Pathologies of epistemology in literary studies*

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Summary

Theoretical/methodological attitudes within the domain of literary studies might most successfully be analyzed and evaluated by examining the epistemological suppositions from which they derive. The present study proceeds (1) to examine some of the epistemological strategies which have commanded attention or displayed coercive force, and (2) to show how the historically inevitable paradigm shifts in literary studies are interpreted and presented by various theorists. The role of epistemology in literary and other disciplines is reviewed and the following theoretical approaches are discussed: New Criticism, deconstruction theories, reading theories, the empirical study of literature and Culler's 'poetics of reading'. The study is concluded with a brief discussion of the immediate future.

Opsomming

Teoretiese/metodologiese benaderings binne die domein van literatuurstudies sou die suksesvolste geanaliseer en geëvalueer kon word deur die epistemologiese veronderstellings waaruit sulke uitgangspunte afgelei is te ondersoek. Hierdie studie ondersoek (1) sommige van die epistemologiese strategieë wat die aandag opgeëis of wat afdwingbare krag getoon het; en (2) daar word aangetoon hoe die histories onvermydelike paradigmaverskuiwings binne die literatuurstudie deur verskeie teoretici geïnterpreteer en aangebied word. 'n Oorsig van die rol van die epistemologie in literêre en ander dissiplines word gegee, terwyl die volgende teoretiese benaderings ook bespreek word: New Criticism, dekonstruksie, resepsieteorieë, die empiriese benadering tot literatuur en die 'leespoëtika' van Culler. Die artikel word afgesluit met 'n kort bespiegeling oor die onmiddellike toekoms.

> I, in fact, standing up in front of you am performing a subversive act by
> reinforcing in your minds a piece of thinking which is really nonsense.
> We all do it all the time because it's built into the detail of our behaviour.
> Notice how I stand while you sit.
> (Bateson, 1972:486)

> Disciplined study of anything follows from epistemology rather than
> from theory. Epistemology at any period of history comprises certain
> customary axioms of thought which keep intellectual functioning
> stable. It is often not productive to question epistemology.
> (Bleich, 1980:366)

*My title is adapted from Gregory Bateson's 'Pathologies of Epistemology' (1972:478-487).

Introduction

People in a position of power seldom endorse the activity of looking for the rivets which hold an epistemology intact. They stand while others sit and most often, they want to keep it that way.

The creation of an epistemology, a grand affair, is characterized by two universal features, both of which are ultimately responsible for the destruction of the system. First, group confidence in the essentiality of the shared epistemological assumptions increases steadily, as these are thrust onto the outside world, branded onto everything within and beyond the group and make it knowable and known. The assumption is ritualized into fact:

> As a rule, interpreters know just how tentative interpretive knowledge
> is. But if the knowledge yielded by interpretation must be presented on a
> large scale, it becomes easily ritualized, and it appears to have far greater
> certainty than it does have.   (Bleich, 1980:351)

Secondly, the ability to respond anew to the new decreases, as the world is reduced to an epistemological paradigm:

> Whatever the number of types and gems we polish, we fail to bring them
> to transparency, and they fail to reflect faces other than our own.
> (Maranda, 1980:193)

The dominant myth controls and maintains language production. Maranda (1980:184ff) introduces the notion of the 'semantic charter' traceable to a culture's myth and responsible for disseminating its paradigms. For Maranda, 'the "myths", ideologies, or semantic charters of cultures or subcultures express themselves in their carriers whose thinking-processes, stereotypes, and attitudes they mold' (1980:184), and from this premise, Maranda proposes the idea of 'semantic jurisprudence', a social contract which rests on a body of subliminal laws (1980:185).

Maranda's terminological portrayal of how epistemologies operate, dominate and exclude, is new, though the idea has become widespread in numerous disciplines in the contemporary academy. The same thing can be said many ways. According to Bleich, 'pedagogical action creates the objectivity that scientists are not so sure of' (1980:364-5). In the domain of science, perhaps no-one has been more influential in the current undermining of the bases of epistemological paradigms than Thomas Kuhn (1970). And Imre Lakatos characterizes science as a body of unquestioned assumptions which is rendered '"irrefutable" by the methodological decision of the protagonists' (1970:91-195). Robert de Beaugrande sums up the recent objections to traditional paradigms of science as follows:

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> The naive objectivity advertised by traditional science – that scientists register, evaluate, and describe raw evidence without any additions, interpretations, or alterations – is now recognized as an elusive fiction. Objects and events are considered 'real' if humans obtain consistent and comparable processing outcomes from experiencing them. (1983:86)

Knowledge becomes a series of stubborn, then dead, mules:

> If the real items of our veridical experience are to be called 'facts', and called thus because they alone enjoy the status of preinterpreted data, the crucial term 'facts' so employed derives its sole meaning from a special *theory* of experience. Only by adopting the theory that imposes upon facts its exclusive interpretation of meaning can facts be said to be free from interpretation and in their preinterpreted status as stubborn as mules. (J. Loewenberg, 1950:173)

Nietzsche expresses the ideological nature of facticity with elegance and simplicity in 'On Truth and Lie in Their Ultramoral Sense': '... truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions' (1964:II, 180). And C. S. Peirce reaches a similar conclusion with as much clarity: 'The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is real' (1966:133). In a discussion of Quine's insistence that we should stop talking about meaning and speak instead of interpretation, Hilary Putnam offers good advice:

> I used to say – as a rueful joke – 'as I get smarter, Aristotle gets smarter' ... Once we give up the idea of the Platonic 'meaning' all interpreters are trying to snare and think of interpretation as human interaction – between two or more forms of life – then we will not be dismayed (or driven to an insane relativism) by the open-ended character of the activity. (1983:79)

But giving up this old idea is not easy. Epistemologies come and go, though not without a struggle. Cultures are subjected to a sort of pre-epistemological terror. Having your truths exposed as assertions, your dogmas expressed as prejudices and your facts shown to be fantasies is not pleasant. It is like discovering that your city, the home base of your culture, is really only a group of tents without guy ropes as the storm approaches.

2. Epistemology and literary studies

However, having bitten off the larger realm, that is, objectivist attitudes to epistemology, I do not want to chew it. My concern is the domain of epistemology within literary studies, and rather than strain my credibility with more generalizations and paradigms, I will introduce the issues directly.

A number of theorists have observed that literary studies, as a mode of inquiry,

is not exempt from the quicksand that underlies all objectivist epistemologies. Paul de Man acknowledges that a body of knowledge exists, but questions the essentiality, or truthfulness, of that knowledge:

> ... the ability of the mind to set up, by means of acts of judgment, formally coherent structures is never denied, but the ontological or epistemological authority of the resulting systems, like that of texts, escapes determination. (1975:550)

Hugo Verdaasdonk questions objective knowledge in literary studies in a no-nonsense manner:

> Research in the philosophy of science and in cognitive psychology has shown that perceptions are anything but 'direct' and infallible. In order to judge the claim that a particular textual property has 'really' been perceived in the course of the reading process, we at least must know the way in which a specific conceptual framework has been applied to a text. (1981:91)

Alarmed by the apparent lack of meta-critical awareness or explicit theoretical justification, Verdaasdonk pleads for an examination of the assumptions which govern literary studies:

> ... scholars in the field of poetics generally assume that the reading process leads to a set of assertions which may be rightfully regarded as *observation statements* about a text. Such 'observation statements' express what a community of literary researchers consider as 'given', as 'self-evident' in a text. Given the lack of criteria for applying conceptions of literature to texts, we cannot say that these 'observation statements' formulate insights upon which a community of researchers has reached a definite and precise agreement. (1981:98)

Fredric Jameson issues a similar call to arms against those who would hide their epistemological assumptions from the public eye, in the name of honesty and for the sake of the discipline:

> We will assume that a criticism which asks the question 'What does it mean?' constitutes something like an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically *rewritten* in terms of some fundamental master code or 'ultimately determining instance'. On this view, then, all 'interpretation' in the narrower sense demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code or 'transcendental signified': the discredit into which interpretation has fallen is thus at one with the disrepute visited on allegory itself. Yet to see interpretation in this way is to acquire the instruments by which we can force a given interpretive practice to stand and yield up its name, to blurt out its master code and thereby reveal its metaphysical and ideological underpinnings. (1981:58)

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My aim here is to show rather than tell: the identification of a serious coercive and authoritarian situation in literary studies is not restricted to a few hysterical chaps who spoil the game. Apart from Verdaasdonk and Jameson, there are many more who call for the admission that critical practice is based on methodological principles which are ideologically bound, community-specific and perhaps radically insufficient and inappropriate.

C. J. van Rees is determined that objectivist literary scholars should admit to the fragility of their assumptions, or simply to acknowledge that assumption is at the base of their enterprise:

> Literary theorists have continued to assume that a precondition for an 'objective' description of a text's essential properties is a theory functioning as an *organon*; such a theory, it is believed, provides the critic with the analytic tools indispensable to such a description, because it determines the nature of and the conditions for the various modes of 'literariness'. (1981:51)

His attack, like so many recent attacks on traditional epistemological assumptions, is directed at the institutionalization of opinions and ideologies, which soon crystallize into 'facts', becoming dogmatic and authoritarian. All epistemologies aim at protecting themselves in whatever they do: 'The use made in an institutionalized discourse of a conception of literature is aimed at *justifying this* conception' (Van Rees, 1981:62).

