

INTERROGATING THEORY—CRITIQUING PRACTICE: THE SUBJECT OF INTERPRETATION

INTRODUCTION

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IT WAS NOT SO VERY LONG AGO that those of us who read Derrida or Paul de Man, who thought about speech genres, psychoanalysis, intertextuality, and deconstruction, were publicly ridiculed at professional meetings and condescendingly tolerated in our home departments. Today, graduate students are as eager to learn about ideology and psychoanalysis as they are to talk about gender, race, and rhetoric. The major university presses publish books in classics on intertextuality, reception theory, citizenship, and gender studies. It appears that the hostility of some “philologists” to “theory” is, if not receding, at least felt with some embarrassment.

This is both a good and a bad development. The advantages are, perhaps, easier to see than the disadvantages: our access to the past has become more self-conscious; new approaches have broadened the discussion of classics and given us new ways to understand texts that many of us still find fundamental; our discipline is less insular. But with acceptance has come a kind of nonchalance. Graduate students often look at the variety of approaches as if they were gazing at the menu in a restaurant: “I’ll have a little of this and a little of that, and if you get the fish, I’ll have the pork.” This may mean that there is no real commitment to the underlying principles of an approach or any understanding of its history, genealogy, or affiliations. We seem to be training our students to become users of the theories generated by other disciplines with no concern for any deeper coherence.

This situation has allowed those who remain hostile or indifferent to theory to treat with condescension those who continue to wonder about how, or if, we can speak of value, meaning, and even beauty. Work on ideology and intertextuality can be tolerated and overlooked as a “foray” into psychoanalysis. This situation, of course, is further complicated by the fact that in the world of the modern literatures theory has been declared dead for at least twenty years. It seems that those who were mocked and attacked in the eighties have survived only to become trivialized as “fashion statements.”

Still, there are scholars among us who feel that the questions that were first raised in the “human sciences” in the seventies and the heyday of “deconstruction” are important and worth pursuing both as theoretical challenges to our understanding of what we are doing as classicists and as opportunities for practical modifications in how we undertake any particular interpretive task. It was for this community that we conceived a Panel on “Interrogating Theory—Critiquing Practice” under the auspices of the American Philological Association’s program

of Three Year Colloquia (2004–2006).¹ We wanted to create a forum for intellectuals who felt that “theory” was not so much dead as yet to be faced and that classicists had something to contribute beyond the application of domesticated versions of continental theories. But we also felt that such a forum should not serve only the theoretically inclined. We hoped that the serious discussion of theory and practice would in itself indicate that theory was something worth pursuing, that it made a difference.

The colloquium was established as a forum for classicists to undertake two important tasks: either to address theoretical questions as such or to critique practices that inevitably proceed unselfconsciously and unselfcritically. (This is not a critical comment; practices need to proceed unselfconsciously in order to exhaust and explore the play of their potential—and that is why theory is needed.) We wanted participants who went beyond the ancillary activity of explaining to other classicists what a particular theoretical orientation meant and entailed. We hoped to find scholars who were willing to question, justify, or develop the implications of any theory of meaning and interpretation from textual criticism and philological analysis to reception theory and psychoanalysis. In other words, we hoped to find classicists who were theorists of some sort, who were interested not only in the results of a particular practical study but also in the coherence and implications of the theories, implied or adopted, that underpin the study of classics.

In order to maximize our chances of success both in finding the intellectuals who were interested and skilled in theory and in appealing to an audience that would support this project, we felt that a return to the three basic elements of communication theory—writer or author, audience or receiver, and the text—was necessary. Not only are these three elements familiar to almost anyone who has done any reading in rhetoric, semiology, or literary theory, but they have a kind of intuitive transparency. How could we talk about “meaning” or “value” in writing or in culture without speaking of the maker or sender of the message, the formal content or structure of the cultural object, and the receiver who interprets, understands, or values? In fact, if there is a polemic inherent in the organization and structure of this colloquium it is precisely that no theory can do without some understanding and accommodation of these three elements. Reception theory entails a theoretical view of the message sent; both the old New Criticism and the more recent Deconstruction require some accommodation of the intention of the author or writer; and even a positivistic formalism requires a rhetoric of reception.

