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Writer, Reader, Critic:
Comparing Critical Theories as Discourse

In recent decades literary studies have focused less on interpreting individual texts and more on discussing the principles for reading, experiencing, and interpreting literary art works at large. The time seems appropriate for integrating this trend with emerging principles and insights in the discipline known as *discourse processing,* that is, the study of human processes whereby discourse is produced and received.[1] This discipline is generally much closer to the concerns of theories of human communication and interaction than were traditional linguistics and language psychology.

Discourse processing has taken over from cognitive psychology the conclusion that "reality" is a mode of cognition rather than a stable, true state of the external world. The order of the world is the outcome of orderly human processing. Objects and events are considered real when human processing (in one person as well as in many persons) obtains consistent and comparable results from experiencing them. These results are loosely grouped into a reasonably well-functioning mental model that society agrees to call "reality." It follows that "objectivity" can never be a direct access to "reality" independent of human perception. Instead "objectivity" can at best be a continually ongoing project for gathering and collating experiences and testing whether our reality-model provides for a consistent and operational orientation in respect to them.

In the sciences this project relies on specialized procedures and equipment to match what we think is happening. In the humanities communicative negotiation is more decisive. But both areas face the same basic problem: how do we know something, and how do we agree that we know it? In this sense the "meta-science" of the future is not physics or mathematics (which held that role in the

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past), but a general science of cognition and communication that, among other things, can show how the sciences and the humanities function as human enterprises.

Most researchers in discourse processing agree that language communication operates on much the same principles as the constitution of "reality." Discourse is meaningful and reliable not because words are defined somewhere in a dictionary or because people are born with predicate logic in their brains, but because discourse participants steadily collate and negotiate their processing results. In each discourse situation the participants build a model of what's going on, including what is being said and why. There is no guarantee that what the speaker or writer "means" will be identical with what the hearer or reader "understands"; people just assume that the uniformity of discourse models will be adequate for the purpose at hand, or if not, that it will be negotiated on the spot. It follows that the "reality" of any text presented during a discourse is the set of processing actions people perform upon it. A preserved artifact (tape recording, written document, etc.) is not "real" in a communicative sense until someone performs such an action upon it—listening, reading it, quoting it, criticizing it, and so on.

While there are no laws or strict rules for processing a text, we certainly are not free to do whatever we like. As an experience the text must somehow be accounted for. We must fit the elements of the text together in such a way that they justify each other (show coherence and relevance) and reveal a motive for the whole act of communicating. We must make the text into a *system* and assign *functions* to the elements of the text, merging what is said with what we know about the world and what we consider worth noticing and mentioning. Precisely because people are not compelled to mean or understand according to strict laws, human processing must be profoundly well-organized in order to make communication possible and reliable. Functional demands for integration and operation coincide and promote a consensus among communicative participants.

Still, different people don't have to attain the same result from the same text. Divergences occur especially because people differ in the points where they impose a processing threshold when they consider the text to be adequately accounted for, according to how much time and effort the text seems to merit under the circumstances. For example, people try to make the text (or its parts) determinate (having a single, stable identity), and decidable (selecting one in each set of alternatives). Processing is terminated when these aspects seem well under control.

Also, people expect to get some information from discourse, something that wasn't known or self-evident before. Communication normally works on a medium level of predictability, navigating between the two extremes of total obviousness and total surprise. We tend to upgrade the obvious, and to downgrade the surprising, by discovering some motives for its occurrence in communication. For example, if Antony says of Brutus, "This was a man" (*Julius Caesar,* V, v, 75), we assume the statement means much more than simple classifying him as "a man" in the everyday sense; it means a special distinction of acting

"in a general honest thought and common good" with "all the elements so mix'd in him." Conversely, if Macbeth says that "pity shall blow the horrid deed in every eye" (*Macbeth,* I, vii, 21-24), we think of people weeping at the deed in pity as if the wind had blown a speck of dust in their eyes. We have thereby "upgraded" Antony's statement and "downgraded" Macbeth's.

"What is literature?"

So far, almost every documented culture seems to have (or have had) a mode of literary discourse, though sometimes with admixtures from other domains, such as philosophical or religious discourse. In this sense literature is an empirical fact: for whatever motives, people in the culture have agreed to consider a corpus of texts to be "literary." But the fashionable question "What is literature?" is by no means resolved—what actually qualifies a text as literary? If we simply argue that literature is whatever people think it is and admit to the "literary canon," we haven't explained the fact of literature—we have only stated the fact and gained very little. People must have motives and methods for producing or accepting texts as literary in the first place, or at least for increasing the probability that a text will be judged "literary" in a particular cultural setting.

Linguistically-oriented approaches inspired by linguistics and stylistics have sought to define literature in terms of the deviant surface features in literary texts as compared to "ordinary language."[2] In a narrow sense a text may be "deviant" by virtue of highly salient and unconventional patterns, such as those typically found in the poems of e.e. cummings or in the prose works of Gertrude Stein and the later James Joyce. However, scholars would hesitate to argue that the "most deviant" text is also the "most literary" text, and for at least two good reasons. One reason is that many texts we recognize as "literary" can hardly be called "deviant" in the narrow sense, e.g., the novels of Ernest Hemingway or Theodor Fontane. The other reason is that the same "deviant" surface features can and do appear in texts people don't consider literary, such as advertisements.

In a broader sense "deviance" could include any distinctive individual touch of style. But this approach fails emphatically as a sufficient criterion, since stylistic specifics are certainly not limited to "literary texts." Moreover, most texts are distinctive in at least some ways, so which ones are to be judged "literary"? If "deviance" is found everywhere, it becomes a senseless concept. What could be the "norm"?

Another possible account would be to define the "literary text" in terms of its

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2. Compare Samuel Levin's papers "Deviation—Statistical and Determinate—in Poetic Language," *Lingua,* 21 (1963), 276-90; and "Internal and External Deviation in Poetry," *Word,* 21 (1965), 225-37. Also Jan Mukařovský, "Standard Language and Poetic Language," in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style,* ed. Paul Garvin (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1964), pp. 17-30. The enduring problems with this view are well treated by Mary Louise Pratt in *Toward a Speech-Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

content—the topics (or topoi) it deals with.[3] For example, cavalier, pastoral, and sacred poetry, such as that of Michael Drayton, John Donne, and George Herbert, respectively, each focuses on specific distinctive topics. But literary content is a no more reliable indicator than surface features. The same topics figure in non-literary texts, such as festive speeches and church sermons. Besides, many acclaimed literary texts specifically address topics few of us would consider "inherently literary"; witness historical dramas and naturalist novellas. Apparently there is something in the particular treatment of these topics that invites us to consider the text a literary work.

Still another account might be in terms of fictionality, the idea that statements made in literary texts are not "true" or don't "refer."[4] But this account fails too, because it assumes that literature must be fictional, and that whatever is fictional ought to be literature. Neither assumption is in any way justifiable. We have non-fictional literature on the one hand (e.g., the works of Norman Mailer and Truman Capote), and everyday lies on the other hand. Literature is concerned with what is generally true of the human situation. Factual sources may or may not be selected as vehicles for the enterprise; if they are, they are not offered as specific facts but as general models.

Thus we cannot define or account for literature in terms of surface features, content, or fictionality. These factors are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for "literariness." They fail to distinguish between literary and non-literary, so they can at most be cues people use to postulate that literary communication is in progress. We still need to discover the central aspects of such communication.

Discourse processing research proceeds on the assumption that there are no text properties in a vacuum: someone has to process the text and constitute the properties (the basic condition for anything to be "real"). A corollary is that we cannot adequately define any text type according to independent text properties, but only according to the community of processes that operate on that text type, such that people are able to agree about what properties (including features and content) there are. We tend to attribute an independent existence to "literary text properties" because we are in the habit of constituting them, and because people in the same culture—particularly specialists—tend to agree about the "literary properties" they constitute. But since text properties are a result, not a cause, they cannot serve to define or explain what makes something a "literary work."

Therefore, literature has to be defined in terms of how it is processed. The notion that I believe works best here can be called *alternativity*. By this I mean

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3. See, for example, Edith Frenzel's volumes, *Stoffe der Weltliteratur* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1963); and *Stoff- und Motivgeschichte* (Berlin: E. Schmidt, 1966). The topos researchers were not in fact offering to define what makes something count as "literature." To them, it seemed obvious, though they might well have wondered about the conditions under which a single topos can appear in both literary and non-literary discourse.

4. Compare Mukařovský, and Richard Ohmann, "Speech Acts and the Definition of Literature, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 4 (1971), 1-19.

that participants in literary communication are free and willing to constitute for a text a world that doesn't have to conform to the accepted real world. There may be some conformity, or even a great deal; but the point of the enterprise is to treat any world, however real or unreal, as one among several alternatives. In so doing participants focus on their own procedures for constituting a world as a response to a given text. The "world-creating" potential of texts—the "literary" ("letter-based") power of organizing human awareness—is the guiding principle of the whole experience.

