

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 4 (1988)

Artikel: Contexts of reading, texts of belief : theory and pragmatism in our clime
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99871>

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Contexts of Reading, Texts of Belief: Theory and Pragmatism in Our Clime

Ihab Hassan

My title is also my thesis, and my thesis comes to this: the contexts of reading are the multitude of literary theories about us today, but these can not *finally* answer the key questions of this symposium; only pragmatism can. For theory answers radical queries circularly, in terms of its own premises. "Answers" rest in praxis, a praxis guided invisibly by habits, histories, aims, accidents, preferences, and a myriad of beliefs. This statement itself derives from my own experience as a man, teacher, scholar, and my affinity for certain genial principles of Jamesian pragmatism.

Perhaps I have stated the thesis too baldly, even brutally, though I meant only to be Swiss-ly forthright. The argument, in any case, stands in its own context, the context of our postmodern clime. This is a clime of uncertainty and destabilization, what I have called "indetermanence." It befits us, therefore, to review the issues of literary theory in the last two or three decades, review, that is, the active contexts of our reading and the illegible texts of our beliefs.

I

The critical debate has clustered around several issues. I have space here to name only five.

1. *Literariness*:

Theoreticians now ask if any valid distinction can be made between literary and non-literary language, between a poem, say, and a critical

essay or manifesto, considered as verbal artifacts. The question was prefigured in discussions of the Non-fiction Novel and New Journalism during the sixties. It returns now, with more theoretical rigor and acrimony, to vex criticism with the diabolical query: What is literature? Thus contemporary stylistics, speech-act theory, hermeneutics, and deconstruction often join to challenge the Kantian assumption about the intrinsically "aesthetic quality" of literature, its unique "fictive" properties, its status as an "elite object." Here, for instance, is E. D. Hirsch: "there is no sound reason for isolating literature and art in a mysterious ontic realm apart from other cultural realities."¹ And here Paul de Man: "literature constitutes no exception, that its language is in no sense privileged in terms of unity and truth over everyday forms of language."²

Different as these critics are in theoretical persuasion, they all question "literariness" — in effect, the boundaries between text and context, literature and the world. In doing so, they — and others — implicitly redefine the status of criticism as literary discourse.

2. *Literary History:*

The most comforting of our disciplines, the most staid, suddenly seems fraught with miseries. As Ralph Cohen says of the distinguished journal he edits: "Articles in . . . [*New Literary History*] raised objections to the received view that 'literary history' was a distinctive category. . . . The journal implied that the triadic distinction of literary theory, literary criticism, and literary history was no longer a rewarding way of understanding the different forms of writing. . . ."³ Others go farther still in challenging history, its periods and divisions, its narrative strategies and claims to objectivity. Thus, for instance, Hayden White proposes, in *Metahistory* (1972), that history is written according to "prefigurative" modes, four master tropes which he borrows from Kenneth Burke: metaphor, metonymy, synecdochy, and irony. These "emplot" historical narratives, organize both the writing and understanding of history, which is just as much a construct as any other verbal artifact.

¹ E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) 108.

² Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 12.

³ Ralph Cohen, "Preface: On a Decade of *New Literary History*," *New Literary History: 10th Year Index*, vols I-X, 1969-1979 (1982) 2.

Furthermore, in an age of instantaneous or synchronic history, where immanent media and anamnesiac data banks make the past almost toally present; in an age of accelerated change, where technology makes the future obsolete even before the present vanishes, in an age of historical anecdotes, cultural palimpsests, semiotic events, epistemic *bricolage*, and dematerialized objects — in this, our age, theorists wonder: How adequate still is the linear concept of time which underlies so much literary history? How accurate are our metaphors of "rise" and "fall," "renaissance" and "decadence," "birth" and "death," "period" and "transition," which pervade our literary histories, implying ideas of origin, center, presence, and supposing organic or genealogical development? How valid is historical explanation itself?

3. *Literary Studies*:

Germane to the question of literary history is that of literary studies, the nature and function of the curriculum. The discussion engages many topics; I can touch only on two.

The first relates to pedagogy. Should the teacher concern himself mainly with the explication of particular works, a concern we have assumed to be entirely self-evident since the New Criticism? The most explicit argument against this assumption comes from Jonathan Culler, in an essay entitled "Beyond Interpretation": "To engage in the study of literature is not to produce yet another interpretation of *King Lear* but to advance one's understanding of the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse."⁴

The other issue regards the literary canon itself, what it might legitimately include or exclude in a time of "delegitimation" (Lyotard). Since the sixties, I have already noted, the canon broke open to accommodate diverse new, or new-fangled, topics — so much so that an anti-theorist like Leslie Fiedler can toll the bell for *What was Literature?*, and, in the name of Harriet Beecher Stowe, call for a new, pop order of discourse. No wonder that many teacher find themselves confused. Is their task, "beyond interpretation," to teach *Beowulf* and *King Kong*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Tarzan of the Apes*, *The Waste Land* and *Folsom Prison Blues*, *Wild Strawberries* and *Deep Throat* — and to teach them by the same, or different methods?

