

ary history. The question of literariness was a crucial issue in Formalism and among American New Critics of the 20s and 30s. It is now surfacing more broadly in many areas of scholarship, such as theory of literature, women's studies, Black studies, the American Renaissance, and the neglected literatures in unfamiliar languages. The issue confronts the individual scholar in his own particular professional activities and is of fundamental concern to future literary historians in their endeavors to maintain or revise the literary canon.

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On the Category of the Literary

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The subject that Professor Balakian has chosen for this panel — the specificity of the literary text — is one of the most problematic and elusive of all the problems posed by contemporary criticism. It is also one of the most crucial, because it calls into doubt the very existence of our profession as literary scholars. The critical revolution of the last forty years has raised many radical and threatening questions, but none more than this: what if anything characterizes those works that we have traditionally claimed for our particular disciplinary province? Is in fact this category worth preserving or is it really artificial and confining? Does it create a factitious canon that narrows needlessly our critical perspectives? These questions may be threatening but they are also central, and we can be grateful that they have been raised. Either the traditional category is meaningless or it has a meaning that can be circumscribed. One possible response in defense of the category would be that a literary text provides a certain kind of experience that is unique and recognizable. One might say of literature as Justice Stewart said of pornography: 'I know it when I see it.' But that remark failed to solve the legal problem, and it will fail doubtless to refute those who claim *not* to know a literary text when they see it. No short paper will solve the problem, but one can at least address what might be called the anti-literary heresy with the respect it deserves.

It is perhaps surprising that this heresy, if it remains one, and a companion heresy — what Edward Said has called 'the limitlessness of interpretation' — have not altogether transformed as yet our critical practice — including the practice of the heretics. We still get interpretations that claim authority; we still have a literary canon, somewhat stretched in certain areas, to be sure, and neglected in others, but not in any case collapsed. Witness the Program of the MLA. One term that has been used to recuperate something like the literary is the term 'production,' a word privileged by critics like Barthes and Kristeva, among others, who figured among the original heretics. For Barthes, the text is experienced only as an activity of producing meaning, in a dynamic collaboration between text and reader. For him, their dis-

tance is reduced or abolished by their participation in a single signifying process, a *pratique signifiante*. The availability of certain texts for this collaboration as against others is clearly an important criterion for Barthes and for others who follow him. Not all texts are equally available for that dynamic collaboration. The criterion does delimit a category and a canon, even if the canon is not perfectly identical to the traditional literary canon. But this new category is itself a little blurred. It is unclear whether there can be or should be any quality control in the ongoing production of meaning. In the quasi-Marxist critical Utopia, can the working class of readers be counted on always to turn out first-rate products? Can the manufacture of *scriptible* meanings, like the manufacture of artifacts, occasionally betray shoddy workmanship? Or is that consideration irrelevant and is all production, *any* production, in itself a good? Is there indeed any means of determining a shoddy interpretive act? Similar questions seem to me applicable to certain versions of reader response criticism.

The late Barthes, in one of his characteristic reversals, introduces the pleasure principle as a distinguishing criterion. Stanley Fish recently has been invoking the standard of professionalism. Michael Riffaterre, who in this respect is *not* a heretic, argues for a readerly consensus, thus perpetuating a view long held by René Wellek. The issue is important because in the absence of a criterion, without quality control over the process of interpretive production, the fabrication of meanings is fallably exposed to the vagaries of readerly caprice. Exposed to this caprice, the text threatens to become an ink blot, and all the interpretation can tell us is the personal or cultural obsessions that possess the reader's mind. The strong reader, if he or she is not a poet, may communicate simply the fixed idea of neurosis or of fashion. The mind or the school homogenizes all it touches, and the various textual raw materials emerge as identical misshapen objects from the critical assembly line. Thus we can ask of any theory of interpretation, whether or not it recognizes the category of the literary, what defense it offers against the ineffable ennui of hermeneutic narcissism. We can also ask whether the text itself contains any defense against this monotonous pathology. I want to argue that a certain kind of text does offer such a defense, and that when we find it, it makes sense to describe such a text as 'literary.'