Even when literature borrows its materials directly from history, the dominant criteria are literary. The literary representation need not select or focus on the same types of elements that stand out in a historical account. (A history of England in the times of Henry IV wouldn't focus on Falstaff and his followers in any proportion like the one we have in Shakespeare's dramatization.) A literary author has no obligation to make use of all the best sources and to adjudicate their merits in cases of discrepancy. The principle of alternativity gives the literary author the license to abridge available facts and to invent fresh "facts" that better serve the literary purpose. (In *Henry VIII* Shakespeare moved the death of Queen Catherine before the birth of Elizabeth because the latter event, and Cranmer's glorious prophecy about it, make a more suitable and dramatic "happy ending.") Moreover, a literary text is not adequately judged "good" or "bad" according to its historical accuracy. (Nobody claims that *Hamlet* is bad because it fails to follow Saxo Grammaticus.) The obvious conclusion is that, though historical and factual elements can be used as literary material, they will be processed differently during literary communication.

In poetic communication the alternativity principle is extended to the negotiability of language in discourse. Once again there is no requirement that this language must be obviously "deviant" from ordinary discourse; some writers like W. H. Auden or Carl Sandburg deliberately modelled poems on everyday language. However, to process poetic discourse, we must appreciate how language itself is organized, and how it can be reorganized for particular motives. The poet has the option of reorganizing discourse, no matter how little or how much that option is utilized in a particular case. The audience relates the result to a spectrum of alternative possibilities. Of course, the poetic function is not limited to poetry, its most common and important genre. We can apply poetic alternativity to the language of folktales, dramas, novels, and so forth, provided we are willing to process it accordingly—or, in the case of "found poems," to texts not originally intended for that mode at all.

In the most general perspective alternativity de-automatizes text processing at least to some degree; it reduces the extent to which processing is done without attention (see Mukařovský). This effect encourages us to perceive and deal deliberately with the specific occurrences we experience in the text at hand. Special (or "deviant") features and content can act as cues and reminders in this process, but they are not vitally necessary. We can increase attention to our procedures for organizing worlds and discourses and thereby alter processing of any text, given appropriate motivation, as is shown by "found poems."

The notion of alternativity could also explain why such a wide range of highly diverse texts gets accepted as literature and poetry. If the literary or the poetic were to be fixed within one particular mode of realization, the potential for other alternatives would be defeated. In fact, critics tend to consider literature or poetry "bad" when it has accepted its own conventions as laws and final goals, and abandoned all search for further possibilities. Common negative terms such as "trite," "trivial," "derivative," and "epigonic" all suggest this view. Conversely, originality and innovation are typically prized, provided the critics are capable of a satisfying response to them. Indeed, every literary trend tends to encourage its own transcendence.

What is critical theory?

Human experience is rife with theories about what the world is and what is going on in it; otherwise, the world wouldn't make much sense. A general definition of "theory" might be: *a predisposition for making certain uses of certain classes of evidence.* This same definition applies to "critical theory," with the stipulation that the main emphasis falls on literary or artistic evidence. But so far there appears to be wide disagreement among critical theorists about what counts as evidence, what predispositions should be followed, and what conclusions should be drawn. In everyday practice a critical theory is propagated when scholars proclaim allegiance to a charismatic critic or critical school, imitating whatever concepts and methods seem to be involved. It is productive to explicate competing critical theories within a common framework derived from discourse processing, and to show how they focus on specific aspects of the whole process.

To begin with we assume that any critical theory entails or implies a set of hypotheses about what goes on in literary communication: how authors produce works, how readers receive them, what critics do, and so on. However, these hypotheses may not be expressly stated, or they may not agree with the stated ones. Critics might proclaim and defend principles they do not adhere to in practice. Hence, explicit statements of theoretical principles should count as partial evidence about the theory, but should be supplemented by a close analysis of what the critic actually does as a discourse participant and of how the theory would influence literary communication if it were valid or accepted.

Presumably, the author of the literary work intends readers to respond in certain ways, for example, to upgrade the obvious and downgrade the surprising. Since literature is typically innovative, the author can't rely on established conventions or habits to make sure that a particular response occurs. It is therefore necessary to organize the text in such a way that the response intended by the author will be one of the more satisfying ways to account for the text. The author must create an agenda of problems whose solution has been pre-figured in the text's design. Apparently, the experience of encountering a complex array and building an elaborate order for it is the basis of the *esthetic,* from which view comes the traditional notion that beauty arises from an interaction between variety and order (Leibnitz, Hegel, etc.). Imposing harmony or unity upon art

works usually makes us exert ourselves more intensely than we do when making sense of ordinary experience or everyday discourse. But we are rewarded with the emergence of a new, revealing order that is in part our own achievement. We have, in a way, dismantled the world for a moment and then reassembled it in a pattern which reflects our own will and consciousness as individuals, yet which affirms the order of the world as well. Such an experience is likely to be pleasurable; the "great" work of art pre-structures an experience people can repeat over and over with continued enjoyment.

Literary criticism generally offers aids for experiencing literary works. As readers, critics apply a detailed background of expectations and prolong or elaborate their encounter with the text. As writers, critics describe how they resolved the tasks and problems imposed by the text, or at least present some of the results. Critics may support certain results with background material (features of genre, historical trends, author's biography, etc.). Or they may argue on the basis of a close analysis of the text as such. Either way critics traditionally imply that their own results are an exemplary and satisfying account of the work.

Critical theories in turn explicate the conditions and motives for particular ways of experiencing works and reporting responses. A theory is both a description and an advocacy of a way to make use of evidence. The theory may make only marginal reference to the basic activities of authors and readers, and focus instead on those of the critic. Yet even here the theory has implications for the entirety of literary communication, because criticism is inescapably a project of intervening in literary processing—stating or interpreting the content of the work, deciding what is important, assigning values, and so on.

Thus a discourse processing approach might help clarify how a critical theory embodies some fundamental assumptions about what happens when literary texts are produced or received. To illustrate that approach I shall try to reconstruct, in processing terms, three currently prominent critical theories. E. D. Hirsch is the representative for *authorial intention criticism,* striving to uncover what the literary author meant to convey; Stanley Fish for *reader response criticism,* attempting to depict the temporal progress of literary readers addressing a work; and J. Hillis Miller for *deconstructionist criticism,* pursuing those communicative aspects that elude definitive fixations of meaning. Each critic suggested to me some of his writings that represent his position as of 1980.[5] By carefully studying these (and some others as well), I shall try to infer a model of what each critic does and says he does, and to consider how this model would fit in with literary communication in general.

The author's intention: E. D. Hirsch

The concern Hirsch announced for his *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967) was "the right of any humanistic discipline

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5. The recommended works were: Hirsch's Blake study, Fish's paper on the Milton *Variorum,* and Miller's treatise on Shelley. See notes 6, 9, and 10.

to claim genuine knowledge" (p. viii).[6] In literary studies that concern was to be upheld by a method of "valid interpretation" that establishes validity through logical procedures for relating hypotheses to a body of evidence (*AI*, p. 151). Hirsch avows this project to be "crucial to the validity of all subsequent inferences" in "all human studies" (*VI*, pp. viii-ix). Strong remedies are called for, he tells us, when "literary studies" are becoming "the most skeptical and decadent branch of humanistic study" (*AI*, p. 149).

On the face of it Hirsch is not offering a theory of literary communication, nor a theory of reading; and he seems to believe such a theory impossible in principle on the grounds that "the process and psychology of understanding are not reducible to a systematic structure" (*VI*, p. 170). Nor does he offer any "new interpretive program or approach," hoping rather that "the practical implications" of his "theoretical argument" will "take care of themselves" (*VI*, pp. x-xi). Nonetheless, his method strongly implies certain presuppositions about what authors, readers, and critics can or should do with literary texts. If his project is to be feasible, critics will have to behave in very specific ways with respect to the whole "process and psychology of understanding," which, as I have argued, must have a systematic structure in order for communication to succeed. Hence, we may legitimately explore what those presuppositions are and how well they accord with current views on discourse processing.

Hirsch's interpreting critic is assigned an imposing task: to resolve literary disputes by "basing his [sic] decision on all the relevant evidence available" in order to make "a grounded choice between two disparate probability judgments on the basis of common evidence which supports them" (*VI*, pp. ix, 180). Hirsch concedes that "it would be unfeasible and undesirable to publicize all the evidence relative to every interpretive problem" (*VI*, p. x). Still, the critic is enjoined to "take the responsibility of adjudicating the issue in light of all that is known"; the fact "that few such adjudications exist" does not constitute an impediment, but "merely argues strongly that many more should be undertaken" (*VI*, p. 171).