⁴ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981) 5.

4. *Representation*:

What, critics ask, could representation mean in an irrealist, aniconic moment, one in which so many artists and thinkers have contested the Western tradition of mimesis, in which artifacts have become immaterial? What is re-presented, presented once again, made present in accordance with some other, prior, originary presence? And exactly how is the meaning of signification, power or desire, in language "produced"? Such queries probe the cunning rhetoricity of language, and inspire theories of allegory, symbolism, representation. Thus, for instance, Stephen J. Greenblatt remarks in his preface to the English Institute volume, *Allegory and Representation*: "Insofar as the project of mimesis is the direct representation of a stable, objective reality, allegory, in attempting and always failing to present Reality, inevitably reveals the impossibility of this project. This impossibility is precisely the foundation upon which all representation, indeed all discourse, is constructed."⁵

Some critics would regard this "impossibility of representation" as the limit that postmodern literature seeks to approach. Thus Lyotard speaks of the "Unpresentable" in postmodernism, an idea he audaciously relates to Kant's Sublime.⁶ Thus, too, Julia Kristeva speaks of the "Unrepresentable": "postmodern writing explores this almost imperceptible exchange between signs and death by its contents or rhetoric, by its fantasies or language-defying style. . . . What is unrepresentability? That which, through language, is part of no particular language: rhythm, music, instinctual balm. That which, through meaning, is intolerable, unthinkable: the horrible, the abject."⁷ Once again, we stand at the threshold of silence, outrage, rupture, eroticism, the "extraterritorial" (Steiner), grounds on which "the dismemberment of Orpheus" perpetually takes place.

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *Allegory and Representation* (Baltimore; The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) viif.

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" in *Innovation/Renovation*, eds. Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) 337. In 1985, Lyotard helped to organize a dazzling exhibition called "*Les Immatériaux*" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, an exhibit which explored the "sublime of technology," or what I have called, since 1972, "the new gnosticism."

⁷ Julia Kristeva, "Postmodernism?" in Harry R. Garvin, ed., *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1980) 141.

5. *Reading:*

Here we tread on still more perilous ground. For nothing enshafes the teacher of literature — and we are all pedagogues, if not pedants — more than theoretical encroachments on his or her authority, prejudice, art. Suddenly, reading has become the most "problematic," the least "innocent," of human activities. No hermeneutic — not the very concept of hermeneutics itself — is sufficient to the day. What is an author, a reader, a text, and what precisely happens when we attempt to read?

Positions on the determinacy of meaning range from monism (one criterion for interpretation) to qualified pluralism (several distinct and perhaps irreconcilable criteria) to radical relativism (also called nihilism by hostile critics).⁸ The old New Critics believed that a work, however complex, had an objective verbal structure; meaning could be ascertained by a "close reading." Unlike the New Critics, E. D. Hirsch postulates the "intention of the author," not the objective verbal structure, as the referent of meaning. Nonetheless, Hirsch shares with the New Critics a monist belief in the determinacy of meaning, in the possibility of a "correct interpretation": "Meaning is an object that exists *only* by virtue of a single, privileged, precritical approach," he affirms.⁹

That privilege begins to weaken as we move toward a qualified pluralism. In the existential hermeneutics of Heidegger and the historical hermeneutics of Gadamer, the reader, situated concretely in his "effective history," begins to play a more active role in constructing the meaning of the text. Similarly, in the criticism of consciousness of Poulet or the early J. Hillis Miller (before his self-deconstruction), the "objective structure" of the work begins to dissolve in a wider field: that of the author's and the reader's mind as they meet through language, in language. And in the phenomenological reading of Iser, the text becomes a structure full of "gaps," which every reader must fill; reading is thus an essentially indeterminate act.

That indeterminacy becomes even more acute, not to say paroxysmic, in post-structuralist criticism and reader-response theory. Arguing that the author has "died" as a legislator of meaning, Barthes shifted the

⁸ For excellent discussions of these terms, as well as other related problems, see Wayne Booth, *Critical Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) and Paul B. Armstrong, "The Conflict of Interpretation and the Limits of Pluralism," *PMLA* 98, no. 3 (May 1983).