Our first panel, held in San Francisco in January 2004, had as its title “Intention and the Subject of Interpretation” in order that we might cast our net as widely as possible. Three terms in the title deserve special attention: “intention,” “subject of interpretation,” and “and.” By “intention” we meant to point to the problematics of the figure who signs the text. Is his intention important or knowable? And what do we mean by intention, anyway? Is authorial intention a practice we can do

¹W. W. Batstone, Convener; A. M. Keith, G. Tissol, V. Wohl, Committee Members.

without? Is it in some sense alive “in” the text or is it irrecoverable and irrelevant? Is it merely an inference by readers, a hermeneutic fiction, or an entailment of certain interpretive practices? And, suppose we knew that the “author” was not aware of some effect of his text, should we assign that effect to him anyway? to his subconscious? to the operations of ideology or genre? or to the malevolence or brilliance of those who read him? Suppose the effect was to create a lovely metaphor, “and brightness falls from the air,” when all that the author meant was that the hair grows grey? Suppose that the effect was to justify Italian hegemony in the 1930s? or to oppose the brutality of empire? Where is the author and his intention in all the effects that a text produces, and should we be concerned about where the author is?

This seemed an important matter to discuss openly and theoretically because to some extent the history of interpretation in the twentieth century has been a history that continually problematizes the author only to have him reappear in actual practice. Consider, for example, the “intentional fallacy” that underwrote the formalism of the New Criticism. According to that theory the author’s intention as such was irrelevant to our understanding of the text because an intention might very well remain unaccomplished. The critic, we were told, was interested only in what the text itself accomplished, not in what the author might have thought she had accomplished. This view entailed an aesthetization of the text as a complete formal object (the iconic “well-wrought urn”)² and a discipline of the reader as one attentive to the details that inevitably cohered in a whole and unified object.

When the text itself did not readily yield some paraphraseable version of unity and coherence (and the text seldom did), irony was called upon to negotiate the elements that did not quite fit. This was, of course, a dangerous move because it ran counter to the most fundamental principle of New Criticism: as later investigations were to show, irony is something that is most notoriously not in the text. If it were “in the text,” for instance, marked by some punctuation like an upside-down exclamation, the very first thing an ironist would do is to use such a punctuation mark ironically. Thus, the very term meant to preserve the unity of the formal object was the term by which some version of either reader-response or intention was smuggled back into the interpretive practice.

But this time the result was more than the historicization of the author and his intention. If some detail did not fit, then we were dealing with irony, but what kind of irony has no author? If some detail seemed beyond any imaginable version of self-conscious poetic artifice, then we were dealing with the poet’s unconscious. If some paraphrasable unity and meaning as communication could not comprehend the text, then the text did not so much communicate a message as construct a world. The poet—through image, statement, and sound—in god-like manner created a whole and perfect world. The Romantic version of the poet as the creator of truth and beauty had returned in a far more powerful form than the historically and philologically oriented version of the old philology.

² See Brooks 1975.

In the seventies there were three reactions to this view of literary meaning and the purpose of interpretation. The first recognized that the well-wrought urns of New Criticism, the worlds of the text and their ironic holistic visions of culture, were constructed by readers. These worlds might or might not be "there," if we could ever agree on where "there" was, but they were certainly in the minds and practices of readers. From this critique we gained the insights of Reader-Response Theory and Reception Theory. Readings that before had been considered "wrong" were now legitimate. Without an author or a formalistic unity to appeal to, the text became the reader's possession, which meant that the text itself disappeared into an uncountable number of unaccountable texts. One polemical book, titled *Is There a Text in this Class?*,³ announced in the first chapter that the answer was "No." (I don't recall anyone reading this polemic along the lines of Swift's infamous "A Modest Proposal"—although such a reading would have been wholly in keeping with the principles espoused.) All the texts that a text might spawn were now available to study and, despite the inherent contradiction in believing that Ovid's meaning could not be determined but that Chaucer's reading of Ovid could be determined, the study of classical texts could now become a study of their importance in history and culture, a study of their reception. Reading was understood as a local practice governed by arbitrary rules and under surveillance by various interests and institutions.

The second response to the New Criticism's self-created dilemma was to scrutinize the theoretical importance of the fact that the same text, open to different interpretive strategies, could generate different, even contradictory, readings. It soon became clear, however, that this was not, or was not only, the result of poetic genius, but that it was a product of language and the structures by which we make our world intelligible and manageable. Texts, then, (either "literary" texts or all texts—the case was never resolved) not only constructed a world of meaning but always de-constructed that world as well. It was found that the center required for the determination of structure and meaning was itself always extra-textual (not in the sense of being "outside text" but in the sense of being "outside the text") and that an eccentric reading was always possible. This discovery made "meaning" as a stable, authoritarian, determinative aspect of the text impossible and allowed readers like Derrida to turn away from the securities of a stable authoritarian world to explore issues like justice, friendship, giving, and responsibility.