To demonstrate the need for his project, Hirsch constructed a strong opposition between the act of reading and the act of interpreting. Reading was decried as obeying "the whimsical lawlessness of guessing," whereas interpreting was extolled for its "ultimately methodical character of testing" and for being "governed by logical principles" (*VI*, p. 204). Reading is "at first a genial guess," and "there are no methods for making guesses, no rules for generating insights. The methodical activity of interpretation commences when we begin to test and criticize our guesses" (*VI*, p. 204). Following Schleiermacher, Hirsch divided the response to a literary text into a "divinatory moment" that is "unmethodical, intuitive, sympathetic," and a "critical moment" that "submits the first moment to a high intellectual standard" by testing it against "all the relevant knowledge

6. To save space, I will use abbreviations for the works of all three critics. The key for Hirsch citations is: *AI: Aims in Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); *IE: Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964); and *VI: Validity in Interpretation*.

available"; only this second moment can "raise interpretive guesses to the level of knowledge" (*VI*, p. x).

This scheme presents a fairly negative picture of the act of reading: unreliable and unmethodical, ruled by "whimsical lawlessness." This picture is far from the one now accepted in the psychology of reading.[7] Considerable evidence has accrued to show that reading is an enormously skilled and selective process governed by elaborate schematic patterns in fine detail. Hirsch supposes that, unless reading obeys "rules and principles" that "compel a right guess" (*VI*, p. 170), the whole process must be chaotic. But he is making unrealistic demands. The processes of reading engender appropriate guesses with an impressively high rate of success, considering the complexities involved, and the number of possible meanings. Communication only seems chaotic to those who have a vague notion of how it works, or who would prefer some idealized, non-human language of logical proofs. Real human discourse demands constant, adroit use of all sorts of cues and clues to determine what is meant, and the results are valid enough for the purpose most of the time.

Viewed in terms of its implications for discourse processing, Hirsch's project suffers from at least three other drawbacks. The first is that he offers us a theory of the second "moment" of reader response without attempting a theory of the first moment. He wants to construct a theory of how to deal with effects, but he shows little interest in the causes. Hirsch's theory only comes into play after a dispute has already arisen, and we know which alternatives we should adjudicate. The theory disregards the processes whereby the reading of literature engenders alternatives that may or may not lead to disputes. Surely we need to know about the nature and origins of the issues before we can stipulate how those issues ought to be resolved.

Hirsch is probably aware of this drawback, because he hedged his dichotomy of reading versus interpreting. In the 1967 statement he granted that "these two sides of the interpretive process, the hypothetical and the critical, are not of course neatly separated when we are pondering a text, for we are constantly testing our guesses both large and small as we gradually build up a coherent structure of meaning" (*VI*, p. 204). In 1976 Hirsch confesses that he had "almost" "ignored the whole question of the process of understanding," and later realized that "the process of validation is not easily separated from the process of understanding in either theory or practice" (*AI*, p. 33). He now affirms that "the private processes of verbal understanding have the same character" as the "public activity" of "validation," the "objective marshalling of evidence in the cause of an interpretive hypothesis" (*AI*, p. 33). Yet he refuses to admit that this radical change of viewpoint calls for "substantive revisions of the earlier argument" (*AI*, p. 8). If ordinary reading is not really so different from "validation,"

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7. Especially influential in this line of investigation were Bonnie Meyer, *The Organization of Prose and its Effects on Memory* (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1975); David Rumelhart and Donald Norman, *Explorations in Cognition* (San Francisco: Freeman Publishing Co., 1975); and Walter Kintsch and Teun van Dijk, "Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production," *Psychological Review*, 85 (1978), 363-94.

why should we need this ponderous enterprise of restraining a non-existent "lawless" reader with mountains of evidence?

The second drawback is even more damaging. The nature of the "objects" to be adjudicated through "validation" is grossly oversimplified. Hirsch's main procedure for judging the most probable hypothesis is to narrow down the classes to which a disputed object belongs (*VI*, pp. 176 ff.). Since "the idea of the class in itself entails an idea of uniformity" based on "the defining characteristics of the class," "anything we can do to narrow the class" will make the characteristics more specific and "increase the likelihood" of our judgment being true (*VI*, pp. 176, 179). Paradoxically, however, the narrowing of classes runs precisely counter to the massive assembling of "all the relevant knowledge available": the more evidence we assemble, the more likely it is that the evidence will belong to the more general classes which, by Hirsch's own admission, have the fewest "specific characteristics" and contribute the least to "validation." The narrowest class of relevant evidence is obviously not likely to be a large one; most of the historical, biographical, and philological evidence Hirsch wants to have assembled would fall into much broader classes.

To offset the circularity between authorial intention versus text—the text shows us the author's intention, and the author's intention determines what the text means—we are exhorted to gather "all clues" about the "cultural and personal attitudes the author might be expected to bring to bear in specifying his verbal meanings" (*VI*, p. 240). What Hirsch fails to see is that this evidence is, if anything, more circular than what the text offers. We can safely assume that each of the elements an author puts into a text are relevant to the meaning of the other elements. But we have much less reason to assume that "cultural and personal attitudes" are so directly relevant. The "clues" Hirsch envisions are clues only when a scholar decides they are; surely that decision can be no more objective or disinterested than an appeal to the coherence of the text itself.

The status of classes in human knowledge has been probed in sociological and psychological research, especially by Eleanor Rosch and her colleagues at Berkeley.[8] The findings reveal that people have only fuzzy notions of what even the most familiar, concrete classes require of their members, and that class membership is not uniform, but varies along a gradation of more to less typical. If this is true even of such everyday classes as "birds," we should hardly expect that the literary objects in Hirsch's classes—being far less stabilized by social agreement—will be uniform or clearly defined enough for a conclusive adjudication. The scholar would first have to perform the subjective and often laborious step of manufacturing uniform classes for this purpose.

Moreover, as I have argued, it is the special nature of literature to be a domain where we understand the human situation by constructing and contemplating alternatives to everyday reality and ordinary discourse. Such a domain is likely to engender many individualistic or unique works. Even elements that

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8. "Human Categorization," in *Advances in Cross-Cultural Psychology,* ed. Neil Warren (London: Academic, 1977), pp. 3-49.

might appear ordinary in other types of discourse are prone to be given novel functions in a literary text. Obviously, using normative classes and sets to adjudicate highly specialized or unique events is a logical contradiction. The more we strive to place text elements in general classes, the more we tend to obscure or devalue the specific and original nature of the individual work.

Predictably, Hirsch wants to deny that "the objects of knowledge in the cultural sciences are thoroughly unique" by arguing that uniqueness would be unintelligible and inaccessible because we couldn't "subsume individuals under a class" to "make an informed guess about their traits" (*VI*, p. 177). But this argument is hardly convincing: it simply brushes aside an obstacle to Hirsch's logic of classes on the grounds that it is indeed an obstacle. We can very well appreciate unique texts by creating new categories for them, and the great work of art is one which animates us to do so and revises our standards for future experiences. Literature is replete with special cases, as Hirsch himself concedes elsewhere: literature "is an arbitrary classification of linguistic works which do not exhibit common distinctive traits" (*AI*, p. 135). How then is the critic going to apply a method of classification that demands a "uniformity" of "defining characteristics"?

The third drawback pertains to the "author's meanings." In Hirsch's scheme the crucial action is the author's exercise of will to convey a type (*VI*, pp. 31, 51, etc.). Hirsch evidently presumes that this original act of will necessarily engenders a determinate and decidable "verbal meaning"; and that authors intend all disputes to be resolved. He avers, "an author cannot mean what he does not mean" (*VI*, p. 234); "no example of the author's ignorance with respect to his meaning could legitimately show that his intended meaning and the meanings of his text are two different things" (*VI*, p. 22); and "either the text represents the author's verbal meaning or it represents no determinate verbal meaning at all" (*VI*, p. 234). Hence, the critic can and should decide exactly which alternative meaning the author intended. "Whenever a reader confronts two interpretations which impose different emphases on similar meaning components, at least one of the interpretations must be wrong" (*VI*, p. 230). To tolerate "an array of different actual meanings" is to "deny that the text means anything in particular" (*VI*, p. 45).

Here yet another paradox emerges. Hirsch depicts reading as "whimsical" and "lawless"; yet he depicts writing as logical, determinate, and orderly. The production of texts is given a vastly different status from the reception of texts. Though writing has been researched much less than reading, the empirical evidence suggests that writing is in principle no more definitive or compelling in the fixation of meaning than is reading. Even expert literary writers sometimes content themselves with expressions that, after close inspection, they reject and revise as not having conveyed what they intended.