⁹ *The Aims of Interpretation*, p. 44.

burden of interpretation to the reader, who must now "write," rather than simply "read," the text. With Derrida, texts become an endless play of "differences," of shifting meanings, "radically undecidable" as Paul de Man and the American deconstructionists would say. This undecidability of meaning in a text is a central assumption of the subjective criticism of David Bleich, the transactive criticism of Norman Holland, and the affective stylistics of Stanley Fish, all focused on the reader's response.

The foregoing issues are merely exemplary. One could easily adduce others: the problem of literary evaluation, the question of political ideologies, the enigma of the vanishing self, etc. But my intention was not to offer a map of postmodern criticism, only to render a sense of its destabilizing energies, its concerns, conflicts, and defiances. Predictably, these reflect the postmodern moment in Western societies, a moment characterized by delegitimation, fragmentation, dissemination, characterized also by its ironic "indetermanence" - that is, indeterminacy of knowledge, action, and authority within the immanence of languages, symbols, media.¹⁰

II

Contemporary theories, then, tend to destabilize our norms, values, procedures, destabilize theory and literature itself, contesting all boundaries, all genres. This last point adverts to the immediate concerns of this symposium, and so warrants retrospective clarity. In effect, I have taken this long route to argue that contemporary literary theories — most of them, at least — *undermine the very contexts of reading they provide*. Their theoretical "answers" fade like the fabled smile of the Cheshire Cat. Indeed, their contexts dissolve into the texts at hand, which themselves become both text and context, or perhaps neither, become rather an unmargined medium, a principle of verbal transgression or contamination, a "third term."

Derrida calls this "third term" a *parergon*, though by no means is he alone in positing that term. The *parergon* stands against, beside, above, beyond, the *ergon*, the work accomplished, and like the notions of trace,

¹⁰ See Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 89-124, and *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987) *passim*.

difference, supplement, remainder, margin, ornament, and "*hors d'oeuvre*," it tacitly denies such traditional oppositions as inside/outside, form/matter, unity/chaos, effect/cause, text/context.¹¹ Similarly, in "The Law of Genre," Derrida argues for an "impurity" or "principle of contamination" lodged "within the heart of the law itself," a kind of inherent "counter-law" that haunts every law with "disruptive anomalies," preventing identical repetition.¹² Extreme, *outré* as they may seem, such statements point to the inescapable enigma of contemporary theories that two young theoreticians, Jay and Miller, call "necessary but unrepresentable ghosts of authority — prerequisites to presence that are themselves incapable of appearing except within the shadow of their own effects."¹³

In recent years, some critics have endeavored to appease or exorcise these "ghosts of authority" by invoking History or Social Reality. They have been largely neo-Marxists, para-Marxists, crypto-Marxists, intent on constraining the free play of language, resisting the abysses of deconstruction, and resolving the *aporias* of textualism. I am sympathetic to their intent, though not to their methods, theories, or ideological clamor. For theirs is a Marxism so attenuated, so revisionist — a post-modern, non-totalizing, linguistic Marxism, divorced from any credible praxis in postindustrial societies — as to seem a self-indulgent exercise in "dialectical immaterialism."¹⁴ Even the best of them — Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Frank Lentricchia, Gayatri Spivak, among others — cannot wholly escape a certain aura of irrelevance, a forced agonism and moral pathos, in their work.

Marx himself, we recall, began by problematizing the relation of text to context, superstructure to base, though his analysis seems somewhat limited — see the articulations of Foucault or Baudrillard — in current mass-media or information societies. In any event, History is not univocal, an oracle with unambiguous voice. At best, History remains a trope for human reality, variously understood as "a narrative of revealed

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," *October* 9 (1979): 18, 20, 24-26.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "La Loi du genre/The Law of Genre," *Glyph* 7 (1980) 204.

¹³ Gregory S. Jay and David L. Miller, "The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature?" in *After Strange Texts: the Role of Theory in the Study of Literature*, eds. Gregory S. Jay and David L. Miller (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1985) 6.

¹⁴ See Frederick Crews, "Dialectical Immaterialism," *American Scholar* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 1985) 449-465

significance, a chronology of factual events, a code word for sociopolitical and economic forces, a seriality without paradigm, or [even] the domain of empiricity" unaffected by time.¹⁵ At any rate, since the work of Hayden White, if not of Giambattista Vico, we have known that history and representation, history and meaning, are indivisible. Thus history can not stand in any clear opposition to language or textuality, nor can it stabilize literary meanings except in pragmatic contexts, contexts, as the books of Michel Foucault and Edward Said show, that denude the underlying networks of power.