In an excellent survey of the attitudes prevalent in contemporary literary study, William Cain shows that correcting the present situation is not simply a *matter of conclusively showing what went wrong. The fear of chaos, disorder and a complete lack of rule-governed behaviour will render most strong people acutely anxious *and* authoritarian. And for many scholars, the current trend to reveal the instability of all literary-critical epistemologies will not enrich the discipline, but will spell ruin and the rule of the mob: '... either we consent to a governing authority, or else we surrender to subjectivity and the mob' (Cain, 1980:619). It is not only fear that prompts ostrich tactics when the issue of epistemology in literary studies is mentioned – the ruling orthodoxy is, like most of us, jealous of power, and is not likely to relinquish its hold on the institutions of literary studies just because they have wrongly identified assumptions with facts. Verdaasdonk studies taboo in the arena, in the following way:

> One should not overestimate the willingness of literary theorists to submit their statements to a thorough critique. Within literary theory, questions concerning the application of 'technical terms' and the nature of the verbal strategies employed in discourses about literature appear to be put under taboo. This is a means of immunizing literary criticism against critical examination. (1982:88)

Protecting one's interests and fearing invasion (or even worse, conquest) is,

however, not such a terrible crime. At least it is not a rare crime. Cultures do just this – cultures *are* just this. Systems of knowledge are afforded much protection because they legitimize the cultures who invent them. And the best means of protection is to convince everyone that these 'facts', 'insights' and 'advances' are indispensable:

> Social institutions dealing with literature divulge and legitimate concep-
> tions of literature. The latter are presented as bodies of knowledge which
> are indispensable to our insight into the nature and function of literary
> texts. (Verdaasdonk, 1982:89)

3. New Criticism

Having moved from a few general observations concerning 'knowledge' and its protection in and by specific cultures to a brief survey of some of the theorists and critics who wish to point out that 'epistemological frames' (after Minsky, 1975) and 'knowledge systems' (Kintsch, 1977), their socio-cultural origins and their laws, are as fully operative in literary studies as in the rest of the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences, it becomes necessary to examine twentieth-century literary-theoretical epistemological assumptions directly and historically. This will, I hope, answer the question, 'Why are so many scholars *so* alarmed that they feel it necessary to reiterate, again and again, the institutional nature and ideological origin of assumptions in literary studies?' The question may be phrased more simply, to read, 'What happened?'

Objectivist theories of ontology and epistemology go hand in hand. By predicating objecthood to the literary text, one has paved the way for 'getting to know' the designated object. Similarly, an objectivist epistemology assumes ready-made objects that are knowable. Heidegger's remarks on the onto-theological tradition in Western discourse must, as a result, also apply to the corresponding epistemo-theology. Reifying the object means reifying one's apprehension of 'its' essence, form, structure or whatever. In the first half of the twentieth century, Anglo-American literary studies, as a discipline, was conclusively overhauled – swept clean and reconstituted – by an energetic and persuasive formalism. It is not my concern here to trace the origin and growth of formalist literary studies, and more specifically, New Criticism. Moreover, it would be a daunting task to document every Anglo-American critical and metacritical study which is explicitly formalist in its aims and assumptions.[1]

The central epistemological premise common to all formalist studies is that of textual autonomy, whereby the literary text is independent of both its author and its readers. This in turn implies textual determinacy, or the conviction that a text has a centre and an edge, and which is recoverable, whole and unblemished, by the skilled reader. Bleich points out that this

> ... epistemology achieved success when the object of investigation was
> either known or assumed to belong to a class of like objects and when
> there was no perceivable influence of the observer on the observed.
> (1980:352)

And Susan Suleiman discusses perhaps the most influential ideological phrase in
Anglo-American literary studies this century, ' the text itself':

> Perhaps no single idea had as tenacious and influential a hold over the
> critical imagination in our century as that of textual unity or wholeness.
> Amidst the diversity of metaphors which critics have used to describe
> the literary text – as an organic whole, as a verbal icon, as a complex
> system of interlocking and hierarchically related 'strata' – the one
> constant has been a belief in the text's existence as an autonomous,
> identifiable, and unique entity: the *text itself* (1980:40).

Monroe Beardsley, as a committed formalist, states the corresponding
epistemological assumption unequivocally, when he says that the text is 'the
determiner of its meaning. It has a will, or at least a way, of its own' (1970:37).

C. Barry Chabot reveals that 'interpretation' was forced to accept a second
class status, and become an implicit expression of worship at the shrine of 'the
text itself':

> The autonomous work became the standard against which all interpre-
> tations were measured; it was the raw data, provided the facts of the
> case, the object that existed prior to and independent of any inter-
> pretation. (1980:642)

Earl Miner makes a valuable contribution to the analysis of New Critical
assumptions by suggesting that the conception of literature as an object is a
metaphor which managed, over the years, to conceal its metaphoricity and to
present itself as fact:

> If the literary object becomes a more or less literalized metaphor, it is
> naturally given the attributes of other objects, such properties as
> structure, form, pace or speed, weight, colouring, content, dimension,
> tension, and so on. A general tendency in criticism has been to concede
> the metaphorical status of such terms but often to use them as if they are
> literal. (1976:13)

If an 'objective' study of *literature* is to perform its task properly, then it follows
that the aim of its search is the 'literariness' inherent in the text. As a result, the
belief in *literariness* is as common to formalist studies as is the notion of the
literary object. For all formalists (and one must include the Russian Formalists,
and perhaps the Prague and French structuralists as well), literariness is to be
located within particular linguistic traits. In turn, this leads to numerous
attempts to define specifically *literary* language, at least as bold an undertaking
as the attempt to secure objecthood for the literary text. The power of New

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Critical polemics was such that even antagonists of New Criticism were unable to break free of the objectivist assumption. Edward Wasiolek, in his introduction to Serge Doubrovsky's *The New Criticism in France,* might well have been discussing the Anglo-American scene when he said:

> Supporters and antagonists of New Criticism never questioned that criticism was an act of approximating in language a work that had objective status, and that its intelligibility and worth were measured by that objectivity. (Doubrovsky, 1973:6)

I do not wish to labour the point – the (mostly covert) assumptions governing the New Critical enterprise have often, and bitterly, been exposed. What is important here is that the formalist epistemological gesture, or bid for power, has been very successful. By the 1950s, the New Criticism 'had become, in the English speaking world at any rate, an established orthodoxy. "New Criticism" was criticism itself' (Hawkes, 1977:152). Cain makes the same disquieting observation:

> It is not simply that the New Criticism has become institutionalized, but that it has gained acceptance as the institution itself. It has, in a word, been transformed into 'criticism', the essence of what we do as teachers and critics, the ground or given upon which everything else is based. (1982:1101)

This situation indicated an unqualified success for the proponents of the New Criticism, but the effect on literary studies was ultimately disastrous. Metacritical speculation shut down; theorists were replaced by technicians whose job it was to keep the machine running. The epistemological coup enabled critics to perform spectacular feats of textual biopsy, quite unconcerned by the tenuousness underpinning their studies. The New Critical machine seemed faultless for decades, superb in conception and operation. The exploratory nature of the early theoretical investigations into literary textuality was lost – even the evangelicism of early studies was lost, and was replaced by generations of complacent objectivist dismantlers and a discipline which had become a dogma, a method ignorant of any larger field of inquiry. Anglo-American literary studies was not without its dissenters, but they were pitifully few and completely powerless. As early as the 1950s, some scholars began to believe in their naive hope that this epistemological arrogance would pass quickly. Frank Lentricchia discusses this in relation to the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism:*

> The great hope for literary critics in 1957, when the hegemony of the New Criticism was breaking, was that the muse would be demystified and democratized and that younger critics would somehow link up poetry with the world again ... to the place where the forbidden

> subjects of history, intention, and cultural dynamics could be taken up
> once again. In some ways the *Anatomy of Criticism* would be the
> fulfillment of that hope; in other, more essential ways, it would frustrate
> the hope for demystification as it never has been frustrated before.
> (1980:7-8)

Dissenters have come and gone, and still New Criticism holds sway. New Critical technicians still abound, but they are generally so far removed from the speculative and theoretical foundations laid down by the pioneers that their only theoretical defence is 'common sense', a term which, in this instance, means only that New Criticism polemic has become so institutionalized and naturalized that, in spite of so many new voices and new epistemological utterances, it is still passed off as a fact.

In 1983, yet another scholar, S. J. Schmidt, proclaims that the reign of objectivist literary studies is coming to an end. Schmidt suggests that 'we should guess from the dawning of new approaches, which have not emerged as haphazard, that the period of text ontological literary criticism is dawning' (Schmidt, 1983b:80). Schmidt's suggestion appears to be very reasonable in the light of the various new epistemologies (a discussion of which will occupy the remainder of this essay), but Cain makes some sobering comments:

> ... we have been hearing reports of the death, decline, or harmlessness
> of the New Criticism for decades, and they have always been greatly
> exaggerated ... Its power is said to be negligible or non-existent, yet it
> still compels interest and renewed attention, and arguments for its
> overthrow or displacement continue to be made. Critiques of the New
> Criticism, even in its so-called decline or death, crop up frequently in
> books and journals. (1982:1100-1101)

Barry Chabot is no less pessimistic about the continued entrenchment of the New Criticism:

> The New Criticism established itself so firmly as the paradigm for
> critical discourse that we can lose sight not only of the public clamour
> with which it was originally greeted, but also of its network of generative
> assumptions, so controversial thirty years ago, which have now sunk to
> the level of truisms ... their conceptions of the offices of literature, of
> poetic language, and of scholarly activity are so much a part of the
> landscape that they can be mistaken for the landscape itself, as natural
> and inevitable aspects of critical discourse. (1980: 640-641)

It may appear that if I am not thoroughly biased in my reading of the New Criticism, I would at least welcome the breaking of its stranglehold on literary studies. One can be sufficiently dispassionate to be able to declare that *all* epistemologies have tenuous foundations, and that all are bids for power over the designation and aims of literary studies. In this sense, all is fair in epistemological warfare, but that fairness ceases (as it always does) when a victor emerges with a

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mandate to call the tune. It is when the victor resorts to tactics utterly without benefit to the discipline that one tends to take sides. New Criticism has, with increasing vigour, attempted to stifle or discredit all dissenting voices, which means stifling just about every discussion of the domain of literary studies (that is, meta-critical discussion), on the grounds that it is unnecessary. Unnecessary, surely, for the remorseless machine of the New Criticism, but not unnecessary, one would hope, for the arena in which scholars wish to discuss meaning generation, textuality, literary value and critical method. The claim that meta-critical discussion is unnecessary has spawned itself in some cunning variations. For example, there is the case of 'But does this theory enhance our close reading of individual texts?' If the answer is 'no', the New Criticism dismisses the theory. Cain expresses this New Critical posture so well one might almost believe he had lived the part:

> If a new theory cannot generate close readings, if it fails the test of practical criticism, if it seems unable to make us understand the classic texts in new ways and appears unlikely to work well in the classroom, then it is usually judged to be irrelevant. A new theory must have consequences for the analysis and explication of texts; it can only make modest claims for itself and should serve, above all, to direct us back to the text and thus enrich our 'close readings'. (1982:1102)

The argument can be reduced to the following: 'If a theory does not accord with New Critical assumptions, it is wrong'. It is at moments such as this that peaceful, well-meaning students of literature tend to become driven, obsessed with the demise of New Criticism, despite the fact that New Criticism was responsible for securing tenure for literary studies in the academy, and transformed a vague and sloppy Victorian habit into an accredited discipline to be reckoned with.