In any case a writer's intention, however clear and determinate, must still be implemented. We can't just throw out what an author says because we have some external evidence that he or she intended something else. A text can easily convey something its author didn't intend without "representing no determinate

verbal meaning at all"; such is the case when Tennyson enjoins his "Riflemen": "Look to your butts, and take good aims!" Besides, an author's act of will is not a directly ("objectively") accessible piece of evidence; as Hirsch concedes, we have to make an "arbitrary supposition" and devise a "psychological recon-struction" of the author (*VI*, pp. 123, 240).

Hirsch's theory foresees restricting "interpretation" to what he calls "verbal meaning." The verbal meaning is the remainder after we remove other modes of meaning, such as: "significance" (the "relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable," *VI*, p. 8); "subject matter" (the topic about which authors and readers may or may not be well-informed, *VI*, p. 20); "response" (what readers actually do upon en-countering the text, *VI*, pp. 38 ff.); "contents of consciousness" (what is in the mind at any moment, *VI*, pp. 58 ff.); "symptomatic meaning" ("involuntary ac-companiments" of verbal meaning, *VI*, pp. 52 ff.); and "implications" (what is implied but not expressed, *VI*, pp. 58 ff.). Hirsch draws a line between "inter-pretation, whose exclusive object is verbal meaning," and "criticism," whose "proper object" is the text's "significance"—a domain he considers "by nature limitless" (*VI*, p. 57). (He appears to confuse this borderline when he says that the author's meaning is "the only proper foundation of criticism," *VI*, p. 57.)

Taken at face value this specific "verbal meaning" raises two serious prob-lems. One problem is that few if any readers could really distill such a meaning in disregard of wider communicative contexts. At best a specially trained analyst could isolate an occasional instance of strictly "verbal meaning" *after* having al-ready comprehended the text in a broad way, that is, in regard to its "signifi-cance." To imagine how you might have understood a passage without any background is surely another subjective step intruding into a project that pur-ports to attain the apex of "objective knowledge." The other problem is that the "clues" Hirsch wants to gather about "cultural and personal attitudes" would most often be related to the text only in terms of "significance" and not in terms of a narrow "verbal meaning."

From a discourse processing standpoint, we can see that Hirsch's theory of validation has several implications that seem gravely problematic:

1. It exaggerates both the uncertainty of ordinary reading and the certainty of interpretation.
2. It wants to expound only the end stage of the reader's actions, without any account of the earlier stages.
3. It represents the objects and classes to be adjudicated as more uniform and well-defined than they are likely to be in most cases. External evi-dence will typically belong to the more general classes and thus not bear directly upon competing interpretations.
4. Literary objects are especially prone to be individualistic or unique, and hence to resist judgments based on classes.
5. Several subjective steps persist: making classes uniform and well-de-fined; deciding which external evidence is relevant; and filtering pure "verbal meaning" out of "significance."

We should therefore doubt the strong claims advanced for the theory as a priv-
ileged tool for establishing "objective knowledge" and seek to revise its status.

The revision Hirsch himself proposes is that his theory is an ethical mandate.
The theory doesn't state what is the case for literary studies; it only states what
should be the case if interpretation is to claim "validity." The central concern is
not so much the declared one—procedures that enable a rigorous examination of
factual evidence—as an ethical imperative to make certain uses of evidence. In-
stead of showing that his method really *can* work for literary interpretation at
large (not just for the handful of straightforward cases he presents), Hirsch is
content to assert that it *ought to*. The moralizing tone of the presentation is
striking. A scholar who "tolerates" a "wide variety of readings" is accused of
"abject intellectual surrender" and "abandonment of responsibility" (*VI*, p.
168). When Hirsch charges critics with "cognitive atheism" (*AI*, p. 13), we
would do well to recall that "atheism" implies a failure to make a leap of faith,
rather than a failure to be objective.

But even if we were to accept the ethical mandate, its fulfillment cannot be in
the terms stated by Hirsch. His marshalling of evidence is supposed to produce
a gradation among objects that are more or less probable. But the mandate is
clearly to set up a dichotomy between objects that are either right or wrong. To
assert "correctness" is an important additional step on the critic's part beyond
the assembling of evidence, and a step fewer and fewer critics are eager to take,
because it misrepresents the degree and nature of our certainty. The mania for
being right in literary disputes is growing rare on the contemporary scene, now
that literary theory leads us to see more important and realistic goals. We are
more aware that the "truth" of literature is not its agreement with specific situa-
tions in the "real world" (e.g., the circumstantial details in a realistic novel), but
its enactment of general principles for constituting reality (e.g., the novel's ex-
emplary glimpses of human nature and society). Hence, the narrow "verbal
meaning" need not embody the literariness of the reading experience at all. The
danger is not merely that Hirsch wants to "throw out the experienced work of
art and retain only the scholarly apparatus," as Louise Rosenblatt has remarked
(*The Reader, the Text, the Poem,* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University
Press, 1978], p. 110), but that his scholarly apparatus might distract from the ap-
preciation of literature as literature.

Despite all his ethical injunctions Hirsch himself disobeys his own theory in
practice. In his study of Blake's "Lamb" poem (*IE*, p. 178)—published in 1964,
after he had already outlined his theory of validation in 1960—Hirsch asks
whether "gave thee clothing of delight" should be read as "God clothed the
lamb with delight" (making "delight" a substance), or as "God gave the lamb
delightful clothing" (making "delight" a descriptive modifier). He accepts both
readings. Abandonment of responsibility? Not at all: his interpretation enriches
our ability to experience the line. Similarly, Hirsch doesn't hesitate to discount
"verbal meaning" when it serves his purposes to interpret "significance," "un-
said meaning," "symbolic meaning," and so on (*IE*, pp. 42, 14, 43). He remarks
that Blake's poems are not uniform objects: "each poem for him was a new
start" and thus must not be made an "intellectual counter" in a "dialectical sys-

tem" (*IE*, pp. 5 ff). Yet Hirsch's logic of classes is presumably just such a "system." No logic of classes could validate an interpretation like this: "Man is a Child, and a Lamb, and to others, a Shepherd. Ultimately, Shepherd and Sheep, Father and Child, are the same" (*IE*, p. 29).

Consequently, the power of Hirsch's theory as an ethical mandate cannot be as compelling as he claims. What remains is a set of specialized procedures for attacking certain historical, biographical, or philological disputes, such as arise during the compiling of variorum editions. But it cannot be a general theory of literary interpretation because it projects a mode of discourse processing that is not plausible, nor indeed desirable. Many aspects of the literary experience should remain unresolved, because they depend vitally on allowing alternative meanings to persist side by side.

Reader response criticism: Stanley Fish[9]

Fish's original enterprise was much more obviously related to discourse processing than Hirsch's was. Far from reinstating the author's meaning, Fish took a pronounced interest in the reader's experience. Whereas critics had traditionally acted as model readers without any special acknowledgement, Fish made a concerted effort to build an explicit model of the literary reader. Hirsch maintained that a reader "begins to speak falsely when he identifies his response with the meaning he has constituted" (*VI*, p. 38), but Fish's concept of meaning embraced "all the precise mental operations involved in reading, including the formulation of complete thoughts, the performing (and regretting) of acts of judgment, the following and making of logical sequences" (LR, p. 140).

Fish remarked that "one can analyze an effect without worrying about whether it was produced accidentally or on purpose"; his method did "not require the assumption of either control or intention"—though Fish "always found himself worrying" about what the author meant (LR, p. 147). He moved closer to Hirsch by narrowing possible responses down to probable ones (LR, p. 145). And, just as Hirsch's critic makes "an informed guess" (*VI*, p. 177),. Fish's method presupposed the "*informed* reader" who knows the language and its "lexical sets, collocational probabilities, idioms, professional and other dialects," and who possesses "literary competence" (LR, p. 145). Fish almost seemed to overtake Hirsch by envisioning the intended reader "whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competences, etc. make him capable of having the experience the author wished to provide"; "discerning an intention is no more or less than understanding," and "understanding includes (is constituted by) all the activities which make up" what Fish called "the structure of the read-

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9. The key for Fish citations is: IIV: "Interpreting 'Interpreting the *Variorum*,'" *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1976), 191-96; *IT: Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); IV: "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Critical Inquiry*, 2 (1976), 465-85; LR: "Literature in the Reader," *New Literary History*, 1 (1970), 123-62; NC: "Normal Circumstances [. . .] and Other Special Cases," *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1978), 625-44; and SS: *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1967). *IT* contains most of the other papers, plus comments on the changes in Fish's position over the years.

er's experience'' (IV, pp. 475 ff.). Yet Fish viewed the meaning created via authorial intention not as an object, but as an event: the "realization" of an author's intention is "the succession of acts readers perform in the continuing assumption that they are dealing with intentional beings" (IV, p. 475).

