

The Authority of Interpretive Communities

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Is There a Text in This Class?

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England

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Eleventh printing, 2000

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Fish, Stanley Eugene

Is there a text in this class?

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Criticism I. Title.

PN81.F56 801'.95 80-19438

ISBN 0-674-46726-4 (paper)

To my parents, Ida and Max Fish

Preface

THE ANSWER this book gives to its title question is "there is and there isn't." There isn't a text in this or any other class if one means by text what E. D. Hirsch and others mean by it, "an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next" (Validity in Interpretation, p. 46); but there is a text in this and every class if one means by text the structure of meanings that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force. The point is finally a simple one, but it has taken me more than ten years to see it, and, in what follows, it will take me almost four hundred pages to elaborate it. Along the way I have had a great deal of help: from my students at the University of California at Berkeley, The Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Southern California; from the members of two NEH summer seminars (1974, 1976); from the faculty and students (themselves faculty) who made the 1977 session of the School of Criticism and Theory so intense an experience; and from a number of colleagues and friends, Leo Braudy, William Cain, Rob Cummins, Hubert Dreyfus, Frank Hubbard, Steven Mailloux, Ellen Mankoff, David Sachs, and John Searle. Lee Erickson performed the invaluable service of refusing to let me off the hook for an entire year. Lee Patterson and Christy-Jo Anderson gave me the gift of a chance conversation. Of two others I can only say what is a very conventional thing to say, that this book is as much theirs as mine; Kenneth Abraham and Walter Michaels worked it out with me in classrooms, in restaurants, at parties, on basketball courts, and, once, even on the radio. Jane Parry Tompkins has encouraged me and inspired me and given meaning to everything in my life.

Chapters 1-12 have been previously published in the follow-

ing journals and collections: chapters 1 and 3 in New Literary History (1970, 1973); chapter 2 in Approaches to Poetics, edited by Seymour Chatman (1973); chapter 4 in Milton Studies (1975); chapters 5, 6, 7, 11, and 12 in Critical Inquiry (1975, 1976, 1978, 1979); chapters 8 and 9 in Modern Language Notes (1976, 1977); chapter 10 in Boundary II (1980). I am grateful for permission to reprint.

S.F.

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Introduction, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned To Love Interpretation

HAT INTERESTS ME about many of the essays collected here is the fact that I could not write them today. I could not write them today because both the form of their arguments and the form of the problems those arguments address are a function of assumptions I no longer hold. It is often assumed that literary theory presents a set of problems whose shape remains unchanging and in relation to which our critical procedures are found to be more or less adequate; that is, the field of inquiry stands always ready to be interrogated by questions it itself constrains. It seems to me, however, that the relationship is exactly the reverse: the field of inquiry is constituted by the questions we are able to ask because the entities that populate it come into being as the presuppositions—they are discourse-specific entities —of those questions. In 1970 I was asking the question "Is the reader or the text the source of meaning?" and the entities presupposed by the question were the text and the reader whose independence and stability were thus assumed. Without that assumption—the assumption that the text and the reader can be distinguished from one another and that they will hold still the merits for their rival claims could not have been debated and an argument for one or the other could not have been made. The fact that I was making such an argument was a direct consequence of the fact that it had already been made, and the position I proceeded to take was dictated by the position that had already been taken. That position was best represented, perhaps, by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's essays on the affective and intentional fallacies (so called), essays that pled a successful case for the text by arguing, on the one hand, that the intentions of the author were unavailable and, on the other, that the responses of the reader were too variable. Only the text was both indisputably there and stable. To have recourse either to the causes of a poem or to its effects is to exchange objectivity for "impressionism and relativism." "The outcome of either Fallacy, the Intentional or the Affective, is that the poem itself, as an object of specifically critical judgment, tends to disappear."