The time has not yet come for retrospective studies, because the era has not passed. It is unfortunate, however, that epistemological revolutions are vicious affairs, not friendly games in which compromise can be reached. When the objectivist epistemology is successfully challenged, it will no doubt be obliterated by the newer models, and when old ways cease, their positive contributions cease. For the remainder of this essay, I will examine the aims and assumptions of some of these newer challenges.

4. Revisions

There are many new epistemologies, and documenting them is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, at the risk of misrepresenting these movements and epistemological predilections, or failing to give them a sufficient or fair hearing, I intend to cluster them around two loci. A rival epistemology has two functions:

to show why the orthodox epistemology is inappropriate, restricting or no longer useful, and to present itself as an alternative. These functions are usually inseparable – one attitude gains credence by successfully battering another. This means that by discussing newer alternatives to the New Criticism, one is forced repeatedly to return to the New Criticism, to show who hits it, how well, and why. This multiple beating is not intended as a group bludgeoning, but as an attempt to show how, very often, newer epistemologies arose directly in response to the New Criticism, and in that sense they may constitute a reaction to New Criticism.

The two dominant foci which might be isolated, contest New Critical ways of authorizing 'knowledge' in very different ways. The first is an effort to displace the onto-theological status of language – a strenuous semioclasty whose aim is to dismantle the notion of autonomous and determinate textuality from within. The second is an attempt to attack the edges of the text, by showing that meaning is not a property of texts, but a process involving active readers. I will discuss these in turn.

5. Boa-deconstructors

During the late 1960s a stir was caused in Anglo-American philosophy, the social sciences and humanities, by a number of French thinkers whose group coherence was generally postulated on the grounds that they had enemies in common rather than a unified set of assumptions and procedures. In the scrabble to name the phenomenon, 'post-Structuralism' seemed apt because Structuralism seemed indispensable to the endeavour and was simultaneously chief whipping boy. Within the last five years the impetus has been renamed 'deconstruction', freeing it both from dependence on Structuralism and from the '-ism'. Clearly, Ferdinand de Saussure had been co-opted as a kind of fore-runner, because of his insistence on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, but deconstruction was not yet another intellectual paradigm for consumption by the Anglo-American academy. Instead, it revealed itself to be a negative response to the entire Western epistemological, ontological and linguistic traditions. As the critics of the endeavour repeatedly point out, deconstruction's

> ... main edge in the activity of criticism is transgression, which is a way
> of saying that deconstruction characteristically presumes and battens on
> prior constructions. It is a negative enterprise. The theory of the trace, a
> profoundly negativizing notion, more an idea of antimatter than matter,
> sins against common sense and patience. (Leitch, 1983:236)

In role-calls of who exactly is trying to spoil the game of writing in the West, Jacques Derrida always figures as the boa-deconstructor. Other Frenchmen who are usually mentioned include Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze,

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Roland Barthes, Sylviane Agacinski, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Felix Guattari, Jean-Luc Nancy and Michel Serres. The 'American Connection', or the figures on the 'American Exchange' include Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom, Joseph Riddell, William Spanos, Paul Bové, and a vast number of scholars centred on the journals *Diacritics, Boundary 2* and *Sub-Stance.* It is impossible to find principles in common among these thinkers – at best one can find common strategies, or similar cognitive styles.

Any examination of deconstruction must start with Derrida. I will not summarize his effort (because this has often been attempted although he cannot be accredited with a theory capable of precise description); rather I will ask him to speak, although I must be held responsible for choosing the utterances. In *Writing and Difference,* Derrida confronts the notion of 'interpretation':

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of
> sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or
> an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives
> the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer
> turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and
> humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who,
> throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other
> words, throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the
> reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. (1978:292)

Derrida locates in Western metaphysics a tendency to study being as absolute, to take for granted that all entities have a centre and an origin. He attempts to show that by undermining the notion of the word and its supposedly unequivocal relation to reality, one necessarily undermines Western discourse. Language cannot be seen as a subservient, secondary scheme for the useful arrangement of reality. Instead, the text should be seen as self-reflexive and self-contained, invoking only itself. Language is no longer a convenient window, opening onto a suitably arranged reality, or any reality at all, other than the 'truth' that these marks on paper actually *are.*

The term 'presence' may serve as a key to the strategy Derrida employs in his deconstruction of metaphysics and linguistics. Structuralism erroneously elevates the word as a source of recoverable meaning. This causes the 'inflation of the sign itself' (Derrida, 1976:6), or the elevation of the sign to a state of absolute presence. And this structuralist urge can be traced to a more basic urge, central to the entire Western tradition, to posit a central presence:

> The notion of the sign ... remains therefore, within the heritage of that
> logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism ... We already have a
> foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination
> of the meaning of being as *presence,* with all the subdeterminations

> which depend on this general form . . . (presence of the thing to the sight
> as *eidos,* presence as substance/essence/existence (*ousia*), temporal
> presence as a point (*stigmè*) of the now or of the moment (*nun*), the
> self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence
> of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional
> phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). Logocentrism would thus
> support the determination of the being of the entity as presence.
> (Derrida, 1976: 11-12)

Presence assumes that in the encounter between the text and the reader, meaning is fully intelligible without recourse to any other thing, text or idea, and without reference to any other signs than those presented. The metaphysics of presence assumes that the object examined contains, or consists of, a presumed unity, which implies either a centre, or an enclosed circumference. For Derrida, this is hopelessly incorrect. Meaning cannot be enclosed within the sign: there is a breach in every such enclosure, since the enclosed requires reference to that which is not enclosed, for definition. The 'centre' relies on the non-central. Enclosure and centrality, both of which entail 'presence' are falsely credited to objects, words, ideas or whole systems of philosophy. Derrida's aim is to expose this misconception on which the Western philosophical tradition is founded.

In the extreme, this metaphysics of 'present' meaning regards the word as an unfortunate but necessary transparency through which truth may be perceived. And implicit in this tradition is the notion that once the truth is perceived wholly, writing will cease to be functional. In opposition to this, Derrida suggests that writing perpetuates itself infinitely and denies that its goal is to reveal truth. The term 'book' is fallacious since it derives from the notions of 'presence', 'truth' and 'representation':

> The idea of the book is the idea of totality, finite or infinite, of the
> signifier; this totality of the signifier cannot be a totality, unless totality
> constituted by the signified pre-exists it, supervises its inscriptions and
> its signs, and is independent of it in its totality. (Derrida, 1976:17-18)

Books provide the illusion of the possibility of truth. Writing can only honestly be about writing: 'There is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida, 1976:158). Philosophy of language becomes a 'quaint little genre' (Rorty's term) which prevents one's understanding that it hooks onto truth no more profoundly than a nursery rhyme, since there is no pre-existent truth. Derrida tries to simplify issues by refusing to acknowledge the very 'problems' which have traditionally occupied philosophy. Texts are texts about texts, enclosed in a whole, constantly replacing and reiterating each other – they are each other, insofar as the meaning of each signifier does not entail a signified but is an infinite chain of other signifiers.

Vincent Leitch provides an accurate account of what Derrida offers contemporary discourse:

> As prophet, Derrida presents to us deconstructive man – who accepts in
> joy and affirmation the play of the world and the innocence of
> becoming, who affirms the world of signs and the activity of interpre-
> tation, who neither pesters the world for truth nor indulges the dream of
> origins, who traces around the centre the free play of signifiers and the
> tendential productions of structure, who writes off man and humanism,
> who denounces the old logocentric wizardry and passes joyously
> beyond. Cold and remorseless, deconstructive man assaults the old
> sensibility and subverts traditional foundations. (1983:38)

It is impossible to describe the elegance of Derrida's strategy or to document it
fully here. Rather, I will turn directly to the implications of the enterprise for
literary study. The concept of the father-author in command of his progeny
disappears. The author does not *create* meaning because meaning is never
present, and has to be sought, without success, beyond the text. As a result, the
idea of 'book' becomes hopelessly unstable, because no text is ever singular or
unified. Next, the idea of 'interpretation' must be discarded, because under
Derridean scrutiny the term erroneously assumes the explication of a concealed
but nonetheless present meaning. The two grouping concepts, 'genre' and
'literary history', cease to have any validity, because all texts are for Derrida a
single expression and not a controlled sequence (the literary historical premise),
or capable of being divided into a number of subsets distinguishable by type (the
generic premise). The absence of a father-author, a controlled polysemy, or a
means of suggesting that one text is separable from another, renders the text at
least fluid:

> There is no present text in general, and there is not even a past present
> text, a text which is past as having been present. The text is not thinkable
> in an originary or modified form of presence ... (Derrida, 1978:210)

The only manner in which literary study may have Derridean validity is via the
study of inter-textuality. The system of texts is self-referring in that the trace may
connect the entire 'structure'. Clear text/reader or text/text divisions become
nonsensical, since if 'we are to approach a text, it must have an edge', which is
impossible: according to Derridean principles, a text is 'no longer a finished
corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a
differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other
than itself, to other differential traces' (Derrida, 1979:83).