Fish contrasted his own "temporal" (successive) orientation against the "spatial" (simultaneous) outlook of such schools as "statisticians of style," "descriptive linguists," and "formalist-structuralists" (LR, p. 148). He attacked the "spatial" assumption that the text "can be taken in at a single glance" (LR, p. 141), because this "ignores and devalues" the "reader's activities"; a "description" of those activities "will also be, and without any additional step, an interpretation, not after the fact, but of the fact (of experiencing). It will be a description of a moving field of concerns, at once wholly present (not waiting for meaning, but constituting meaning) and continually in the act of reconstituting itself" (IV, p. 476).

Within the total literary experience Fish emphatically addressed initial reading (LR, p. 127). Hirsch, on the other hand, wanted to spring over initial reading as devoid of "systematic structure" in order to address final reading, the result of weighing all available evidence about the original act of text production. Not surprisingly—needing a means to assert one "best" reading—each critic thought that the phase he was addressing was the one where interpretive hypotheses converge. Hirsch's end-product was an interpretation that disallows "an array of different actual meanings" (*VI*, p. 45). Fish saw on-the-spot understanding as "uniform" and postulated "a secondary or after-the-fact level at which the differences between individuals make themselves manifest"; "it is only when readers become literary critics and the passing of judgment takes precedence over the reading experience that opinions begin to diverge" (*IT*, p. 5; cf. LR, pp. 147 ff.). Figures 1a (Hirsch) and 1b (Fish) offer a graphic representation of this basic distinction between the two critical methods. The two critics naturally disagreed because their respective models addressed different phases and imposed contrary and exaggerated priorities on the scholar. Whereas Hirsch made initial reading seem too chaotic and lawless, Fish made it seem too simple and deliberate.

Either way the breakdown of reader experience into two separate places remains problematic. In actual practice the two phases presuppose each other. Without initial reading, no "objects" would be available for Hirsch's validation
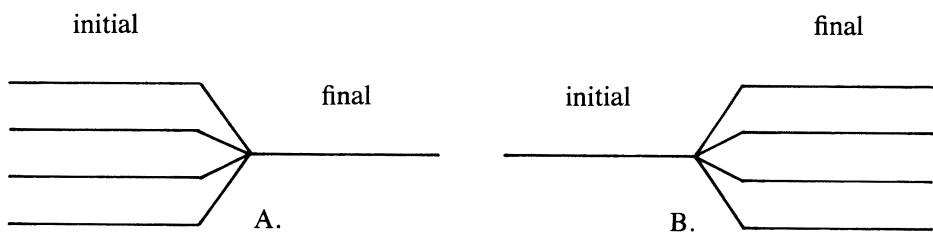

Figure 1. Initial vs. final readings. A: Hirsch. B: Fish.

within a final reading, and Fish's accounts of on-the-spot experience are composed in his retrospective awareness of the overall literary work. Neither critic can remain entirely in his declared boundaries. Fish is "taking in" a text "at a glance" when he offers observations like these: "the *Phaedrus* is not an argument or a proposition, but a vision"; and "the *Phaedrus* is a radical criticism of the idea of internal coherence from a moral point of view" (LR, pp. 137 ff.). Otherwise, he could not make comprehensive statements about the impact and import of an entire work. He would not have the interpretive framework which he has obtained from his entire reading and within which he reconstructs temporally ordered experiences.

Conversely, Hirsch sometimes follows the temporal progression of the reader's experience in order to reach his final interpretation and judgment of a poem. When discussing Blake's "Tyger" (*IE*, pp. 244-252), he remarks:

> It begins with a statement about the creator [. . .] the first stanza makes two statements at once [. . .] In the second stanza, Blake continues to evoke the doubleness of the tiger [. . .] these staccato beats of controlled fury are succeeded by a stanza of immense calm that enormously widens the imaginative range of the poem.

These depictions of unfolding experience form the basis for Hirsch's taking in the poem at a glance: "it is the most inclusive poem Blake ever wrote," and "its spiritual scope is immense" (*IE*, p. 252). Though Hirsch focuses mostly on the author, his concept of the reader comes into view now and then. He presents his interpretation as what "the adult reader implicitly knows," what "the sensitive reader will feel," or what "all sympathetic readers of the poem have experienced" (*IE*, pp. 178, 246).

Fish's stress on the initial reading phase made him pay attention to the "temporal left to right reception of the verbal string" (LR, p. 143), with periodic suspensions for "perceptual closure" (IV, p. 477). To be sure, current research confirms that the eye moves from left to right on the page and pauses every one to five words for about a quarter of a second while the reader makes sense of the passage. But research also strongly suggests that the accruing meaning is rapidly transferred from a linear to a hierarchical format: a network of relations that is "spatial" in the sense Fish uses the term (see references in note 7). Linear word order is dominant only during the more immediate and shallow phases of reading. Fish's model of "the mental life of the reader" (LR, p. 144) seems too much like a tidy reconstruction after the fact, rather than of the fact. He fails to consider how larger chunks of meaning are formed once the string of words has been processed.

Though Fish keeps revising his position, he is consistently attacked for what is misconstrued as a facile tolerance for any possible reading—the customary knee-jerk reaction to the whole reader-response approach. Fish replies that "the text is always stable and never ambiguous"; and that his "is not an argument for an infinitely plural or open text, but for a text that is always set," as long as "a particular way of reading is in force" (NC, p. 629). His reader is "surprised" by the "sin" of misjudgment when one stable opinion must be abandoned to meet incoming evidence. Alternative readings are thus entertained successively (as in Fig. 2a), not simultaneously (as in Fig. 2b).
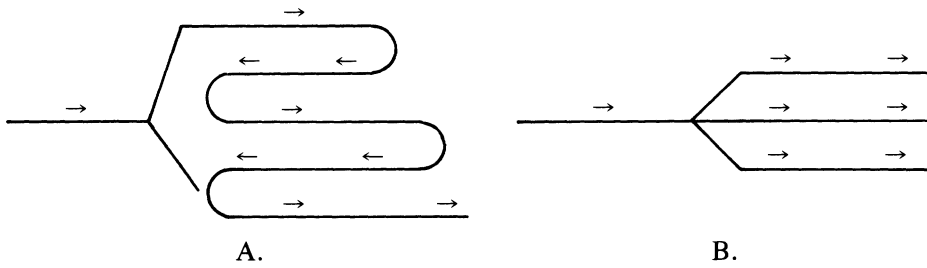
Figure 2. Alternative readings. A: successive. B: simultaneous

To waver between concurrent alternatives, between, for example, two readings for "spare" ("spare time for" versus "refrain from") in Milton's lines, "He who of those delights can judge, and spare/To interpose them oft, is not unwise," is not to "deny that the text means anything in particular," as Hirsch would assert, but to respect the author's intention that the "pressure for judgment" be "transferred from the words on the page to the reader, . . . who comes away from the poem not with a statement, but with a responsibility" (IV, pp. 466 ff.). Hence, to tolerate both readings is not to "abandon responsibility" (Hirsch's charge), but to accept it.

In a passage from Milton's *Il Penseroso* describing the Goddess Melancholy:

> Black, but such as in esteem,
> Prince Memnon's sister might beseem,
> Or that Starr'd Ethiop Queen that strove
> To set her beauty's praise above
> The Sea Nymphs, and their powers offended.
> Yet thou are higher far descended.

the last line can be taken as "you have higher lineage," "you have come down from a greater height," or "you have made a greater descent to our level, our 'weaker view.'" According to Fish this passage assigns us the "responsibility" to "do several things at once": "suspend one line of argument and attend to another, but that argument in turn unfolds in stages, so that we are continually revising our understanding of what we have just read; . . . we are asked to choose every reading, because each of them goes with one of the interpretive strains we have been led to pursue and distinguish" (*IT*, pp. 125 ff.). Obstacles against deciding which reading is meant are not a defect to be surmounted by adjudication, but an integral part of the meaning. Here is a possibility that Hirsch's theory cannot accommodate.

On a different level Fish's early method (1970 version) did not deny validation, but rather moved it from adjudicating alternative readings over to adjudicating alternative ways to describe the reading process. His position has shifted markedly on this issue in the past decade. Whereas in 1970 he wanted to expound "what is objectively true about the activity of reading" (LR, p. 141), in 1976 he averred that "the choice is never between objectivity and interpretation,

but between an interpretation that is unacknowledged as such and an interpreta-
tion that is at least aware of itself" (IV, p. 480). He then sparked new controver-
sy by mounting an attack against objective evidence. He denied the "indepen-
dence" and "priority" of "formal features" (IV, p. 476); even "phonological
facts" and "acts of orthography" are only "patterns that our perceptual habits
make available" (IV, p. 480). The text itself fades away as interpretation be-
comes supreme. "Formal units," Fish declared, "are always a function of the
interpretive model one brings to bear (they are not 'in the text'). Indeed, the text
as an entity independent of interpretation and (ideally) responsible for its career
drops out and is replaced by texts that emerge as the consequence of our inter-
pretive activities" (IT, p. 13).