To the degree that this argument was influential (and it was enormously so) it constrained in advance the form any counterargument might take. In order to dislodge the affective fallacy, for example, one would have to show first that the text was not the self-sufficient repository of meaning and, second, that something else was, at the very least, contributory. This was exactly my strategy in the first of the articles presented in this book. I challenged the self-sufficiency of the text by pointing out that its (apparently) spatial form belied the temporal dimension in which its meanings were actualized, and I argued that it was the developing shape of that actualization, rather than the static shape of the printed page, that should be the object of critical description. In short, I substituted the structure of the reader's experience for the formal structures of the text on the grounds that while the latter were the more visible, they acquired significance only in the context of the former. This general position had many consequences. First of all, the activities of the reader were given a prominence and importance they did not have before: if meaning is embedded in the text, the reader's responsibilities are limited to the job of getting it out; but if meaning develops, and if it develops in a dynamic relationship with the reader's expectations, projections, conclusions, judgments, and assumptions, these activities (the things the reader does) are not merely instrumental, or mechanical, but essential, and the act of description must both begin and end with them. In practice, this resulted in the replacing of one question—what does this mean?—by another—what does this do?—with "do" equivocating between a reference to the action of the text on a reader and the actions performed by a reader as he negotiates (and, in some sense, actualizes) the text. This equivocation allowed me to retain the text as a stable entity at the same time that I was dislodging it as the privileged container of meaning. The reader was now given joint responsibility for the production of a meaning that was itself redefined as an event rather than an entity. That is, one could not point to this meaning as one could if it were the property of the text; rather, one could observe or follow its gradual emergence in the interaction between the text, conceived of as a succession of words, and the developing response of the reader.

In this formulation, the reader's response is not to the meaning; it is the meaning, or at least the medium in which what I wanted to call the meaning comes into being, and therefore to ignore or discount it is, or so I claimed, to risk missing a great deal of what is going on. In order to support this claim I performed analyses designed to demonstrate both the richness of literary experience and the extent to which that experience was unavailable to (because it was flattened out by) a formalist reading. I did not make use of it at the time, but the following passage from Paradise Lost might well have been the basis of such a demonstration:

Satan, now first inflam'd with rage came down,
The Tempter ere th' Accuser of man-kind,
To wreck on innocent frail man his loss
Of that first Battle, and his flight to Hell. (IV, 9–12)

My contention was that in formalist readings meaning is identified with what a reader understands at the *end* of a unit of sense (a line, a sentence, a paragraph, a poem) and that therefore any understandings preliminary to that one are to be disregarded as an unfortunate consequence of the fact that reading proceeds in time. The only making of sense that counts in a formalist reading is the last one, and I wanted to say that every-

thing a reader does, even if he later undoes it, is a part of the "meaning experience" and should not be discarded. One of the things a reader does in the course of negotiating these lines is to assume that the referent of "his" in line 11 is "innocent frail man." Within this assumption the passage would seem to be assigning the responsibility for the Fall to Satan: Satan, inflamed with rage, comes down to inflict the loss of Eden on a couple unable to defend themselves because they are innocent and frail. This understanding, however, must be revised when the reader enters line 12 and discovers that the loss in question is Satan's loss of Heaven, sustained in "that first battle" with the loyal angels. It is that loss of which Adam and Eve are innocent, and the issue of the Fall is not being raised at all. But of course it has been raised, if only in the reader's mind, and in the kind of analysis I am performing, that would be just the point. The understanding that the reader must give up is one that is particularly attractive to him because it asserts the innocence of his first parents, which is, by extension, his innocence too. By first encouraging that understanding and then correcting it, Milton (so my argument would go) makes the reader aware of his tendency, inherited from those same parents, to reach for interpretations that are, in the basic theological sense, self-serving. This passage would then take its place in a general strategy by means of which the reader comes to know that his experience of the poem is a part of its subject; and the conclusion would be that this pattern, essential to the poem's operation, would go undetected by a formalist analysis.