Finally, the nature of the author came under scrutiny. If the New Critical poet could construct unified worlds of truth and beauty by virtue of his poetic genius and imagination, why might not the same poet be subject to all the dark and devious forces of the family romance, to the pressures of identity and the problems of false consciousness and the falsifications of ideological closure, to the limits and structures of the language and tropes that constitute his consciousness? Even if we allow "intention" as a category of interpretive importance, we have

³ Fish 1980.

still to understand what “intention” might mean. Does a subject intend? or does ideology intend through the subject? Implicated in this, of course, is a question about what or who the subject is. We may think of the subject as the authorizing subject of the literary work (i.e., the author) or the interpreting subject of that work (i.e., the critic). Where, in other words, is the “subject of interpretation”?—a question that returns us to the problems of text and reader. The phrase “subject of interpretation” was meant to point to all the problematic relationships that occur whenever any subject interprets the words or actions of another subject, including the problem that we may not be able in the final analysis to disentangle the one subject from the other.

This, however, is not all that we hoped to capture in our title. The phrase “subject of interpretation” may also refer to the topic or focus of interpretive activity. Is it “meaning” or “value” or “aesthetics” or “historiographical emplotment”? Is it culture or psychological subjectivity? Is it some historically bound subjectivity or the trans-historical workings of culture and language and psychology? Within the term “subject,” then, is already posed the problem of relating authorial subjectivity, which typically entails some notion of intention, to the topic of interpretation and to the subjectivity that both determines the topic of interpretation (as well as the interpretive protocols) and is itself subjected to ideological and cultural forces.

Finally, we come to the little word that holds together or holds apart “Intention” and “Subject of Interpretation”: “and.” This term can be conjunctive (how are “intention” and “the subject of interpretation” joined, related, mutually constitutive, or implicated?) or disjunctive (how is “intention” something outside “the subject of interpretation?”). Interpretation is an activity that sets in motion several subjects, and yet the relationship between any of those subjects and the account we might give of intention is a deeply problematic and intriguing one.

The title for the first panel was, therefore, meant to be provocative and to appeal to as many of these intersecting and conflicting interests as possible. We knew full well that the actual panel would be much more limited and would depend to a great degree upon chance. In fact, we felt that, given the potential range of debate and discussion, we would be fortunate to offer a coherent panel. But why should a panel at the APA attempt or pretend to cover the entire scope of questions raised by our various relationships to intention, subjectivity, and interpretation? We decided, therefore, to present a panel that offered its audience work that we thought would be interesting and provocative—whether representative or idiosyncratic—in an area that we cannot avoid engaging whenever we read and write about the literature of Greece and Rome.

For the first panel the result was a set of four papers, each important and exciting in itself, but difficult to relate to the others. Fortunately, we were able to enlist the brilliance and finesse of Duncan Kennedy, who in offering his response to these papers has explored some of the common threads that not only hold together the individual papers but reveal something of the range and importance of the topic as we have framed it. Here, I would like to introduce the papers, not

by calling attention to what they share, but by locating them within some of the diverse concerns outlined above.

In "Intention and Intertext," Joseph Farrell, operating with a strong version of intention as the self-conscious and willful project of the poet, wonders about the intentionality of allusions in poets like Vergil and Apollonius. The paper is historically linear, by which I mean that the text of Lucretius is not allowed to allude to the text of Vergil nor the text of Vergil to the text of Ovid or Lucan, and raises questions about how we can understand the desire and intention of the historical subject Vergil.

Basil DuFallo, in "The Roman Elegist's Dead Lover or the Drama of the Desiring Subject," operates with a different view of intertextuality. He interprets the rhetorical practices and topoi mobilized by authors as ways that language and culture have of addressing the presence of the past in the present and so of the future in the past. His paper adds to the panel's concerns the subjective needs and desires that inhabit transhistorical practices and so join us with the past, both subjecting us to those traditions and giving us a present.

In "Foucault's Ascetic Ancients," James Porter focuses on how readers of Foucault have assigned intentions to Foucault that are at odds with his project. He argues that such interpretations in the end reflect our own preconceptions and may alienate us from the very past we were attempting to understand.

Miriam Leonard, in a discussion of Oedipus and Vernant, examines the complicity of interpretation with its own subjective moment, assigning intentions that reflect present needs and present understandings not only to Sophocles but also to Oedipus and to the tragic moment. The subject of Oedipal interpretation turns out to be the Oedipal-Sophoclean-mirror in which we see something of our own subjectivity.

Throughout these papers the subject and his or her intention remains as ineluctable as it is elusive—a Protean subject. We hope that beyond the value of the papers themselves readers may come away from this collection with new insights into how we and our intentions are implicated in the subject and subjectivity of interpretation.

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