To isolate that kind of text will require a shift of focus away from contemporary critical practice to the textual object itself. I will begin this description with my own reactionary heresy, with a consideration of the moment of the text's coming into being. This need not oblige us to consider authorial psychology or intention, but it will confront

us with the work's historicity. The work comes into being as a set of marks on a page, before the process of diffusion begins, before it is exposed to the pressures and perspectives of a series of audiences. It comes into being at a given historical moment or within historical termini that can be delimited. It makes use of conventions and codes that are time-specific and culture-specific, codes which are not purely arbitrary but which are grounded in instinctive habits of perceiving, relating, ordering, combining, and figuring, habits peculiar to the moment and the culture. Each culture has its own conscious or unconscious modes of organizing experience, and these modes determine among other things not only textual codes but even the structure of basic tropes. Racine's metaphor is not Stevens'. The text issues from what I have called a semiotic universe that is unique. If it is a major work, it challenges its semiotic universe with its own revisionary practice, but this revolt is itself conditioned by those extra-literary modes of perceiving and ordering that ground all texts. The revolt simply signals a shift, previously unobserved, in those subterranean modes. A minor work reveals its participation in a conventional coded practice; a major work reveals its struggle to alter this practice and it betrays the scars of that struggle, that trauma of birth. In either case the work is marked by its coming into being, and its marks for better or worse *date* it indelibly. But remarkably and paradoxically, the codes of the kind of text we are talking about contain a virtuality of significance that transcends the temporality of its origin and the mutability of its conventions. One can describe the text at its moment of origin as pure virtuality, pure potency, as yet unrealized. A set of signifiers has not yet been construed, has not yet been translated into signifieds, but it constitutes an immense reservoir of potential construals, despite those time-specific markings which fix its date and which the construal must properly take into account.

One can conceive of the text at its moment of origin, before its diffusion, before its exposure to interpretation, by means of a term drawn from the theology of Nicholas of Cusa. Nicholas was himself indebted to ancient neo-Platonism, but that history need not concern us. One can specify the power and destiny of the text by means of two antithetical terms, *complicatio* and *explicatio*. I trust that the use of these charged theological terms for a secular paradigm will not appear blasphemous. They have been rendered in English as 'enfolding' and 'unfolding.' In the thought of Nicholas, space is enfolding in the point, time in the now, the circle in its centre, number in unity, movement in rest, creation in the divine Creator. Enfolding, *complicatio*, is ontologically prior to the dilation of all these things into their proper extension and ful-

filament through the process of unfolding, *explicatio*. But enfolding is not superior; *explicatio* allows the divine to inform the fullness of creation with its dynamic presence. In the thought of Nicholas, both orderings are equally valid and simultaneously operative. If we can conceive of the text at its first coming into being as a reservoir of potentiality, as an explosive ingathered core of possible meaning, then Nicholas' word *complicatio* would seem an appropriate representation of its status. The text at this stage is a set of coded instigations or orientations or provocations to the mind, provocations that have not yet begun to operate. Let us provisionally call 'literary' any text that contains this dense explosive capacity to provoke interpretation, repeated, continuous, spontaneous interpretation, whether or not the interpretation is written down. The literary text would distinguish itself from other texts subject to interpretation, such as a legal text, because its signifiers possess this compacted power of exfoliation. The legal text has been crafted to simplify meaning and to reduce potential interpretation; most of the uncertainty in its application stems chiefly from the variety of those circumstances it is designed to restrict. The impulse to construe it stems not from the language itself but from a human situation. The impulse to construe a literary text stems from the text itself, and uncertainty in the construal stems from the inherent explosive polyvalency of its signs. At the text's inception, this explosiveness is still latent.

One objection that might be made to the idea of a moment of origin preceding the process of diffusion is that the text will always have been construed by its writer in the act of writing, so that there is no moment of pure enfolding. The beginning of diffusion, one might argue, coincides with textual coming into being. The writer receives his or her work as he or she makes it. To concede the validity of this objection would not, I think, greatly damage the argument, since the writer as reader is clearly a very special case. But I would prefer to respond by suggesting that the writer is the one person who can *not* interpret his or her work in the sense that, as I shall argue, this word properly receives. To interpret is to make an effort to close a gap, to cross a distance, to decipher otherness. For the writer in the act of writing, this gap does not yet exist. He or she stands on the far side of the alien text, unsurprised and unpuzzled. Only as time passes will the writer grow away from the text sufficiently to belong to its audience and join the rest of us.

Thus it is possible to conceive of an original text as pure *complicatio*, purely enfolded, a set of compressed signifiers not yet unpacked although marked and scarred by their entrance into history at a particular moment. It's possible to conceive of that, but it is not of course