Still, Fish's reader is not free, not even fully subjective, but must obey the in-
clinations of the "interpretive community" that establishes the procedures for
reading texts. "An interpretive community is not objective because as a bundle
of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather
than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced
by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed
from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view"
(IT, p. 14). The old dichotomy of subject versus object is thereby discarded in
favor of a heavily normative and ineluctable subjectivity.

In this approach literary disputes should result from discrepancies among dif-
ferent "communities." The categories of "right" and "wrong" lose all rele-
vance. Fish's early "theory and practice" involved the "equivocation" of claim-
ing that his own model was more objective than the formalist one (IIV, p. 195).
He could not denounce the "spatial model" for "suppressing what really hap-
pens" if by his "own declared principles the notion 'really happens' is just one
more interpretation" (IV, p. 480). By arguing for a given reading Fish was in fact
describing not what readers do, but what they should do by accepting Fish's in-
terpretive assumptions. This jump from what is to what should be has very dif-
ferent motives from those in Hirsch's method. Fish openly defies Hirsch by
maintaining that "the business of criticism" is "not to decide between inter-
pretations by subjecting them to the test of disinterested evidence but to estab-
lish by political and persuasive means" the "set of interpretive assumptions
from the vantage of which the evidence (and the facts and the intentions and ev-
erything else) will hereafter be specifiable" (IT, p. 16). For Hirsch adjudication
follows an impersonal ethical mandate (serving the interests of "truth" and "ob-
jective knowledge"); for Fish, it follows a self-centered political mandate (serv-
ing the interests of the critic and his or her own community). The fact that the
"reader" described in his early work was a projection of Fish himself is now
cheerfully acknowledged.

Both Hirsch and Fish have abandoned their original separation of reading into
two distinct phases. Hirsch later concluded that "the universality of the match-
making process and of corrigible schemata in all domains of language and
thought suggest that *the process of understanding is itself a process of valida-
tion*"; hence, "the private processes of verbal understanding have the same
character" as validation (AI, p. 33). Fish, in contrast, has transposed inter-

pretive tendencies from an "after-the-fact" stage to a "before-the-fact" one. Both critics now see the reader's prior expectations as controlling the very first reading. But whereas Hirsch still hopes that valid adjudication will create convergence, Fish suggests that diverse communities cannot converge. We now have the schemes represented in Figure 3: Hirsch's with convergence beginning right away (Fig. 3a), and Fish's with endless lines of reasoning that will never touch from one community to the next (Fig. 3b).
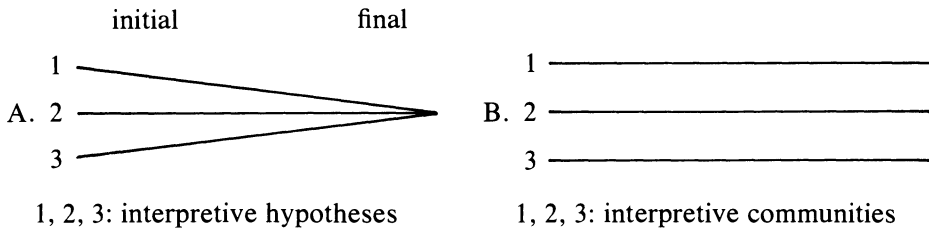
initial   final

A. 2

1, 2, 3: interpretive hypotheses   1, 2, 3: interpretive communities

Figure 3. Convergence of readings. A: Hirsch. B: Fish

Fish's new approach suffers from the drawback that the notion of "interpretive community" is much harder to define and apply than those of "author," "text," or "informed reader." Whereas we can study these three entities as evidence (e.g., Milton writing *Paradise Lost* and Fish reading it), the "interpretive community" can only be an elusive reconstruction. If we are to attribute every dispute to an opposition of "communities," we will wind up with an explosion of communities and no important gain. Only if Fish can show that a single community will predictably take particular stands on definable issues will the notion be useful.

But Fish's argument indicates that scholars undertaking such a large-scale description of an "interpretive community" are not going to succeed. If the scholars belong to the community under study, its assumptions should be inaccessible to them by virtue of coming before any act of perception or comprehension. Yet if the scholars do not belong to the community, its assumptions should seem misguided and "strange" (compare *IT*, p. 16). The task of "determining from which of a number of possible perspectives reading will proceed" (*IT*, p. 16) should be even harder, because the critic would have to understand competing communities well enough to compare them in the same terms, and Fish implies that the terms should disagree from start to finish. In addition scholars from different communities should scarcely be able to communicate.

These objectives lead me to conclude that Fish has exaggerated the inescapable force of the community as dictating "the thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can perform" (*IT*, p. 14). One freshman in my poetry class—surely no seasoned critic—gave me two complete but opposed readings of an e. e. cummings poem (number 62 in *73 poems*), one interpreting the poem as about the death of a person and the other reading it as about the end of a love relationship. Fish would either have to say that the student's interpretive

community allows both readings equally—but then it cannot be true that "the text is always set" as long as "a particular way of reading is in force" (NC, p. 629)—or Fish would have to say that the student was moving between two communities—but then we have the explosion of communities that makes the whole notion pointless.

The concept also has biographical and historical drawbacks. The author must have belonged to an "interpretive community" and designed the work in the expectation that certain interpretive strategies would be in force; otherwise, no control over reader response could be exercised. Yet Fish could hardly argue that the "interpretive community" of an author survives over centuries, for example, from Milton to today's college student. To some degree the reader must assume a partial, temporary membership in another community (that of the author or of the original audience) in order to be "capable of having the experience the author wished to provide" (IV, p. 475). If so, the experience triggered by the text must therefore be capable of forming or at least correcting interpretive strategies, not just of executing them; this need is especially strong for innovative texts. Fish needs to attenuate the force of the community and allow that it can be determined by the literary experience, not just the other way around. So far, though, Fish has not demonstrated any inclination to soften his position.

Perhaps we could resolve these drawbacks by recognizing different levels of awareness. Like any set of prior assumptions, the "interpretive community" would owe its existence and acceptance to people's needs to account for their experience. On one level the interpretive strategies of the community are being actively applied. On a higher level the mind monitors how well the strategies are working. Repeated or prolonged failure to reach a satisfactory account engenders pressure to revise one's strategies. Fish cites a baseball player who attributed every event to divine intervention. But if the outfielder "literally saw everything as a function of his religious existence" (NC, pp. 625 ff.), he wouldn't know what to do—he would have to wait around for heaven to act. He must monitor his actions as a successful baseball player well enough to maintain his own initiative and playing skills.

If my definition is appropriate, literature is a domain that invites us to adapt our strategies for understanding and talking about the world. Literary strategies would thus tend to be flexible and adaptive, waiting until the actual experience before settling the details of what counts as expected and sensible. Therefore the force of the community is weaker than Fish claims to the degree that interpretive strategies can accept external input and fit themselves to its demands—rather than simply dictating what the input must be. The esthetic pleasure of imposing order on a complex experience would encourage a cognitive evolution of one's interpretive capacities.

At present Fish's new theory awaits a more elaborated and cautious demonstration than it has had thus far. As we have seen his statement of the key notion of the "interpretive community" is uncompromising and poorly differentiated. However, Fish's emphasis on the controlling power of prior assumptions is a healthy counterbalance to Hirsch's unwarrantedly optimistic hope for ultimate objectivity. Here also, I think that studying literary communication as an ac-

tivity of discourse processing—including the part played by critics—would help clarify the unresolved questions in Fish's theory. Such a study might be able to show that interpretive strategies, though powerful and pervasive, can be perceived, described, and refined. Then we could strive for more productive and adequate reading strategies, rather than acquiescing to those we now follow.

Deconstructionism: J. Hillis Miller

Whereas Fish addressed initial reading, and Hirsch addressed final reading, Hillis Miller seeks out the moments of reading that are beset by instability.[10] The problem of alternative meanings, so troubling to Hirsch and Fish, is welcomed by Miller, who portrays and cultivates instability in the actions of author, reader, and critic. In the favorite deconstructionist parlance, Miller wants to make "western metaphysics" undergo a "vibratory displacement" (AW, p. 60) that will leave it "demolished beyond hope of repair" (CH, p. 251). A single disputed spelling for the name "Ariachne" is said to bring the "whole shebang of Occidental metaphysics into question" (AW, p. 47).

Deconstructionism takes as its target the contemporary world-view ("metaphysics") shared by Western thinkers, including at least to some degree (as we will see later on) the deconstructionists themselves. This world-view rests not so much on a set of specific beliefs or facts as on a set of cognitive strategies and habits. The foundation is the well-known logical "principle of identity" (AW, p. 47), according to which any entity is identical to itself and can be no other entity at the same time. This principle is essential to our social order, legal institutions, science, and most philosophical definitions of "truth" and "fact"—and even such definitions of "meaning" as Hirsch's.