Apart from melting the barrier between texts, the barrier between kinds of
texts (literary, philosophical, psychological) similarly disintegrates under
Derridean scrutiny, if not as a result of infinite textuality, then as a result of the
reading process outlined by Derrida, which itself entails an *infinite pursuit* of the
trace. Derrida's *Glas* embodies this deconstruction of categories, for the book
evades definition. Hartman describes *Glas* in this way:

> It is not only hard to say whether *Glas* is 'criticism' or 'philosophy' or
> 'literature', it is hard to affirm that it is a book. *Glas* raises the spectre of
> texts so tangled, contaminated, displaced, deceptive that the idea of a
> single author fades ... (1976:268)

Glas is an illustration of the tenuousness of such bold assertions as 'author',
'centre', 'origin', 'determinacy' or 'book'.
  For Joseph Riddell, 'text' becomes a mirage:

> ... readings of the thematic or semantic richness of work only reveal
> that the depth of the text is a semantic mirage generated by the play of
> heterogeneous signifiers which refuse to be commanded by any single
> element within (meaning) or without (author) the text. (1979:248)

Roland Barthes, whose enormously diverse body of writing vexes classification,
clearly aligns himself with deconstructive activity, and articulates the endeavour
well:

> ... writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it,
> carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. In precisely this way
> literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to
> assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as
> text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an
> activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the
> end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law. (1977:104)

The motivation for deconstructing a text might require brief explanation at
this point. No longer is a 'critic' entitled to hide behind the terms 'interpretation'
or 'explication'. Prior to Derrida, the status of the critical (or supplementary)
text, and its relation to the 'literary' (or 'original') text, were by no means clear or
unequivocal issues. Derrida's deconstruction of the more fundamental issues
concerning discourse collapes the already fragile premises and procedures of
literary criticism. But 'deconstruction' will not simply replace 'criticism' as a way
of talking about works of literature: such a simple substitution would be a
mockery of Derrida's intention, which has far more serious implications than the
revitalisation of critical discourse. Besides, the deconstructionist's dark crusade
against prevailing methods has only just begun, and has not provided much
indication of what form the 'new government' will take. At present, the decon-
structionist is content to try to prove his opponent wrong, and to perform the
gymnastic event with expertise, though ultimately the value of the task resides in
the escape from the closure of the 'logos', in fact from the closure of all current
knowledge. The act is certainly dangerous in that 'things fall apart', though
beyond the closed structure of the transcendental signifier lies the larger field, or
freedom without end. The process of deconstruction can never be complete. And
the completeness of a single deconstructive act is absurd, since singularity of
meaning is absurd. Each reading is a rehearsal, pathetic in its limited scope, yet
bold in the face of failure.

It is difficult to convert Derridean theory into appropriate answers to specific pre-Derridean or what he would call logocentric literary-critical questions. Thus one cannot *show* how Derrida has contributed to the 'analysis' and 'interpretation' of 'works' of 'literature'. This already involves a total distortion of the Derridean project. 'Book', 'author', 'reader', 'commentary' and 'meaning' need to be undermined before any such activity can begin. Assuming this, one may further suggest that in the application of a 'theory' of 'literature' one distinguishes between 'literary' texts which *contain* (at some level of their construction or meaning) an analogous polemic or idea of literature, and those texts which may be said to be *amenable* to analysis, discussion or commentary in terms of the particular approach to texts. The former text reiterates, whereas the latter text is performed on. To insist on this distinction when applying a deconstructionist strategy to a text is to misrepresent Derrida, since all texts disrupt themselves and reiterate the principle of *difference*. The notion of intertextuality, of an abandonment of the centre and the edge of each apparently discrete unit, is one of the fundamental implications of denying 'presence'. Geoffrey Hartman outlines the situation clearly:

> Each text is shown to imbed other texts by a most cunning assimilation whose form is the subject both of psychoanalytic and of purely rhetorical criticism. Everything we thought of as spirit, or meaning separable from the letter of the text, remains within an 'intertextual sphere' ... (Bloom et al, 1979: viii)

Derrida 'explains' the reason why textuality must be conceived of as a field:

> What has happened, if it has happened is a sort of overrun (debordement) that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text', of what I still call a 'text' for strategic reasons, in part – a 'text' that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) – all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference – to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth). (Bloom et al, 1979: 83-84)

Vincent Leitch asks wryly: 'Who stole the referent? Derrida. And consequently the world becomes an infinite, borderless text' (1983:118). And a few pages later, Leitch addresses the problem of how one should regard 'the text':

> What are texts? Strings of differential traces. Sequences of floating signifiers. Sets of infiltrated signs dragging along ultimately indecipher-

> able intertextual elements. What about the truth of the text? The
> random flights of signifiers across the textual surface, the dissemina-
> tions of meaning, offer truth under one condition: that the chaotic
> processes of textuality be willfully regulated, controlled, or stopped.
> Truth comes forth in the reifications, the personal pleasures, of reading.
> Truth is not an entity or property of the text. No text utters its truth; the
> truth lies elsewhere – in a reading. Constitutionally, reading is mis-
> reading. Deconstruction works to deregulate controlled dissemination
> and celebrate misreading.

It should be clear from the above excerpts from Derrida's writing that the
domain of deconstruction is not simply what has been called literature – it
includes the whole of Western discourse, especially the authoritative episte-
mological and ontological 'texts'. In an interview in 1977, Derrida says:

> ... but deconstruction is not a critical operation, the critical is its object;
> deconstruction always bears, at one moment or another, on the
> confidence given the critical, critico-theoretical, that is to say, deciding
> authority, the ultimate possibility of the decidable; deconstruction is
> de-construction of critical dogmatics ... (1977:103. Translated by
> Vincent Leitch, 1983:205)

The American Connection seems to have undergone three distinct phases in its
reception of Derrida. First, there was an awe, a reverence without commitment
and, in the journals, a reporting without entering the Derridean field. Secondly,
there was a wholesale scramble to institutionalize Derrida, to make him fit into
the American academy. Needless to say, enthusiasm overruled prudence and
clear thinking. Derrida was often presented in an effectively castrated form,
sporting French dress and adding a new flavour to the old orthodoxy. This has,
in turn, prompted the remark that deconstruction in America is no more than a
fancy New Critical reading. William Cain does not mince words in his evaluation
of what has happened:

> The deconstructive critics are, I think, pretentious in many ways, but not
> for their philosophical grandeur as much as for their insistence that they
> are breaking free from the New Criticism and at last, moving beyond
> formalism. As Edward Said has noted, these 'new New Critics, like their
> predecessors, confine literature to language and the problems raised by
> language'. Deconstruction has not made a decisive change in our under-
> standing of our discipline, but has merely enabled critics to refine
> familiar techniques, generate more close readings, and indulge in
> controversy without consequences. (Cain, 1982: 1111)

But twenty years have elapsed since Derrida first shocked American audiences,
and a whole generation of boa-deconstructors has come of age, using Derrida to
transform the landscape of Anglo-American social sciences and the humanities.
It is true, Derrida has not colonized the whole of America – he has generated

fierce antagonism, especially in havens of New Criticism, because of the havoc he wreaks within the tidy, objectivist arena. However, deconstruction represents the most serious threat to orthodox epistemologies in literary studies, and whatever the outcome, it has become firmly entrenched in the American academy.

6. Reading theory

The second locus around which anti-objectivist literary theorists may be grouped derives its impetus (and often, its conclusions) from an examination of *how* readers read, which in turn has implications for the epistemological status of *what* they read. Clearly, many of them draw weapons from the Derridean armoury: the assault on logocentrism involves an assault on determinate textuality. But the primary focus among reading theorists is not Derridean. Rather, common to all of these studies is the attempt to show that the communication process is not simply a channel of information but the determinant of meaning. And all of these theorists face a common problem. Even a small breach in the ideology of the subject/object distinction is enough to herald a much larger breach. It is difficult, having challenged objectivism, not to go 'the whole way' and allow pure subjectivism, pure chaos. Historically, this is an unfortunate situation: scholars might well rankle at the restrictions imposed by the affective fallacy, which refuses to allow the reader even a teeny weeny bit of meaning determination. But by poking holes in the affective fallacy, one causes (or so it seems) an end to the whole endeavour of rule-governed behaviour. One often hears, from within the ranks of those who find strict objectivism just too much, a plaintive cry 'But I only poked a little hole in the text, officer' as hordes of objectivists wail that such breaches spell ruin for literary studies, the academy and the object of study. The result has been that those who have hung on to the implications of their dissent against the orthodoxy have had to do so with their teeth, and with their eyes shut.

Kuenzli expresses the problem well:

> Paying attention to the reader is therefore often regarded as a subversive activity which re-opens Pandora's box and undermines our hard-earned 'certainties' concerning literary texts. Indeed, a reader-oriented theory exposes our 'objective' analyses as sophisticated 'subjective' readings. (1980:47)

It was probably the fear of releasing the subjectivist horde that kept dissenters from exerting pressure until the 1960s. And still it was a case of 'You go first' because, after the major reception theorists which emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, hordes of liberated readers followed.