That claim would be attached to the more general claim I was making, that I had escaped formalism by displacing attention from the text, in its spatial configurations, to the reader and his temporal experience. In order to maintain this claim it was necessary to remove the chief objection to talking about the experience of the reader, to wit, that there are (at least potentially) as many experiences as there are readers, and that therefore the decision to focus on the reader is tantamount to giving up the possibility of saying anything that would be of general interest. I met that objection by positing a level of experience which all readers share, independently of differences

in education and culture. This level was conceived more or less syntactically, as an extension of the Chomskian notion of linguistic competence, a linguistic system that every native speaker shares. I reasoned that if the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform. The fact that the understandings of so many readers and critics were not uniform was accounted for by superimposing on this primary or basic level (identified more or less with perception itself) a secondary or after-the-fact level at which the differences between individuals make themselves manifest. At times I characterized this secondary level as an emotional reaction to the experience of the first (whether the reader likes or dislikes the experience of Faulkner's delays, he will, in common with every other reader, experience them); and at other times I spoke of it as an act of intellection, more or less equivalent with what we usually call interpretation. In either case the assertion was that this subsequent and distorting activity was the source of the apparent variation in the response of readers to literary texts: "It is only when readers become literary critics and the passing of judgment takes precedence over the reading experience that opinions begin to diverge. The act of interpretation is often so removed from the act of reading that the latter (in time the former) is hardly remembered."

The distinction then was between the actual reading experience and whatever one might feel or say about it in retrospect. It was also a distinction between something that was objective and shared (the basic data of the meaning experience) and something that was subjective and idiosyncratic. From this it followed that the proper practice of literary criticism demanded the suppressing of what is subjective and idiosyncratic in favor of the level of response that everyone shares. In terms of my own criticism this provided me with a strategy for dealing with my predecessors. I treated their accounts of literary works as disguised reports of the normative experience that all informed readers have. These reports are disguised, I reasoned, because a reader who is also a critic will feel compelled to translate his experience into the vocabulary of the critical principles

he self-consciously holds. He will, that is, be reporting not on his immediate or basic response to a work but on his response (as dictated by his theoretical persuasion) to that response. In relation to such critics I performed the service of revealing to them what their actual experience of a work was before it was obscured by their after-the-fact (interpretive) reflections.

In short, I was practicing a brand of criticism whose most distinctive claim was not to be criticism at all but a means of undoing the damage that follows in criticism's wake. This is particularly true of the essay on Milton's L'Allegro, where the argument is that as a poem whose parts are arranged in such a way as to exert no interpretive pressures it is unavailable to criticism insofar as interpretation is its only mode. It follows then that since others who have written on the poem have to a man sought to interpret it, they are necessarily wrong. They are wrong, however, in ways that point inadvertently to my description of its experience; for it is in response to the curious discreteness that characterizes a reading of L'Allegro that the critics are moved to fault the poem for a lack of unity or to supply the unity by supplying connections more firm and delimiting than the connections available in the text. Thus, the very efforts of my predecessors testify to their involuntary recognition of the truth of what I am telling them; their reading experience is finally exactly like mine; it is just that their critical preconceptions lead them either to ignore or devalue it. Not only did this strategy enable me to turn opposing positions into versions of my own, but it also gave me a way of answering the question most often asked in the classroom and in public meetings: How is it that readers who are at least as informed as you are (in the sense of having "literary competence") do not experience literature as you say they should? I simply said that they do, even though they may not (consciously) know it, and that if they will only listen to me they will learn how to recognize the configurations of the experience they have always had. In this way I was able to account for the (apparent) differences in literary response without having to give up the claim of generality.

Like any other polemical success, however, this one had its price; for by thus preserving generality I left myself vulnerable

to the most persistent objection to the method, that in essence it was no different from the formalism to which it was rhetorically opposed. In order to argue for a common reading experience, I felt obliged to posit an object in relation to which readers' activities could be declared uniform, and that object was the text (at least insofar as it was a temporal structure of ordered items); but this meant that the integrity of the text was as basic to my position as it was to the position of the New Critics. And, indeed, from the very first I was much more dependent on new critical principles than I was willing to admit. The argument in "Literature in the Reader" is mounted (or so it is announced) on behalf of the reader and against the self-sufficiency of the text, but in the course of it the text becomes more and more powerful, and rather than being liberated, the reader finds himself more constrained in his new prominence than he was before. Although his standard is raised in opposition to formalism, he is made into an extension of formalist principles, as his every operation is said to be strictly controlled by the features of the text. The last paragraph of the essay urges a method of classroom teaching in which students are trained first to recognize and then to "discount" whatever was unique and personal in their response so that there would be nothing between them and the exertion of the text's control.