the text we know; what we have to do with is a text always in the process of unfolding, yielding its compacted signifiers to the dilation of successive signifieds, a text moving through a history which is a series of construals. The text properly described as literary is a text that *compels* construal, that forces the reader willy-nilly to make something of it, to grope for signifieds, to puzzle out a provisional coherence. The reader must do that, must silently explicate, *as* reader. Out of all the written and printed matter in the world that makes no such demands on us, beginning with this morning's *Chicago Tribune*, the literary text obliges and seduces us to render it a meaning that is not transparent, that has to be looked for and found within its own language. Thus the ingathered, enfolded force of *complicatio* is balanced by the force to elicit an unfolding *explicatio*. The construals may be narcissistic; they may be appropriate and responsive, but insofar as we read at all, they are inescapable. The text remains at a distance from us, mysterious, dense, and secretive, but it gives us the eye. It invites us to violate its secrets, and it is vulnerable to our partial or parochial understandings. As it moves through history, away from its originating codes, away from those modes of ordering and relating and figuring that ground its codes, it is ever more vulnerable to hermeneutic vogue, to denystifying brilliance, to specialized understandings and prejudiced perspectives, to deconstructions and appropriations. The process of unfolding involves genuine response and perverse bias, triumphs of perception and fumbles of distortion, in any case a progressive exposure to alien penetration. What again singles out the *literary* text is its capacity of miraculous reintegration, reforming in its hermetic wholeness after each successive *mise en abyme* and each blind insight. No matter how we dissect or dismember it, the pieces fly back together again like the members of dead bodies when the last trump sounds. The literary text, one might say, is a text that can never be talked to death. Given enough time and will, we could talk this morning's *Chicago Tribune* to death. Some allegedly literary works have been discussed to the point of death, and when this happens they fall limply, silently out of the canon. But the texts that truly deserve our interest have an infinite power of resuscitation. They survive the analyses that reveal and disfigure them.

Thus one can think of the literary text as a tissue of dense, compacted signifiers instigating an ongoing *explicatio* into endlessly ramifying signifieds, signifieds which are discovered, uncovered, by the endless work of critical invention. French scholarship uses the word *rayonnement* to refer to the power of a text as it moves through time. It's an astronomical term, probably preferable to our astrological 'influence,'

since it suggests a wave of energy indefinitely prolonged. It's this power of explication, this compulsion to interpret projected by the work, that is reflected in the contemporary notion of 'production.' But the weakness of this notion is that it tends to ignore that central point of origin which determined the textual codes, those codes which are culture-specific and grounded in modes of experience which are also culture-specific. To ignore those determinative marks is to misconstrue the structure of the signifier. The reader who thinks the gap with the text can be completely closed is cut off from the semiotic world of the text he wants to collaborate with. Uninformed production is an invitation to hermeneutic narcissism. But even informed interpretation has to confront its distance from the object it seeks to understand. It has to recognize a space to be crossed, an essential otherness, an estrangement. If there were no distance and no radical unlikeliness, then in fact interpretation would be unnecessary. Appropriate interpretation works against a resistance; the recognition of this resistance is already a step away from narcissism. But the estrangement remains a fact. Thus one can speak of unfolding as alienation.

But this Derridean dissemination does not seem to me to be the final destiny of the literary text. As in the thought of Nicholas, the centripetal power of *complicatio* matches the centrifugal power of *explicatio*. That is to say, the power of the text to engender ramifying constrials is matched by an opposed power to draw us back into the original scarred density of its signifiers. The reader who is compelled to supply meanings, paraphrases, translations, comes to recognize the parochial partiality of these paraphrases. The reader responds to the threat of an endless dispersal of meaning by trying to work back to the original unexplicated object. Faced with a potential hermeneutic *spangmos*, the reader works to return to a lost semiotic universe whose codes have to be learned not only in the mind but under the skin. It is this affirmation of its original remoteness inscribed within the text that provides the strongest defense against narcissistic reading. The text draws us away from the partial insights we achieve back to the secretive, collected, time-specific signifier. By recognizing it as time-specific, we recognize, or *should* recognize, our own versions as time-specific. The impulse to appropriate, to make it new, is ultimately inhibited by the shock of difference. The text properly called literary asserts its own peculiar eccentricity, which is not ours. It asserts its own hard-core opacity, like a star so dense that it pulls back its own rays of light. The text asserts its own cultural, rhetorical, semiotic horizon which, *pace* Gadamer, is not finally blendable with ours. To recognize this specific horizon, the particularity of codes and rhetorical structures,

is not to restrict the potentiality of textual meaning but it is to exclude as inappropriate readings that neglect this particularity. My only quarrel with Edward Said is that his effort to restore the text to its social, political, economic world fails to include its rhetorical, semiotic, epistemological world.

Heretofore I have been speaking of texts that have reached us from a remote culture. But one might well ask what of those texts that derive from a recent past. Is it proper to speak of estrangement from Browning, Valéry, Gunter Grass? The first way to answer this would be to point out that a semiotic world is perpetually in flux. It changes invisibly, subtly, but profoundly, by increments that are impossible to measure. It would be risky to underestimate the tempo of change, especially in our century. The past drifts away from us more rapidly than we readily see. But even in the case of contemporary writing in our own language in our own country there is a distance of sensibility and experience. There is also a drive in modern literature toward defamiliarization, privacy of inflexion, personal mythology. In most instances the hermeneutic resistance does not have to be looked for.