In an excellent comment on the 'revolt of the reader' in contemporary literary studies, Terry Eagleton's witticisms also contain accurate descriptions of the hordes of bold readers. He says:

> The growth of the Readers Liberation Movement (RLM) over the past few decades has struck a decisive blow for oppressed readers everywhere, brutally proletarianized as they have been by the authorial class. Readers are less and less seen as mere nonwriters, the subhuman 'other' or flawed derivative of the author: the lack of a pen is no longer a shameful mark of secondary status but a positively enabling space. (1982:449)

And, expanding the metaphor, Eagleton speaks of the

> ... reader as compliant serf, caught in the commanding play of a discourse which is at once intimately sustaining and always elsewhere, a mystified peasant enthralled to a reverent and interminable listening ... (1982:449)

The irony is that some theorists, the protectors of the reading-serf's rights, having begun the campaign against objectivist orthodoxies, became terrified of what they might achieve, and tried to scuttle, with dignity, back to the fold. Perhaps it is appropriate therefore, to discuss Wolfgang Iser first.

7. Iser and Jauss

The reception theories formulated by Iser, Jauss and a number of European scholars whose fundamental propositions seem to emanate from the University of Constance can be traced to the pioneering postulates of Roman Ingarden. Limited space prevents me from surveying all of the variations of 'Reception Theory' and 'Reception Aesthetics'. Instead, I will focus on the epistemological suppositions of Iser and Jauss, after a brief mention of Ingarden's legacy.

In *The Literary Work of Art* and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art,* Ingarden offers an epistemological model whereby the literary work is an intentional object – neither real nor ideal – and is therefore, dependent on acts of consciousness for meaning generation. Because of an intrinsic textual indeterminacy, the reader's task is to concretize the text, to perform acts of 'complementing determination' (1973b:53). At first glance, Ingarden's phenomenological premise seems far removed from objectivist assumptions, but intentionality might be more of a gesture than a rival epistemology. Ingarden fails to relinquish textual determinacy entirely: the structure of the work remains stable, and while the reader is free to create concretizations, the work itself (reminiscent of the New Criticism battlecry, 'the text itself') is invariable. Robert Holub makes an acute observation on how Ingarden retains determinacy:

> One has the impression here that faced with an empirically verifiable indeterminacy at the level of concretions and evaluations (*de gustibus non est disputandum*) Ingarden simply shifts determinacy from the level of concretions to the level of the schematized structure. (1984:28)

A determinate skeleton exists prior to the reader's concretizations – the flesh of the text is wrested from objectivist reification by Ingarden, but fundamental textuality retains autonomy. The result is a mixed epistemology which attempts to skirt the objectivist plea for total determinacy *and* the terrors of unlimited concretizations. Norbert Groeben makes a valuable observation in this regard:

> In terms of 'phenomenology', the literary text is claimed by hermeneutics to exist only in and by means of a receptive consciousness: a 'concretization' of the text in the sense of Ingarden (1973a, 1973b: cf Iser, 1980). However, this basic assumption is suspended again when Ingarden postulates the art work independently of consciousness in order to attain an 'ideal objectivity'. Methodologically, this ideal objectivity is attained by reducing and synthesizing possible 'concretizations' to a single ideal 'concretization': the text meaning thus obtained should be both objective and corresponding to the author's intention. (1980: 346)

These brief comments on Ingarden's two principal works are unfair in that they fail to do justice to an immensely sophisticated paradigm. For the purposes of this study, however, Ingarden's integration of two epistemological premises seems to result in an epistemological vacillation in Iser's theoretical statements, rather than a combination.

Iser encountered this slight shift away from objectivist epistemologies in two other philosophers whose work finds re-expression in Iser's metacritical statements, namely Heidegger and Gadamer. For both, reading is not a passive absorption or simply a recovery or codified meaning. In *Being and Time,* Heidegger is insistent that an 'Interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us' (1962: 198) and, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer suggests that 'prejudice' (an interplay of psychological and sociological forces) does not simply hinder a clear apprehension of a text's meaning, but conditions and makes possible an understanding of the text:

> What is necessary is a fundamental rehabilitation of the concept of prejudice and a recognition of the fact that there are legitimate prejudices, if we want to do justice to man's finite, historical mode of being. (1975: 246)

Briefly, these are the epistemological models Iser had at his disposal. What he does with them is complicated but perhaps not satisfactorily clear. In *The Implied Reader,* the

> ... term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process. (1974: xii)

John Paul Riquelme clearly spells out the implications of Iser's fundamental concept: 'The implied reader, then, is a term that names the act of reading itself, that is, a process at once both textual and affective, linguistic and mental' (1980: 78). As a description of the reading process this may be an illuminating explanation, but as an epistemological statement, Iser wants it both ways.

The 'implied reader' relies on the prior concept of indeterminacy (apparently derived directly from Ingarden), for the concept allows Iser to cause a breach in the edge of the text, a bleeding off that does not destroy the text in favour of its readers, but allows for a degree of contamination by the reader. In 'Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction', Iser proclaims that 'the repair of indeterminacy gives rise to the generation of meaning' (1971: 42).

Iser moves from Ingarden to Austin and Searle to find support for his mixed epistemology. In a passage that is typical of the shuttling back and forth between epistemological frames in Iser's texts, he writes:

> The language of literature resembles the mode of the illocutionary act, but has a different function. As we have seen, the success of a linguistic action depends on the resolution of inderterminacies by means of con- ventions, procedures, and guarantees of sincerity. These form the frame of reference within which the speech act can be resolved into a context of action ... Literary texts also require a resolution of indeterminacies, but, by definition, for fiction there can be no such given frames of reference. On the contrary, the reader must first discover for himself the code underlying the text, and this is tantamount to bringing out the meaning. (1978: 60)

Iser wants his readers to simultaneously 'resolve indeterminacies' and 'bring out the meaning of the text'.

Critical response to Iser has been mixed. Certainly, in Germany in the 1960s, he appeared to be effecting a revitalization of literary studies, but more and more theorists are dissatisfied with his ambiguous (if not altogether unclear) epistemology. There are even grumblings that by retaining a hefty chunk of objectivist epistemological strategy, Iser fails to move beyond formalist readings of texts. Holub concludes his study of Iser with disappointment:

> Iser's project, as far as it can be translated into analysis, remains largely within the bounds of textual criticism. (1984: 100)

Stanley Fish has engaged in a witty, but not very friendly, debate with Iser. In 'Why No One's Afraid of Wolfgang Iser' he challenges the determinacy/indeter- minacy distinction in a way which might undermine *all* compromise or double epistemologies. For Fish, one cannot speak of a prior textual determinacy as if it was capable of being apprehended by the reader prior to his/her reading:

> It is just that the distinction itself is an assumption which when it informs an act of literary description, will *produce* the phenomena it

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> purports to describe. That is to say, every component in such an account
> – the determinacies or textual segments, the indeterminacies or gaps,
> and the adventures of the reader's 'wandering viewpoint' – will be the
> products of an interpretive strategy that demands them, and therefore
> no one of those components can constitute the independent given which
> serves to ground the interpretive process. (1981: 7)

Further, according to Fish, Iser's entire 'descriptive' endeavour becomes normative, by imposing rather than clarifying. This may be so, but all epistemologies impose, or create ways of seeing, and even objections to over-confident epistemologies are themselves epistemological and constitute bids for power.

Ironically, at a time when Iser is experiencing a substantial number of negative critiques, he is simultaneously becoming common property in Anglo-American literary studies. His major works have all been translated into English, and he is frequently invited to contribute to the major American literary-theoretical journals. Theorists might be unimpressed, but teachers often find his models valuable as a stop-gap during the aftermath of objectivist orthodoxy.

Hans Robert Jauss has yet to be as thoroughly consumed by the Anglo-American critical community. And while he and Iser collectively represent the core of reception-theoretical activity at Constance, Jauss's perspective is in many ways quite different to Iser's. Jauss insists on the historical essence of the literary work. His concept of the 'horizon of expectations' is an attempt to describe the inevitable contamination of the text by a structure of norms, prejudice and beliefs which constitute the reading process. As a result, he moves towards a dual epistemology similar to Ingarden's. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception,* Jauss opts for an interaction theory of meaning determination:

> Literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a
> process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the
> producing subject, but also through the consuming subject – through
> the interaction of author and public. (1982: 15)

But Jauss too seems uncertain of where to lodge his epistemological support. He defends the reader's 'horizons of expectations' only to suggest that this is somehow controlled by 'signals' in the text:

> The psychic process in the reception of a text is, in the primary horizon
> of aesthetic experience, by no means only an arbitrary series of merely
> subjective impressions, but rather the carrying out of specific instructions
> in a process of directed perception, which can be comprehended
> according to its constitutive motivations and triggering signals, and
> which also can be described by a textual linguistics. (1982: 23)

In a comparison of the theories of Iser and Jauss, Holub articulates the desire, in both theorists, to create an aesthetics of *reception,* and the fear (that is apparent in both) of taking their endeavour too far:

> At some level, both Iser and Jauss, as well as other reception theorists,
> call upon a determinate text (or sub-text) to prevent what threatens to be
> a totally subjective and arbitrary reader response. (Holub, 1984: 150)

Iser and Jauss both want to get into the sea without getting their feet wet,
evidenced by their regular hasty retreats from what begins to look like a fully-
fledged theory which collapses the object/subject distinction in favour of the
receiver's codes and norms. Perhaps this theoretical coyness accounts for the fact
that reception theory in Germany has reached a stalemate of sorts. An
ambiguous theoretical model is incapable of providing avenues of research closer
to the ground, where people actually read. Rolf Kloepfer poses this question in
his survey of 'Reception in German Literary Theory':

> Why is it that more than ten years after the soundings of the clarion call
> for a new era of reception-oriented literary theory, no one has yet gotten
> around to the essential inquiry into the all-important laws of reception?
> (1982: 51)

8. Holland, Bleich and Fish

Because Fish seems to be the most outspoken opponent of the Constance
theorists, it may be most profitable, at this stage, to examine Fish and others in
the American pond of reading theory. Reception theory in America does not
present a unified front: the major theorists often seem more concerned with
demarcating their own space relative to the others than with confronting the
common enemy. As a result, the models prepared by Stanley Fish, Norman
Holland and David Bleich must be reviewed separately for, in spite of some
epistemological assumptions in common, all three insist on the differences which
separate them. I will discuss Holland first, because in many ways, he epitomizes
the common perception of 'subjectivism'.