These perceptions inform two recent and promising trends of literary theory in the United States: I mean New Historicism and Neopragmatism. The former, as even J. Hillis Miller (the "boa deconstructor") admits, tries to adapt the best insights of linguistic philosophies to its social and historical concerns. Hence the title of its organ, edited by Stephen Greenblatt and Svetlana Alpers at Berkeley, *Representations*. Thus, for instance, in the first issue of the periodical, Stephen Greenblatt discusses Dürer's plans for several civic monuments, hoping to reveal thereby "the problematic relation in the Renaissance between genre and historical experience"; he concludes as follows:

If intention, genre and historical situation are all equally social and ideological, they by no means constitute a single socio-ideological "language." On the contrary, as Dürer's design suggests, they are, in effect, separate forces that may jostle, enter into alliance, or struggle fiercely with one another. What they cannot do . . . is to be neutral — "pure," free-floating signifiers — for they are already, by their very existence, specific points of view on the world.¹⁶

The New Historicism must finally rely on pragmatism, not on abstract theory or political dogmatism, to resolve its issues. This Neopragmatism is variously associated with Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, and Steven Knapp, who, of course, continually disagree. My own probative pragmatism derives more directly from William James, most particularly from his central insight that "the crudity of experience

¹⁵ Jay and Miller, pp. 17f.

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, "Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre, and the Representation of Rebellion," *Representations* 1, no. 1 (February 1983) 1, 13f. See also, in the same issue, Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, or The Viewing of *Las Meninas*," 31-41. See also the interesting debate in a later issue, "Art or Society: Must We Choose?" *Representations* 12 (Fall 1985) 1-43.

must remain an eternal element" of reality: "There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact."¹⁷ This makes, as he says, for a "noetic pluralism," which abjures both monism and relativism, and attends to particular contexts, goals, consequences, to what I call resilient concretions of reason and desire in their circumstance.

In avoiding the claims of the One (monism) as of the Many (relativism) — the first leads to totalitarianism, the second to terrorism, two faces of paranoia — James seeks always to link knowledge, action, and belief. Indeed, he honors the will to believe, which constitutes both knowledge and act. Pragmatism, he says, "will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences," and "will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact — if that would seem a likely place to find him."¹⁸ Clearly, then, James has no rancorous rage to deconstruct or demystify all beliefs — they are the texts and contexts of human life, coded, re-encoded in everything we do, we are.

A pluralistic universe, of reading or being, sustains a plurality of beliefs, beliefs answerable to their occasion and responsive to the discourse of mind. James can not provide a critique of beliefs, nor of their measure — too little, tending to nihilism; too much, tending to zealotry — beyond the pragmatic test of strenuous, negotiable demand, which Rorty calls, rather more blandly, "conversation."¹⁹ In the end, James can only appeal to genial possibilities of commitment and mediation, without sterility or coercion, appeal, in his multiverse, to a trust in the potencies of human trust. I personally can go no farther, do not know how.

III

Yet as a pragmatist — albeit an Emersonian pragmatist — I could not close on that evasive note; nor could I do so as a teacher engaged for nearly forty years in the teaching of literature. I want, rather, to end practically, recovering the theme of this symposium, in terms

¹⁷ William James, *The Will to Believe and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover Books, 1956) ix.

¹⁸ William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955) 61.

¹⁹ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) 170, 210, 370-73.

comprehensible to any practitioner — student, professor, writer — of literature.

I have argued, you will recall, that literary theories provide the contexts of our reading, but these contexts prove illusory, for they can neither found nor ground, only frame, our praxis. What, then, can I propose to any assembly of serious professors of literature? My proposals are modest, perhaps even obvious or jejune; and they require me to state candidly the assumptions on which they repose. Here are my assumptions.

First, I believe that theory is here to stay, though it may not, probably will not, stay in its current forms. On this, critical antagonists like J. Hillis Miller and Meyer H. Abrams will agree, though the latter also says: "For a while the diverse modes for disestablishing the intelligibility of literary language will flourish. But in the course of time, the way of reading that we have in common with our critical precursors will assimilate what the new ways have to offer. . . ."20

Second, I assume that no critical practice — historical, philological, exegetical (what used to be called in the good old days "close reading") — can be theory-free. Every practice implies premises, beliefs, *ratios*, frames; as scientists know, you can't even see a "fact" without some theory to make it visible. Such a theory, though, may blur or ignore the "facts" of another theory.