Miller contends that this "monological" mode of thought that makes each entity single-natured should yield to a "dialogical" one that allows an entity to be both itself and not itself but something else at the same time. He calls the "dialogical" mode basic, and the "monological" mode its "derived effect" (AW, pp. 59 ff.). This disturbing view might be explained by reference to the psychological considerations I outlined at the start. Western society has devised a model of reality whose components owe their identity to our excluding or denying certain alternatives. Even when communicating in everyday life, people have to make meaning determinate and decidable in order to understand. Miller's "dialogical" mode could be an aspect of the early stages in the cognition of a person or a whole society when identities have not yet been established. Psychological experiments do indicate that, on a deep level of awareness outside conscious attention, people can expect or respond to mutually exclusive events.[11] Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Gödel's proof

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10. The key for Miller citations is: AW: "Ariachne's Broken Woof," *Georgia Review*, 31 (1977), 44-60; CC: "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), 5-31; and CH: "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 217-53.

11. An authoritative discussion of this problem is offered by Alan Allport, "Conscious and Unconscious Cognition," in *Perspectives on Memory Research,* ed. Lars Nilsson (Hillsdale, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1979), pp. 61-89.

that formal logical systems cannot be totally complete and decidable demonstrate the limits of fixed identity. However, society has scarcely drawn the consequences of these new discoveries; in effect, the principle of identity has merely retreated from physics into metaphysics. In particular, literature endures as a domain where alternative realities are contemplated, so that we can recognize the negotiability of identities. Hence, a "dialogical" approach to literature seems at least worth considering.

Hirsch's critic is obsessed with establishing identities, no matter how much evidence needs to be gathered. Fish's critic has no choice but to accept the identities dictated by his or her "interpretive community." Miller's critic, however, is committed to dissolving or contravening identities at every opportunity. This project is ultimately hopeless. A fully dialogical world-view would "deconstruct" reality as we know it by blurring distinctions, denying orientation, and precluding relevance. Communication would break down because the decisions and selections needed to constitute meaning would be perpetually suspended. At this point prevailing metaphysics would indeed be damaged beyond repair. But the organization of human cognition and communication is opposed to any such absolute remodeling. If you want to use a system, you have to respect the principles of its operation. At least some degree of identity must be maintained for communication to work at all. If you try to think or talk about every alternative at once, you get nowhere. Carried to its ultimate goal, deconstruction would not revitalize or redesign literary criticism, but simply destroy it.

Thus it is that all projects of deconstructionism fall short of the absolute end stage, the fully deconstructed world-view. Instead, they programmatically enact the antagonism of stability and instability wherever they can find it in literary communication. The deconstructionist critic hopes to reanimate literary and critical theory by constantly postponing or rescinding the stabilization of meaning. The transitory state of uncertainty that is normally transcended by the imposition of a new order is now to be prolonged as far as possible. In theory the esthetic experience of confronting, then integrating new alternatives would be reshaped. Traditional esthetics emphasized the end state of attaining a new order; the reader or critic then passes on to another experience with a new work.

In contrast, a deconstructionist esthetics would emphasize the early state of encountering the unexpected and the disturbing; the reader or critic persists in or repeats the same experience with the same work and cannot escape. However, if we closely examine actual practice, we see the deconstructionists performing isolated destabilizing actions from inside the protective framework of an already ordered system. After the work has been experienced as coherent and meaningful, the critic backtracks to try out other pathways. So instead of the simultaneous co-existence of alternatives (Fig. 4a) implied by deconstructionist theory, we have the successive restarting of alternatives (Fig. 4b), one by one.

The critic contemplates a problem and follows trains of thought—associations, analogies, metaphors, and so on—that lead to different solutions, or, better still, to new problems. But to do so, the critic must at least structure the problem, state the alternatives, define which identities are at stake, adduce evi-
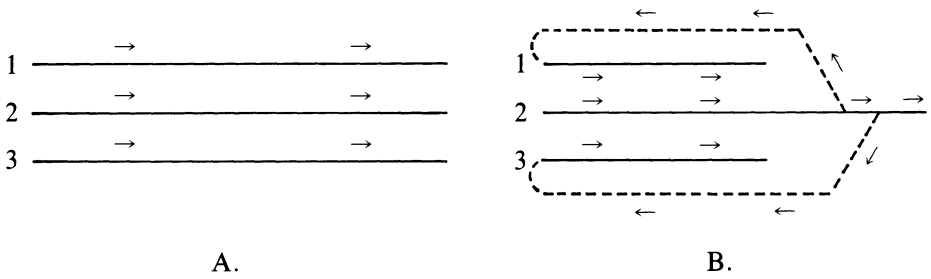
Figure 4. Deconstruction. A: Co-presence of alternatives
B: Restarting alternatives

dence for conflicting world views, and so forth. Therefore, every deconstructive act is also constructive to a much greater extent. The deconstructionists want to destroy the hermeneutic circle, but they can't help constantly using it themselves.

The most radical weapon for subverting identity is the paradox, the unification of opposites, as, for example, in the images of "host and guest," "eater and eaten," or "friendly presence and alien invader" (CH, p. 220). Miller sees "the uncanny antithetical relation . . . not only between pairs of words in this system, but within each word itself"; "it reforms itself in each polar opposite when that opposite is separated out" (p. 221). Less radical weapons are also deployed, including changing terms or the definition of terms without warning, stream-of-consciousness associations, and abrupt non-sequiturs.

According to Jacques Derrida (*Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Spivak [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977], p. 15) stable text meaning is to be displaced by "metaphoricity itself." The critics demonstrate this displacement by carrying on their own discussions with frequent uses of metaphor, oxymoron, paradox, reversal, tautology, allegory, parody, and even travesty. For example, Miller states Shelley's view of life in the cryptic tautology, "Life, for him, may not die" (CH, p. 234), and the critic interprets with chains of metaphor: "The word 'parasite,' for Shelley, names the bridge, wall, or connecting membrane which at once makes this apocalyptic union possible, abolishing difference, and at the same time always remains as a barrier forbidding it" (CH, p. 237). As evidence of Shelley's "deconstructive" world-view, Miller cites such passages as:

> Figures ever new
> Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;
> We have but thrown, as those before us threw,
> Our shadows on it as it past away.

The rhetorical habits of the deconstructionists, though rather unconventional in literary studies, are thus a deliberate illustration of their philosophical agenda. On the one hand they dwell upon unstable meanings in literary works. On the other hand they offer instead of explanations only extended series of metaphors

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resolving into further metaphors, layer after layer. By virtue of such critical dis-
course "the critic" is claimed to be "a follower who repeats the pattern once
again and once again fails to get it right":

> The critic's attempt to untwist the elements in the texts he interprets only twists
> them up again in another place and leaves always a remnant of opacity, or an added
> opacity, as yet unraveled. The critic is caught in his own version of the intermina-
> ble repetitions which determine the poet's career. The critic experiences this as his
> failure to get his poet right in a final decisive formulation which will allow him to
> have done with that poet, once and for all. Though each poet is different, each con-
> tains his own form of undecidability. (CH, pp. 247 ff.)

In this view Hirsch's project of definitive adjudication is not only hopeless, but
antagonistic to the very essence of literature. Miller's critic "can only retrace
the text, set its elements in motion once more, in that experience of the failure of
determinable meaning that is decisive here" (CH. p. 248).

Yet, however disorienting such criticism may be, it is still predominately con-
structive: paradoxes, metaphors, allegories, or whatever, must first be made:

> The word "deconstruction" suggests that such criticism is an activity turning some-
> thing unified back into detached fragments or parts. . . . Far from reducing the text
> back to detached fragments, it inevitably constructs again in a different form what it
> deconstructs. It does again as it undoes. It recrosses in one place what it uncrosses
> in another. Rather than surveying the text with sovereign command from outside, it
> remains caught within the activity in the text it retraces. (CH, p. 251)

Given this dilemma the critic has to embark on a deliberate search for multiple
meanings. For example, Miller deconstructs the notion of "parasite" by analyz-
ing its etymological components. He takes the prefix "per-" and (following the
American Heritage Dictionary—surely a prime product of "western meta-
physics"?) lists the basic and extended meanings (p. 219). Though a few of these
meanings are compatible (e.g., "in front of," "before," "early," "first"), many
have little in common (e.g., "through," "chief," "near," etc.). Miller uses this
diffusion to prevent the meaning from becoming determinate and decidable: "the
other meanings are always there as a shimmering in the word that makes it re-
fuse to stay still in a sentence" (CH, p. 219). Even so Miller trips himself up
when he picks out the "basic meaning" from among the "extended senses." At
least he should want to claim that the "extended senses" for a text have no lim-
its: Miller's text is "inhabited" by "a long chain of parasitical presences—ech-
oes, allusions, guests, ghosts, of previous texts" (CH, p. 225).

