms of the syntactic structure of this sentence in conjunction with the lexical meanings of its constituents. But it cannot provide an account of literary "meaning" as a function of the meanings of the sentences comprising the literary text. The problem is not, as so-called "text grammarians" have argued, that existing linguistic theory has mistakenly chosen sentences rather than texts as the basic unit of linguistic analysis. Text

grammars are no more capable of meeting the "inherence condition" stated above than are sentence grammars. The problem is rather this: the "meanings" that critics claim to discern in literary works are not, strictly speaking, meanings at all, but propositions, a different sort of abstract entity. But propositions, unlike meanings, are not inherent in sentences or texts, since the proposition expressed by a sentence is a function of the context of expression. Thus, insofar as critical theory presents itself as a theory of the actual praxis of critics, that theory is untenable. It postulates the wrong sort of abstract entity as the object of critical concern.

The proper characterization of propositions is beyond the scope of our present discussion; however, this much should be noted: propositions are the contents of so-called propositional attitudes and of speech acts. Thus, if I believe that received critical theory is confused, what I believe -- the content of my belief-state -- is the proposition that received critical theory is confused. Similarly, if I state that received critical theory is confused, what I state -- the content of my act of stating -- is the proposition that received critical theory is confused. (Notice that the propositional contents of speech acts are reported in oratio obliqua.) Propositions thus provide the nexus between thought and language; for if I express my belief by saying "received critical theory is confused," the proposition expressed by that sentence is the content of both my belief-state and of my speech act.

This notion of the proposition expressed by a sentence is important to our present discussion, because the distinction between meanings and propositions is best understood in terms of it. Consider the sentence "I am hungry," said first by me

and then by you. Clearly the meaning of the sentence does not change with the speaker, though the proposition expressed does. Only when I utter the sentence does it express the proposition that Robert Matthews is hungry. Uttered by you, the sentence expresses a different proposition. But not only can the same sentence be used to express different propositions without change of meaning; different sentences, having different meanings, can be used to express the same proposition. Thus, I could have expressed the proposition that I did by uttering the sentence "Robert Matthews is hungry." Sentences and the propositions expressed by them are clearly not identical; nor are the meanings of sentences correlated one-to-one with the propositions that they can express. Rather they are related as follows: the meaning of a sentence is an abstract entity much like a mathematical function that determines the proposition expressed by that sentence in a context as a function of certain elements of that context. Thus, whereas meaning is an inherent property of sentences (and hence of texts); the propositions expressed are not. Propositions are properties of pairs of sentences and contexts.

But what grounds are there for believing that critics are concerned with propositions rather than with meanings? First, there is the tendency of critics to treat literary works as utterances, as a form of discourse, sometimes to the point of postulating a virtual speaker (e.g., the "dramatic speaker"). Yet clearly sentences or texts are not themselves utterances, but only what is uttered. There is, however, one clear sense in which propositions might be identified with utterances: utterances are individuated on the basis of the proposition expressed; thus, we report in oratio obliqua what someone said (i.e., his utterance) by specifying the proposition expressed by his uttering a sentence in a context. Second, critics

typically treat literary works as suggesting or implying certain things; however, it is propositions, not sentences or their meanings, that suggest or imply other propositions. Third, critics invariably specify an interpretation for all referring expressions in a literary text. Thus, for example, Wordsworth's "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal" is for Brooks a poem about the dramatic speaker's lost lover, for Bateson a poem about Lucy, for Coleridge a poem about Dorothy, while for others it is a poem, not about some female personna, but about creative spirit or mind. Yet none of these interpretations is dictated by the text itself; it is not part of the meaning of the poem that the pronoun "she" take any of these objects as its referent. In each case the interpreter has presumed a context within which he has embedded the text of the poem; however, such a contextualization of the literary text by the critic would be required only if the critic is concerned with propositions rather than meanings. Finally, critical preoccupation with the fictional worlds and characters generated by literary works presupposes the propositional character of those works, since fictional worlds, like possible worlds, are defined over propositions.

In addition to these and other features of critical praxis that support my contention that critics are concerned with propositions rather than with meanings, one can also point to terminological ambiguities in critical theory. In virtually every case, the ambiguity serves to mask an otherwise implausible account of critical praxis. Thus, for example, the metacritical claim that critics are concerned with meaning is preserved only by appeal to a notion of "utterance meaning," which allows the critic to smuggle in the suppressed (repressed?) notion of context while at the same time preserving the pretense of being concerned

only with an inherent property of literary texts. But as if often the case with ad hoc adjustments to theory, a price must be paid elsewhere. In this case the theory becomes saddled with the problem of the utterer: if criticism is concerned with utterance meaning, then literary works are utterances of some sort. But if this is true, then who are their utterers? Failing any adequate answer, the reductio of this position is not long in coming: literary works are unuttered utterances (which is to say, not utterances at all)!

My proposal that we replace meanings by propositions as the primitive elements of critical analysis has the not insignificant virtue of providing the correct sort of abstract entity for critical theory. Moreover, recent work in theoretical linguistics, especially in pragmatics, makes available a theory of propositions that is equal to any existing theory of meaning. But more important than either of these considerations is the redirection of metacritical attention that such a replacement would effect. Because the proposition expressed by a sentence is an explicit function of the context of expression, critical theory under a propositional paradigm would accord increased theoretical importance to the art-institutional context within which texts express literary works. The replacement of meanings by propositions would, as a result, have a profound impact on our conception of literature, and derivatively on our conception of literary criticism. For if, as seems likely, the art-institutional context within which a text expresses a particular work is not determined solely by the artist producing the text, but is partly determined by the contextualizing labor of critics, then the notion that critics are non-productive middlemen would have to be rejected. Moreover, the proper task of critics could no longer be thought

of as simply reporting on and evaluating works of art. For it is, I take it, a conceptual truth about reporting that one can report only pre-existing facts. But if the effect of these so-called "reportings" is to determine at least partially the work being "reported on," then these "reportings" would not be reportings at all. The utterances of critics would have, to use J. L. Austin's terminology, a performative aspect; they contribute to the production of literary works by modifying the art-institutional context in which these works are expressed. The precise way in which critical praxis modifies this context would, of course, represent a central problem for a propositional theory of criticism. But since I am interested here in sketching this theory only in the broadest terms, I shall not attempt a solution to this problem. Nor shall I attempt to characterize the scope or nature of the metacritical issues that would constitute the "problem set" of this theory.

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At the outset of this essay I expressed reservations, first, about the timeliness of raising the question of relevant evaluative criteria, and second, about the merits of seeking an integrated critical perspective. The source of the first should now be apparent. Any alternative to received critical theories that attributes to critics a task substantially different from that attributed to them by received theories will sanction different, probably incompatible sets of evaluative criteria. But if, as I contend, received theories are radically mistaken in the central role that they accord to meaning, then an adequate theory of criticism would probably attribute to critics a substantially different task. Thus, lacking such an adequate theory it seems premature to raise the question of relevant evaluative criteria. My reservations about the merits of seeking an integrated

perspective have their source not simply in the inadequacy of existing critical theory, but in my belief that an adequate theory will be similar to the one sketched above. If the labor of critics is productive, then the proposal that we seek an integrated perspective must be construed as a proposal to constrain the domain of literary works. There may be good reasons for adopting such a proposal; however, the reason adduced by the organizers of our seminar strikes me as rather weak. Why should we value effective communication among critics? Why should critical "pluralism" be deplored? These are questions that can be answered only within the context of a theory of criticism; in the absence of an adequate theory we should leave them open.

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Notes

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