First, Holland's attitude to New Critical models of textuality is unequivocal:

> Evidently the meaning of the term 'text' is so obvious there is scarcely a
> literary handbook that troubles to mention it. It is just what the writer
> wrote or, to take the word back to its etymological root, *texere* ('to
> weave'), what he wove, *as in a textile,* or what he made, as in words like
> *architect.* In this sense, the writer's emblem is the badger, Old High
> German *dahs,* an animal who builds; thus, the critic's symbol would be
> that animal specially bred for ferreting out badgers, the *dachsund,* like
> so many of my colleagues, long of nose and low of belly. (1975: 813)

This leaves Holland no room for diplomatic compromise, but he is not interested
in preserving the objectivist connection. In 'Unity Identity Text Self', Holland
suggests that *'interpretation is a function of identity,* specifically, identity

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conceived as variations upon an identity theme' (1975: 813). This brief statement might serve as a synopsis of his entire thesis. Implicit in Holland's model is the existence of a stable, definable, even knowable 'identity theme': 'we can arrive at someone's identity by interpreting their behaviour for an underlying thematic unity just as we would interpret a literary text for a certain theme' (1976: 337). All acts of reading, for Holland, serve not to understand the text, but to articulate 'unconscious fantasy':

> All stories – and all literature – have this basic way of meaning: they
> transform the unconscious fantasy discoverable through psychoanalysis
> into the conscious meanings discovered by conventional interpretation.
> (1968: 28)

For many scholars, Holland opens the door to allow idiosyncrasy to rule literary criticism. But implicit in Holland's notion of the 'identity theme' there may be a more serious problem. Holland is at pains to distance himself from objectivist epistemology and, having left the fold, he goes the whole way. Yet for all his grand rejections, he smuggles some wholly objectivist strategies in his luggage. Having boldly rejected the naive epistemology of the New Critics, he promptly reinstates it, not in the text, but in the reader. He regards behaviour as if it were a thing with a stable centre and an edge. Sheer determinacy is shifted from object to subject.

David Bleich criticizes Holland for his objectivist attitude:

> Hollands speaks as if defenses, expectations, fantasies, and transforma-
> tions are discrete items perceivable by anyone studying a response ...
> But projective tests depend heavily on the leanings of the interpreter; for
> as long as these tests have been used there is still no good reason to
> suppose that they yield objective knowledge about the subject. (1976:
> 462-463)

Moreover, if the 'identity theme' is recoverable only by way of its interpretation, how is Holland able to differentiate between text and reader? William Ray uncovers what he calls a tautology in Holland's strategy:

> ... personal text is matched against personal text: the identity theme
> derived from non-literary data is matched to that derived from literary
> responses. (1984: 63)

Perhaps the epistemological perspective used in this essay is unfair, because Holland's work simply cannot be reduced to unclear thinking. However, whatever the value of Holland's research, he has yet to meet the object/subject problem head-on.

Bleich is more theoretically sophisticated in his defence of reading theory. And he begins his 1980 essay, 'The Identity of Pedagogy and Research in the Study of Response to Literature', all too conscious of the fundamental epistemological issues at stake:

> The Study of Response to Literature has tried to use the epistemological standards and research procedures of the quantitative sciences. In this well-known method, a research site is established, the object of research is stripped of inessential features, the researcher stipulates and seeks to maintain independence of the object and its independence of him, and then draws conclusions that he believes others will have no trouble accepting. If accepted, the conclusions are considered objective *knowledge* and are discarded only when there is a more persuasive argument for another conclusion. (1980: 350)

Bleich wants to retain objectivism, but in meta-critical mode. His aim is to study all the phenomena which occur, and which have been postulated, within the act of meaning-constitution. He even insists that his whole endeavour must be regarded as an object of study:

> The specific new knowledge involved here pertains to individual intentions and community conventions that are taken for granted when readers conceive of literature as an objective entity. It is not as if traditional objectifications are false, but that they are objectifications which people created pursuant to subjective purposes. The activity of presenting judgments about reading experiences and about literature is itself brought into the area of investigation. (1980: 366)

In effect, he places all institutions, all knowledge, and all epistemologies within history, and suggests that knowledge is a matter of shared and immediate needs, not a *corpus* which essentially corresponds to 'objects out there'. In this way, all perception is interpretation and all knowledge is subject to the 'subjective paradigm'. In *Subjective Criticism,* Bleich states that 'for all practical purposes, reality is invented and not observed or discovered by human beings' (1978: 11). Bleich's reading theory confronts the large epistemological issues before they pounce on him, but then his arena is correspondingly large. In *Subjective Criticism,* he suggests that his problem is to show

> ... how a single differently conceived discipline could lead to changes in existing pedagogical institutions that will reflect the forms of thought more commensurate with today's most authoritative knowledge. Subjective criticism is my proposal of what that discipline is, how it may involve every interested individual, of any age, in the formulation of consequential knowledge. (1978: 297)

It follows that literary criticism is subject to the same phenomenon. For Bleich, interpretation reveals not the text, but the reader, for there is no way to move through the reader to the text:

> The logic of interpretation excludes consideration of whether and how the author is communicating anything to us and explains, instead, the motives and processes developed by the interpreter(s) on the interpretive occasion. (1978: 95-96)

Tompkins states the matter baldly:

> His theory of interpretation strips the text of its priority as an object of
> literary study by making interpretations a function of human motiva-
> tion. (1978: 1071)

And two pages further on, Tompkins claims that Bleich 'makes his epistemology
into an upside-down positivism, reifying consciousness rather than its object'
(1978: 1073). Perhaps Bleich cannot escape this charge. In *Readings and Feelings*
he insists on the idiosyncratic nature of each personality which, if true, would
militate against anyone perceiving that personality objectively in order to gain
objective knowledge:

> To say that perceptual processes are different in each person is to say
> that reading is a wholly subjective process and that the nature of what is
> perceived is determined by the rules of the personality of the perceiver.
> (1975: 3)

Despite the fact that Bleich is hard pressed to resolve this epistemological puzzle,
it might turn out to be more of a terminological contradiction than a conceptual
one. In his various models, he makes it clear that knowledge is always subject-
dependent. If this is the case, he can dispense with the subject/object distinction
entirely, and retain his idea of 'consequential knowledge' (1978; quoted above) in
its place.

If Holland and Bleich have been hauled over the mat often, they are relatively
unscatched in comparison with Stanley Fish. He portrays himself as a person
who is simply thinking aloud, trying to find a way of reading which does not
make him uneasy. But he is not, as a public figure, bashful and reserved: whoever
was responsible for casting the first stone, Fish has launched a handful, often
with deadly accuracy. Terry Eagleton takes aim at Fish in a delightfully funny,
but deadly serious, way. Discussing Fish's 'reader power theory', Eagleton
warns:

> The risk, in short, is of a partial regression to an artisanal or cottage
> industry mode of production, to which the textual manufacturers put
> out products or slabs of raw material so that readers may be kept
> harmlessly preoccupied with working them up into pleasing exotic
> shapes, transforming melted-down balloons into little rubber men.
> Within such creative enclaves, equivalent in some sense to workers'
> co-operatives within capitalism, readers may hallucinate that they are
> actually writers, reshaping Government handouts on the legitimacy of
> limited nuclear war into symbolist poems. (1982: 451-452)

What has Fish done to warrant this kind of comment? Fish wants to make texts
disappear, by claiming that readers and critics are unable to locate any
specifiable properties in texts. As far as Fish is concerned, 'literary quarrels' are

'not disagreements about response, but about a response to a response' (1970: 147). Like Bleich, Fish would have it that knowledge is impossible as a subject-free object. In a discussion of the individual perspective, Fish says:

> This infinite regress could be halted only if one could stand free of any ground whatsoever, if the mind could divest itself of all prejudices and pre-suppositions and start, in the cartesian manner, from scratch; but then of course you would have nothing to start *with* and anything with which you *did* start (even 'I think, therefore I am') would be a prejudice or a pre-supposition. (1980: 360)

For Fish, individuals can never be free of *a priori* assumptions, which in turn entails the impossibility of objective knowledge:

> Because we are never not in a situation, we are never not in the act of interpreting. Because we are never not in the act of interpreting, there is no possibility of reaching a level of meaning beyond or below interpretation. But in every situation some or other meaning will appear to us to be uninterpreted because it is isomorphic with the interpretive structure the situation (and therefore our perception) already has. (1980: 276-277)

Then Fish turns the notion of truth on its head, by suggesting that if 'truth' is always dependent on its context, then that 'truth' must be true in that context:

> The fact that a standard of truth is never available independently of a set of beliefs does not mean that we can never know for certain what is true but that we *always* know for certain what is true (because we are always in the grip of some belief or other). (1980: 365)

Common to many ideas of what a de-objectified world would look like is the notion that there would be no truth, all ideas would be equal, and chaos would reign. But Fish restores truth to a position of ultimate authority without giving it back its objecthood, by means of the concept of the 'interpretive community':

> ... if the self is conceived of not as an independent entity but as a social construct whose operations are delimited by the systems of intelligibility that inform it, then the meanings it confers on texts are not its own but have their source in the interpretive community (or communities) of which it is a function. (1980: 335)

Fish clarifies this crucial concept in this way:

> 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. (1980: 14)

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Fish performs some startling tricks on the words 'text' and 'fact' in the light of this discussion. In 'Working on the Chain Gang', Fish says:

> This interpretive action, or any other that could be imagined, would not be performed in violation of the facts of the text but would be an effort to establish those facts; and if in the course of that effort I were to dislodge another set of facts, they would be facts that had emerged within the assumption of another intention and would therefore be no less interpretive than the facts I was putting in their place. (1982: 211)

Fish does not claim to be upsetting the *status quo* - he simply objects to objectivism, suggesting that it is a naive oversimplification. And he is happy to see critical habits continue as they are, as long as critics and theorists relinquish the notion that they pursue and recover autonomous literary objects. Mary Louise Pratt remarks that what Fish's theory 'buys for us is... licence for academic critics to proceed exactly as they have been...' (1983: 228)

In summary, interpretations can never be intrinsically valid, but they can be valid within an interpretive community, that is, within a set of assumptions. They are, in fact, indistinguishable from these assumptions. An accepted interpretation is a valid interpretation, and acceptance entails ensuring that the interpretation and the assumptions of the interpretive community are congruent.