To appreciate the predicament of deconstructionism, let us consider the well-
known psychological phenomenon of "semantic satiation."[12] If you say a word
over and over to yourself for about fifteen seconds, it starts to seem not mean-
ingful, but odder and odder, finally ridiculous. Apparently, senseless repetition
wears out the process that normally supplies the meaning when the word is ut-
tered. Now if you subjected every word of a text to this satiation, it would be

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12. For a recent view, see James Neely, "The Effects of Visual and Verbal Satiation on a Lex-
ical Decision Task," *American Journal of Psychology*, 90 (1977), 447-59.

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radically deconstructed, and its meaning would be reduced to absurdity. But you also would not be able to do anything with the text, such as give it a critical interpretation. You would have broken the apparatus and learned nothing about how it works.

Now compare this outcome with the one obtained by deconstructionists. When Derrida repeats "the 'into' of Mallarmé" (*Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], p. 181), he obtains no semantic satiation, but only further configurations with readily comprehensible meanings (e.g., "the 'inter' of Mallarmé" and "the in-two of 'Mallarmé'"). When Hillis Miller contemplates the word "parasite," he derives an interesting but hardly remote pun with "parracide" (inspired by *Henry Esmond,* among other texts) and an array of etymological roots. He argues that the multiple meanings of such roots help prevent a decision about the meaning of the entire word "parasite," so that the word can assume the key function within the central ambivalent image in Shelley's *The Triumph of Life:* the life-giving and life-destroying symbiosis of host and parasite. Yet Miller has already made up his mind that this image is indeed crucial, and only then does he decide what instabilities he wants to look for and place in evidence. Though the "parasite" image is indeed ambivalent, it is not random or undefined. As Hirsch remarked, "knowledge of ambiguity is not necessarily ambiguous knowledge" (*VI*, p. ix). Besides, most of Shelley's text retains a fairly stable meaning for Miller. His interpretation is tightly constructed around this one major ambiguity.

By the same token, when Miller proclaims that there can be no "closure," he performs an obvious closure. To promote "undecidability" is itself a decision; to obvert determinacy is a determinate enterprise; and so forth (CH, p. 250). Thus, as Miller readily concedes, deconstruction constantly fails in all its projects for dismantling "western metaphysics," and dismantles itself instead (CH, pp. 251 ff.). If language is a "prisonhouse" and words are "chains of lead" in Shelley's words (CH, pp. 229, 246), it is because even a deconstructionist has to make the text work by assigning functions to its elements. "To the action of deconstruction with its implication of an irresistible power of the critic over the text must always be added, as a description of what happens in interpretation, the experience of the impossibility of exercising that power" (CH, p. 251).

All the same a self-defeating enterprise is in this case by no means a useless one. It forcefully enacts and calls attention to a basic principle of literary communication that no single world-view or text-meaning can resolve all the deep complexities and uncertainties of human thought and experience. Deconstruction uses literature to demonstrate what Kurt Gödel proved for logic (AW, p. 48).

Vehement protests against deconstructionism have become commonplace. Probably motives of professional decorum are most important here. Hirsch rather shallowly suggests that critics who make their living from criticism as an "institution" have no right to "attack" its "very foundations" (*AI*, p. 13)—a rather authoritarian view on academic privilege. The fear that deconstructionism might weaken those foundations is probably shared by many more liberal critics than Hirsch and his followers. Nonetheless, the popularity of the method indi-

cates that many other critics find it refreshing and enjoy the liberty to experiment.

Divergence of meaning is built into literary communication itself. Criticism can negotiate methods that promote convergence, such as those of Hirsch and Fish. But if we adjudicate and "validate" every text meaning for once and for all, or set down as law the "interpretive strategies" of one "community," we may place literature in a greater peril than any which threatens to come from the exaggerated divergence sought by deconstructionism. At least it is plain from the outset that deconstructionism must fail, so that it can hardly constitute a genuine danger. Meanwhile, the method supports the dynamics of criticism by reminding us that "undecidability" is one "name" for the "experience of a ceaseless dissatisfied movement in the relation of the critic to the text" (CH, p. 252).

I have tried to show how each of three influential critical theories implies a particular view of how literary discourse is or should be processed. I indicated that each view is in part justified, but not to the extent claimed by the critics themselves. Since the critics focus on different phases and aspects of the literary experience, disputes are natural. But no argument made from within a single approach could prove that the latter was "right" and the other two "wrong." That would be a "political" step in the sense Fish uses the term: it projects the critic's interest in dominating literary discussions from a particular standpoint. Each approach works for some aspects of the literary experience but does not refute the other approaches as useful for other aspects. If literary communication depends on alternativity, we should expect precisely this result.

It might well be asked why discourse processing should serve as the standard for evaluating critical approaches; surely it too is incomplete and relative to theoretical interests? Of course it is, but not in the same ways as critical theories. There are at least five advantages to the sort of approach I have tried to demonstrate.

First, discourse processing theories strive for a convergence of human factors such as attention, performance, memory, computation, social interaction, and language capacities, whereas each of our three critics selects only a few points from such research: categorization and hypothesis-testing (Hirsch), prior interpretive schemas (Fish), and temporary ambiguities (Miller). The more factors we account for, the more likely it is that our account will be generally appropriate, and will support a unified rather than a fragmented outlook on literary communication.

Second, discourse processing research applies different methods of validating claims and hypotheses. This research relies not only on text analysis, but also on a range of experiments and empirical measures, whereas our three critics rely on text analysis supplemented by rhetorical persuasion. Here also, a greater range of sources and controls should support the generality and unity of the enterprise. Though literary communication does not conform to the same conditions as everyday discourse, we can describe its special nature in comparable terms, as I have tried to do here.

Third, a discourse processing approach offers ways of seeing how critical the-
ories agree or disagree. For example, our three critics all follow the trends in re-
cent discourse processing research when they rescind the independence of the
text asserted by the New Critics (Hirsch in *VI*, pp. 11 ff.; Fish in LR, p. 123;
and Miller in CH, p. 217). On the other hand, the three differ in how they per-
form the tasks of upgrading the obvious and downgrading the surprising (in the
sense I used these terms in the opening section). Hirsch picks out problems he
calls "cruxes" (*IE*, p. viii) and downgrades them by uncovering the author's mo-
tivation; somewhat paradoxically, he proposes to resolve improbable events by
showing that they are the most probable in view of all the evidence. Less often,
he upgrades a passage by appealing to the author's intention, for example, by
averring that Blake's "childish simplicity of language" conceals "adult profun-
dity of insight" and "symbolic implications" (*IE*, p. 21). In Fish's early work he
downgraded "interpretive cruxes" (IV, p. 465) by integrating them into the
"cumulative pressures of the reading experience" (LR, p. 140) that readers have
the "responsibility" to navigate and resolve. But on occasion (especially when
treating the "unpromising material" of prose) he upgraded such seemingly insig-
nificant elements as "that" (LR, pp. 129 ff.). Fish's later work seems to obscure
the issue of surprises: if one's interpretive strategies are eternally confirming
themselves by creating whatever evidence they want, it is hard to see how read-
ers could ever perceive anything they don't expect. Miller selects cruxes too,
but he upgrades them still further until the problems seem incapable of ever
being solved.

Fourth, a discourse processing approach helps us identify certain drawbacks
in critical theories. Some of these I have tried to suggest. Hirsch fails to consider
that external evidence can be as circular as that taken directly from the text, and
that classes of objects are seldom uniform or well-defined, least of all in liter-
ature. Fish obscures the capacity of experience to correct, rather than confirm,
interpretive hypotheses and communities. Miller pursues instabilities but can not
help constructing a largely stable text-meaning.

Finally, the same approach is useful for recognizing when critics proceed in
ways that overstep the declared bounds of their own theories. We saw Hirsch
going far beyond "verbal meaning" to interpret Blake, or accepting both of two
competing readings. Fish takes in the text "at a glance," and depicts the "sur-
prises" of a reader who, if the force of the interpretive community were indeed
all-powerful, would have to misperceive surprising events as expected ones. Mil-
ler constructs far more than he ever deconstructs.

These five advantages indicate that discourse processing standpoints deserve
to be admitted to critical theory alongside those we already have. Perhaps my
own interests may eventually be furthered, namely, to expand the range of peo-
ple participating in literary communication and the range of ways they do so. It
seems to me that we can offer such opportunities more easily as we gain a stead-
ily more refined understanding of the nature and procedures of critical activity.
We have little to lose and much to gain by learning all we can about how liter-
ature works.