Third, I understand by theory an elaborate procedure to formalize our practice but also to problematize or contest it. In doing so, theory produces a set of analytical fictions (we call them concepts), a model of literature and society. The coherence of the model, however, does not guarantee its adequacy. Quite the opposite: the more coherent, the more closed the model may prove to the fluid stuff of reality.

Fourth and last, the resistance to theory will always persist in academe, not because we resist the rhetorical nature of language, resist "language itself" as the late Paul de Man says — that's too intellectualistic a formulation — but because any human community entertains different beliefs, traditions, aims, concerns.²¹

²⁰ M. H. Abrams, "Literary Criticism in America," in M. H. Abrams and James Ackerman, *Theories of Criticism: Essays in Literature and Art* (Washington, D. C.: Library of Congress, 1984).

²¹ Paul de Man, "The Resistance to Theory," *Yale French Studies; The Pedagogical Imperative*, No. 63 (1982) 13, 20.

With these assumptions behind me, I am prepared to make certain biased — yet utterly reasonable — suggestions.

1. If "theory" is the process of thinking about language, literature, and culture, the very form of our self-awareness, then it can not "apply" to one field (say modern literature) more than another (medieval literature). Leo Bersani has theorized on the Assyrian friezes of Ashurbanipal; Harold Bloom on the Kabala; Stanley Fish on Milton. Theory applies not to a literary period but to the field of literature itself; indeed, it applies to us as users of language, interpreters of texts — historical beings. Hence theory should not be segregated or quarantined in theory courses, though some courses will inevitably be more theoretical than others, and some courses will resort to one kind of theory, other courses resort to another. In short, theory should be "dispersed" through the department in a *pluralistic* way.

2. Having said this, I see no reason why theory courses couldn't be offered on the undergraduate level, certainly on the graduate level. Such courses would acquaint students with varieties of critical methods, old and new, varieties of contexts, premises, implications. Consider them as tools, "speculative instruments" (I.A. Richards), such as we used to provide, and rightly continue to provide, in our seminars on bibliography and literary research — tools and instruments, though, inseparable from their end. As Jay and Miller remark (p.5): "Theory after all is not a device, like a compass or divining rod, that can be cast aside when the treasure is found. Sometimes, as John Barth [says], the key to the treasure is the treasure."

3. This brings me to my third recommendation. I would suggest something like a monthly or bi-monthly departmental colloquium for faculty and possibly graduate students to sharpen the issues of theory and pedagogy in the *local context* — I say local context because such issues, like certain wines, travel badly. It is up to each department to shape itself, and this shaping is both an administrative *and* a theoretical decision. Gerald Graff recognizes this when he says that the "way we organize and departmentalize literature is not only a crucial theoretical choice but one that largely determines our professional activity and the way students and the laity see it or fail to see it."²² Such a colloquium need not, indeed should not, produce a consensus on theory. It need only agree that

²² Gerald Graff, "Taking Cover in Coverage," *Profession* 86 (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1986) 42.

theoretical differences should become productive rather than destructive, productive in the classroom, productive in the faculty lounge. This assumes, however, a commitment to pluralism, an unstable concept that threatens continually to lapse into dogmatic monism or cynical relativism.

4. My fourth point is an example rather than a recommendation. What do I actually do in the classroom? This, of course, depends on the level and purpose of the class, and on my own intellectual concerns at the moment. In undergraduate courses, I sometimes begin by discussing several theories, several contexts, what they empower us to see and what they hinder; then proceed to read particular texts, say Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. At other times, I take up a particular theory as I take up a particular text, Feminism with *The Wife of Bath*, say, Freudianism with *The Man Who Died*. At other times still, I present no theory at all, but reach it inductively, asking students to become aware of the "theory," the assumptions, behind their particular interpretation of *Hamlet* or *Wuthering Heights*. In short, the pedagogics of theory are various; where there is a will, there are *several* ways.

But now I must quickly conclude. Theory is not invariably benevolent. It can encourage cant, jargon, needless polemic, and obnebulating abstractions. Ironically, it can also repeat the very errors it has set out to rectify — as good theoreticians are first to admit. And it can displace the affective powers of literature, its originary pathos, its sublime, deadening the reader's pleasure with rancid or soporific prose.

In the end, though, the perils of theory can be averted with pragmatic tact. Theory, in any case, is ineluctable. It embodies our deep awareness of language and culture, of all our representations, of mind reading itself. It is also the record of our evasions, transgressions, beliefs. We owe it to our students as to ourselves, not only to contextualize or demystify our practice, but constantly to clarify our will to believe. For without that will, as William James knew, no one can read, no one can live.