What I didn't see was that I could not consistently make the two arguments at the same time. That is, I could not both declare my opposition to new critical principles and retain the most basic of those principles—the integrity of the text—in order to be able to claim universality and objectivity for my method. I kept this knowledge from myself by never putting the two arguments together but marshaling each of them only to rebut specific points. When someone would charge that an emphasis on the reader leads directly to solipsism and anarchy, I would reply by insisting on the constraints imposed on readers by the text; and when someone would characterize my position as nothing more than the most recent turn of the new-critical screw, I would reply by saying that in my model the reader was freed from the tyranny of the text and given the central role in the production of meaning.

In short, I was moving in two (incompatible) directions at once: in the one the hegemony of formalism was confirmed and even extended by making the text responsible for the activities of its readers; in the other those same activities were given a larger and larger role to the extent that at times the very existence of the text was called into question. The tension between these two directions is particularly obvious in the second of these essays, "What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" The argument of this piece is largely a negative one, directed at those practitioners of stylistics who wish to go directly from the description of formal features to a specification of their meaning. My thesis was that such a move, because it is unconstrained by any principle, produces interpretations that are always arbitrary. I did not, however, deny either the possibility or the relevance of cataloguing formal features; I merely insisted that the value of those features could only be determined by determining their function in the developing experience of the reader. Linguistic facts, I conceded, do have meaning, but the explanation for that meaning is not the capacity of syntax to express it but the ability of a reader to confer it.

Thus I retained the distinction between description and interpretation and by so doing affirmed the integrity and objectivity of the text. In the second part of the essay, however, the argument is much more adventurous and (potentially, at least) subversive. Objecting to the formalist assumption that the reader's job is to extract the meanings that formal patterns possess prior to, and independently of, his activities, I proceed to give an account of those activities that greatly expanded their scope:

In my view, these same activities are constitutive to a structure of concerns which is necessarily prior to any examination of formal patterns because it is itself the occasion of their coming into being. The stylisticians proceed as if there were observable facts that could first be described and then interpreted. What I am suggesting is that an interpreting entity, endowed with purposes and concerns, is, by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed.

This clearly weakens, if it does not wholly blur, the distinction between description and interpretation, and it goes a long way

toward suggesting that linguistic and textual facts, rather than being the objects of interpretation, are its products. Typically, however, there is a loophole, a space for equivocation which allows me to avoid the more unsettling implications of my argument. The phrase "determining what counts as the facts" is capable of two readings: in one reading it is a radical assertion of the unavailability of facts apart from interpretation; in the other it merely means that of all the specifiable linguistic facts, only some are relevant to the act of interpretation, and these can only be picked out in the context of the reader's activities. (This is more or less the position taken by Michael Riffaterre in his critique of the Jakobson-Levi-Strauss analysis of "Les Chats.") That is, in one reading the status of the text is put into radical question, while in the other it is a matter of selecting from the text, which is still assumed to be stable and objective, those components that will be regarded as significant. The equivocation finally rests on the key word "interpretation." In the first statement of the position (in "Literature in the Reader") interpretation is characterized as a second-level response that prevents us from recognizing the shape of our immediate experience; but in this essay interpretation is identified with that experience when I declare that the reader's activities are interpretive. Again, however, this is a statement that points in two directions: it can either mean that a reader's activities are constitutive of what can be formally described or that formal features are prior to those activities and act in relation to them as promptings or cues. The article trades on these meanings and ends without confronting the contradiction that exists at its center.

The source of this contradiction was my unthinking acceptance of another formalist assumption, the assumption that subjectivity is an ever present danger and that any critical procedure must include a mechanism for holding it in check. Indeed, it was the absence of such a mechanism in the procedures of the stylisticians that was the basis of my attack on their work. It is not, I complained, that what they do can't be done, but that it can be done all too easily and in any direction one likes. Behind the phrase "any direction one likes" is the Arnoldian