But not everyone is willing to allow Fish to play with reified objects in this 'flippant' manner, or to flirt with reification without getting into difficulty. Culler (1980: 48) shrewdly points out that Fish is really unable to do anything with his theory, and therefore magnanimously allows orthodox interpretive action to continue. And Ray questions Fish's protrayal of the individual as a powerless, Ledaean figure used by history:

> Postulating a reader incapable of seeing the ground of understanding and thus of losing his balance, Fish proposes a stasis of certainty that makes the individual an object of history rather than its agent. Always already assimilated by a further set of conventions we cannot know, we are swept forward in a regress that cannot be grasped as such, but only as a sequence of past moments - a conceptual structure that offers us no control over our destiny precisely because it derives by definition from a belief system beyond consciousness. (1984: 168-169)

Nevertheless, if Fish succeeds in squeezing from the orthodoxy the admission that the epistemological assumptions of the interpretive community are binding, he has achieved a significant goal. Besides, investigative study of how *specific* communities are constituted and how they operate, might have the effect of making critics aware of what they are doing when they interpret.

9. The empirical study of literature

Perhaps it is true to say that common to all epistemological models presented so

far in this essay is a hankering after objectivism, or a need to reconstitute *some* object of study in order to constitute a study at all. The problem arises when one wants to demolish objecthood in one quarter and to erect it in another - the anti-objectivist argument holds true for all epistemologies. Nevertheless, epistemological paradigms grow stale and authoritarian, and exploration can degenerate into dogma. For this reason, alternative models or new bids for epistemological power inject health and vitality into the academy. We turn now to a relatively new bid for power in the arena - the attempt to formulate an 'Empirical Study of Literature' (ESL) which rejects formalist 'empiricism'.

C.J. van Rees opposes the intrinsic and institutional epistemological models of literary study and points the way to ESL:

> Central to this inquiry is the following assumption: texts owe their 'literary' or 'aesthetic' - in short value-laden - character to the fact that specific social groups-and institutions subject them to a valorisation process; instrumental to this process are the conceptions of literature adopted by these groups and institutions. A conception of literature is a set of normative statements on the properties which texts ought to possess in order to be reckoned as literary and on the function to be assigned to literature. (1983: 286)

Having suggested that conceptions of literary study are norm-dependent and therefore predilections rather than investigations, van Rees reveals the impossibility of extricating critical statements from the ideological field from which they derive:

> Taking a conception of literature as a starting point for the analysis of literary texts demands that one adheres to the norms which constitute this conception of literature or to other norms one judges relevant to legitimate it. (1983: 298)

S.J. Schmidt calls this 'the (non-positivistic) empirical shift' (1983b: 72), in that ESL shifts the focus of its study from texts (predicated by the 'positivists' with intrinsic and recoverable literariness) to the social groups which confer meaning:

> This program suggests to cure the fixation on literary texts by an investigation into the whole complex social system in which literary items (in the broadest sense of the term) are produced, mediated, received, and post-processed, thus shifting the scholarly emphasis from isolated texts to text-action-pairs. (1983b: 71)

In his function as the editor of *Poetics: International Review for the Theory of Literature,* Schmidt articulates the central concern of many of the studies which appear in the journal, in the following way:

> As soon as the subject dependency (which is not to be confused with subjectivity!) of meanings and interpretations are acknowledged, the

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> academic as well as the social function of interpretation has to be
> redefined. Any such redefinition presupposes a clearcut definition of the
> crucial concepts in this field: i.e. a definition or explication of 'text',
> 'meaning', 'literature', 'reception', and 'understanding'. (1983b: 72)

For Schmidt, there is a way of avoiding both the overconfidence of objectivism and the horrors of subjectivism as epistemological models, by acknowledging the 'subject-dependecy' of all interpretive statements and beginning one's investigation at that point.

This model, concerned with establishing guidelines for investigating the *processing* of literature, can be traced to Ihwe (1972), Wienold (1972) and Groeben (1972), studies which attempt to deny essentiality in texts, within the fields of linguistics, semiotics and psychology respectively.

In the past decade, the model has been refined and the voices have become more confident, though consensus and mutual conviction does not constitute a detailed programme of study. K. Ludwig Pfeiffer makes the following statement in 1983:

> ... meanings can only be assigned, attributed to texts, construed by
> readers who have to conduct semantic operations on the basis of their
> own cognitive systems. (1983: 165)

Pfeiffer's socially constituted 'cognitive systems' are remarkably similar to Fish's 'interpretive communities'. Schmidt makes the congruency even more explicit when he says:

> In the course of history of socialization one model of reality (ortho-
> world-model), as a rule will be established through conventions so that
> this model will be consensually obligatory on the members of a social
> community. (1983a: 243)

And the problem which now faces ESL is precisely that which Fish has so far been unable to resolve, that is, having established that meaning derives from the 'world model' (the set of ontological and epistemological assumptions) of a social community, how does one go about studying 'world-models'? At least two obstacles have to be overcome:

1. the epistemological double-bind, mentioned earlier, whereby the ESL researcher is unable to proceed beyond his/her own 'world-model' in order to empirically study his own or any other 'world-model', and
2. the practical problem of isolating such a phenomenon: a 'world-model' is at best only a concept referring to the numerous dynamic forces which determine the individual's implicit epistemology. Moreover this practical problem has another dimension: what size social unit consitutes a social community?

Any culture is made up of numerous sub-cultures which in turn are made up of various groups. In one's search for a 'social community', if one is to avoid imprecise (or even inapplicable) generalizations, one might become prey to infinite regression, and end up studying the *individual*-as-social-community, at which stage the epistemological barrier mentioned above may frustrate the possibility of knowledge even at this level.

The question which then arises is, 'What happens now?' Perhaps it is too early to posit insurmountable problems for the ESL project. What its adherents propose is an entirely new approach to all knowledge, one which might take a century to develop. What is important at the present moment is that the ESL theorists are deadly serious, and are convinced of the usefulness of their proposal. Schmidt, for example, is unequivocal in his commitment:

> Texts are no longer regarded as autonomous entities, but always in relation to those actions which are necessarily performed by agents within the system of literature. As a result of this general orientation toward action, we obtain a model of literature as a social action system, which can be *structurally* defined through the causal and temporal relations between four primary action roles: the roles of producing, mediating, receiving and post-processing those actions, objects, or events which are *considered literary* by agents according to the norms of the poetics internalized by the agents. (Schmidt, 1983a: 239)

In the same study, Schmidt focuses attention on the objectivist practice of interpretation, and undermines its methodological assumptions in order to call for its demise. Contrary to Fish, Schmidt is not willing to allow interpretations to come off the production line in their thousands annually. First, he undermines objectivist interpretation in this way:

> Receiving or understanding consists in assigning a meaning (= communicate in my terminology) to a text according to conventionalized rules of assignment and according to expectations, conditions, and requirements of understanding. In the case of understanding a *literary* text these regulatory items cooperate producing both the meaning and the literariness of a text. (1983a: 255)

What we are faced with, then, is a social institution and not the literary object. Schmidt would like to call a halt to the headlong rush of interpreters and interpretations, in order to decide how best to go about studying what the phenomenon is. Instead of simply replacing the objectivist paradigm with another, one should study paradigms as the true source of meaning. In this sense, Schmidt agrees with Culler, for precisely the same reasons. Culler dismisses the big 'if' and finds it to be without foundation:

> If a work were an autonomous entity which contained its own meaning, then literary theory would consist only of ex post facto generalizations

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> about the properties of such entities. It would be very much an auxiliary
> activity, with no necessary place in the study of literature. (Culler, 1975:
> 251)

The point is that interpretation is a circular activity, which proceeds backwards, by re-validating the assumptions on which the activity is based. Louis Althusser expresses this circularity of 'theory' and 'practice', whereby interpretation is not able to move beyond the confines of the theory which validates the interpretive act:

> Left to itself, a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the
> 'theory' it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it: this
> 'theory' is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized,
> unknown, *in its means of realization, that is, it is a by-product of the*
> reflection of the technical practice's end on its means. A 'theory' which
> does not question the end whose by-product it is remains a prisoner of
> this end and of the 'realities' which have imposed it as an end. (1979: 171)

In a discussion of object-dependent critical models, Steinmetz suggest that this

> ... produces the impression that texts are, so to speak, waiting to be
> released by an adequate interpretation. Strictly, such a definition of
> interpretation reactualizes the old thesis that interpretation has to be the
> mouthpiece of the texts, that the limits of exegesis are indicated by the
> limits of the potential meanings of the texts, which, as it were, are
> deemed self-evident meanings. (1983: 154)

And this is no more than a 'vicious circle', namely, 'that the text to be interpreted constitutes the evaluative norm for the adequacy of the interpretive results' (1983: 154). What this line of argument does is to place the problem in the objectivist's laps. ESL is faced with enormous problems in attempting to formulate a programme for research, but by demonstrating that it is everyone's problem (and not just a barrier within ESL), they attempt to make everyone within the domain of literary studies share the responsibility for the problem. In short, in reply to the objectivist demand 'You locate a circularity in literary studies, now give us the answer', the adherent of ESL may say 'The problem belongs to us all'. This universalization of the problem is intended to show that it is not ESL-specific, and that its authority (pertinence, essentiality) is not ESL-dependent. Moreover, one could argue that the ESL argument itself is an expression of the social community from which it derives, and that if social imperatives cannot be denied or if shared epistemologies are insurmountable, then literary studies will *have to* take cognisance of the problem. And here an immense circularity becomes operative: if epistemologies are socially determined, what is the use of hammering the objectivist stance? It might be wiser to sit back, as Fish does, and let social dynamics take their course, but this is an absurdity for theorists with strong feelings. Perhaps it is appropriate, at this

point, to leave the discussion, with the observation that ESL aligns itself with the research undertaken into the institutional nature of art perception by Pierre Bourdieu, who has begun to tackle the immense circularity mentioned above, by asking the question as to who is entitled to impose the legitimate definition of art and literature? Bourdieu places the critic within the field of the cultural production of knowledge when he says:

> Every critic declares not only his judgement of the work but also his claim to the right to talk about it and judge it. In short he takes part in a struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art. (1983: 317)

Bourdieu's project is paralleled in many ways by Fredric Jameson's Marxist hermeneutics in *The Political Unconscious.* And Jameson does make provision for 'theorists with stong feelings'. Whereas Fish insists that the interpreter is *always* in an interpretive community, and reduces historical and social conflict to 'a discrete succession of self-contained, monadic movements' (Weber, 1983: 20), Jameson claims that a Marxian interpretive framework accounts for a theory of interpretive conflict.

Jameson, like Bourdieu, does not regard the institution of literary studies as a special case. Instead, he examines the entire panorama of society and history and arrives at a research programme which examines all interpretive acts as impositions rather than as objective investigations:

> *The Political Unconscious* accordingly turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes, as its organizational fiction, that we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or - if the text is brand-new - through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions... (Hence) our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. (1981: 9-10)

This essay is steadily leading away from the domain of literary studies to the complex ideological affairs within and between groups, which constitute epistemologies and which authorize knowledge. Before concluding the present study, I wish to discuss one more theorist, whose aims and assumptions are remarkably similar to those of the ESL theorists, but who derives from an entirely different 'reading community', Jonathan Culler.

10. Culler's 'poetics of reading'

In 1975 in *Structuralist Poetics,* Culler begins a line of inquiry which, in the

intervening years, he has developed into a 'poetics of reading'. Initially, Culler contends that 'reading poetry is a rule-governed process of producing meanings' (1975: 126), and that when the reader approaches the text(s) he is 'guided by a series of formal rules derived from one's experience of reading poetry, which both make possible invention and impose limits on it' (1975: 126). The competent reader's expectations 'impose severe limitations on the set of acceptable plausible readings' (1975: 127). Here Culler shifts some degree of determinacy from the object onto the subject, though his epistemological commitment is dual, ambiguous and perhaps unclear. In *The Pursuit of Signs* Culler conceives of semiotics as the description of 'the system of literary signification that is drawn upon by readers and critics in their encounters with literary works' (1981: viii), and while reading is still an 'encounter' for Culler (which implies a perception of an object), the 'system of literary signification' seems to be the chief determinant of literary meaning. Elsewhere in *The Pursuit of Signs,* Culler throws open the reading process to the wider cultural field: 'To read is always to read in relation to other texts, in relation to the codes that are the products of these texts and go to make up a culture' (1981: 12). And the reader 'becomes the name of the place where the various codes can be located: a virtual site' (1981: 38). For Culler, interpretation and literary competence is an historical phenomenon, not an objective search for essences:

> The historical perspective enables one to recognize the transience of any interpretation, and to take as object of reflection the series of interpretive acts by which *traditions* are constituted and meaning produced. (1981: 13)

The act of reading becomes convention-dominated:

> The subject who reads is constituted by a series of conventions, the grids of regularity and inter-subjectivity. The empirical 'I' is dispersed among these conventions which take over from him in the act of reading. (1976: 258)

Moreover, it is impossible to achieve a 'clean', direct, uncontaminated perception of the text - the critic is unable to empty the space between him/her and the text:

> Even if 'emptied' by a radical theory, the centre will inevitably fill itself in as the analyst makes choices and offers conclusions. (1976: 250-251)

The objectivist epistemology relies to some extent on the supposition that the subject is able to suspend his informing ideologies, in the reading process. This 'emptying' activity is, for Culler, an impossibility:

> To read a text as literature is not to make one's mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions;... the semiological approach suggest, rather, that the poem be thought of as an utterance that has

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> meaning only with respect to a system of conventions which the reader
> has assimilated. (1975: 113-114)

Culler, like the ESL theorists, realizes the implications of suggesting that interpretation is subject-dependent, and calls for a revision of the domain of literary studies. The discipline should cease to indulge in the circular epistemological act of 'interpreting texts' and should study rather the forces which determine reading:

> I am arguing that if the study of literature is a discipline, it must become
> a poetics: a study of the conditions of meaning and thus a study of
> meaning. (1980: 48)

This would involve an historical study of the countless interpretations which naively believe themselves to be outside of the historical process of meaning-generation:

> Moreover, to ensure awareness of the range of interpretive possibilities
> contained within the system of literary conventions, one need only
> consult the spectrum of interpretations that literary history records for
> almost every major work. These considered reactions of readers are
> more than adequate to ensure the breadth of an investigation into
> conditions of meaning. To inquire what conventions and interpretive
> moves must be postulated to connect text to interpretation is the best
> way to begin a study of reading. (1980: 57)

Pfeiffer concurs with Culler, and states the idea simply:

> ...history writing and literary interpretation can only produce materials
> to be again interpreted, on more general levels and in a more or less
> speculative way, in terms of larger socio-cultural or evolutionary
> dimensions. (1983: 176)

Epistemologies become, in the extreme, 'mass delusions' and if that is the case, the delusions should be studied:

> Reading and interpretation may be carried out in solitude, but they are
> highly social activities, which cannot be separated from the
> interpersonal and institutional conventions that are explicitly
> manifested in literary journals, critical discussion, and literary
> education. Someone like Norman Holland might argue that these things
> are the result of a mass delusion, but communal delusion on this scale is
> a social fact in its own right, more interesting and significant than the
> supposed reality it is said to conceal. (Culler, 1980: 53)

Culler arrives at the point which all reading theorists must reach, whatever the route taken: the act of reading cannot free itself from subject-dependency, and in turn, the subject cannot free itself from his/her interpretive community, controlling ideology or epistemological frame. It is possible to absorb this

information and continue to interpret texts without calling them objects, but while this is permissable, it is also stubborn, in that an enormous area of research, previously often ignored or unacknowledged, presents itself: the study of literary meaning as a socially constituted act. For Culler, 'No other area of literary criticism offers such an interesting and valuable program' (1980: 66). If such a program of studying interpretations (and their origins, limits, and rules) were to come about, Anglo-American literary scholarship might witness its first major shift this century. Despite the numerous new voices, the practice of criticism remains unchallenged. Tompkins, for example, articulates the fear that many feel, when she says:

> What is most striking about reader-response criticism and its close relative, deconstructive criticism, is their failure to break out of the mold into which critical writing was cast by the formalist identification of criticism with explication. Interpretation reigns supreme both in teaching and in publication just as it did when New Criticism was in its heyday in the 1940s and 1950s. In the long perspective of critical history, virtually nothing has changed as a result of what seems, from close up, the cataclysmic shift in the locus of meaning from the text to the reader. (1980: 224-225)

11. Concluding remarks

My conclusion will be brief, because there does not seem to be anything to be conclusive about. Clearly, something is afoot in the domain of literary studies. There is, from a diversity of 'thinking communities', a critique of orthodox epistemological models (which far from achieving supra-historical justification and accumulating knowledge, really only constitute attempts at authorization or, as Freundlichs suggests, 'recommendations'):

> A better way of characterizing them (interpretations) would be to say that they are simply the result of complex cognitive processes, something a person *does* with an inscription, not statements *about* some real object called text. Their logical status is that of recommendations, that is, recommendations to others to do the same thing with the inscription. (1983: 274)

And for Bleich, what we confront when we investigate specific epistemologies is no more and no less than 'community interest':

> To propose knowledge is to take an initiative with one's own language and the language held in common with others. Especially with regard to language and literature, knowledge cannot be conceived as something heretofore kept secret by God or Nature, but rather as the formulation of a new perspective that can enhance community interests. (Bleich, 1980: 366)

Tompkins is optimistic about the shift from working strictly within

epistemological frames to a discussion of what those frames are and what they do:

> The net result of this epistemological revolution is to re-politicize literature and literary criticism. When discourse is responsible for reality and not merely a reflection of it, then whose discourse prevails makes all the difference. (1980: xxv)

At the very least, E.D. Hirsch can rest easy in the knowledge that no epistemological revolution can ever produce a 'cognitive atheism' (1976: 13), because epistemological frames can never be emptied.

Notes

1. For the purposes of directing my comments at real theorists rather than some mythical entity, I cite the following studies as either typical or very influential New Critical texts: Beardsley, M.K. (1970); Brooks, C. (1947, 1967, 1968); Brooks, C. and Warren, R.P. (1950); Crane, R.S. (1967); Ransom, J.C. (1940, 1941, 1947, 1948, 1968); Richards, I.A. (1924); Stallman, R.W. (1949); Tate, A. (1959); Wellek, R. and Warren, A. (1968).

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