The literary text then commands a double power. It compels us to unfold, to construe, to paraphrase, but it also pulls us, if we take heed, back against the current of dilation toward the enfolded origin that complicates our self-contented explanations. The pursuit backward is not self-contented; it involves the jolt of the unfamiliar. It imposes a kind of *askesis*, the discipline of the historical imagination. But it can also elicit finer versions of understanding. Harold Bloom, who claims the pragmatic right of the strong reader to interpret as he chooses, in fact betrays his theory and imposes on himself a disciplined attentiveness. We can be grateful that as reader Bloom is not capricious but gives us interpretations responsive to the particular density of the work. One might turn against him his favorite aphorism — 'nothing is got for nothing.' He can only achieve his insights by sacrificing the arrogance of the strong mis-reader.

I have been describing an expansive movement outward which is countered by a withdrawal backward and inward, both movements instigated by potencies within the text. The expansion privileges the extraction of signifieds; the withdrawal returns to the elusive, hieratic signifier. But just as the outward movement is checked, or ought to be checked, in the reader's experience, so finally the gravitation backward has to confront its limits. The historical imagination will fail fully to grasp the ingathered text in its original specificity, because the instinctive habits of ordering, perceiving, and figuring that ground the text are not our habits. If we have lost the sense of vertical correspon-

dence and hierarchy, then we will never assimilate comfortably and spontaneously medieval allegoresis. In Greek tragedy, we are cut off from the duality of the sacred, at once awesome and taboo, that baffles our rationalistic groping. We can't recapture a pristine, Edenic originality; we can't dismiss the gulf of history and sensibility. We have to face the particularity of our own historical moment, our own habits of ordering and perceiving which are not the text's. What Kernode calls the *spes hermeneutica* will always, as he says, be a little disappointed. We have to acknowledge the ultimate mystery of that alien sign, self-enclosed and enigmatic. Our impulse to move backward against the current will always fall tragically short of its goal. Just as the process of *explicatio* was checked by the text's power of withdrawal, the process of *complicatio* for us is checked by its power of enclosure.

Thus the reader has to settle for an incomplete circuit. The humbling realization of his or her estrangement intercepts the return to the origin. And this realization which comes to restore us to history will gradually initiate again an unfolding movement, a new *explicatio*, as we submit to history. The signifier-in-itself, hermetic and enclosed, will appear to be barren, and we will once again turn to unpacking, construal, paraphrase. We will come to value the signifieds we uncover, despite their partiality, and we will value them the more because they are refined by the discipline of the phase of enfolding. Then this unfolding process will run its course and once again reverse itself. Reading, we discover, involves a shuttle of understanding, a mental dialectic that no *Aufhebung*, no transumption, will resolve.

One can describe the literary text, I submit, as that kind of text which elicits this perpetual, exhilarating shuttle, this double movement of the mind latent in the text's own power. This is not the movement of the psychoanalytic process, where the analyst's mind reaches out for associative signifieds and then returns newly enlightened to the dream symbols that lose their opacity. The literary text alone has the secret of directing our reading without surrendering its core of opacity. It alone has the inexhaustible power to provoke or compel our double response, restless, acquisitive, continuous, absorbing, as it unfolds and enfolds in our understanding.

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Opening a Dialogue on Thomas Greene's Literariness

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At the beginning of his talk, Thomas Greene reminded us of the fact that the specificity of the literary text is one of the most complex and elusive of all the problems posed by contemporary and, if I may add, past criticism. The role of a discussant is to clarify further the position of the main speaker and also to question his ideas and to offer alternatives. From my limited perspective of the topic and in my role as understudy for a more expert expert, I am somewhat embarrassed by this task. As historians, critics and teachers of literature, why would we wish to quarrel with such a seductive conclusion as Greene's:

... the literary text ... [is] that kind of text which elicits [a] perpetual, exhilarating shuttle, this double movement of the mind latent in the text's own power. ... The literary text alone has the secret of directing our reading without surrendering its core of opacity. It alone has the inexhaustible power to provoke or compel our double response, restless, acquisitive, continuous, absorbing, as it unfolds and enfolds in our understanding.

There is room, nevertheless, for observations, questions and alternative approaches. His talk is presented as a contribution to an ongoing debate and not as a final conclusion; it merits serious consideration and the compliment of critical scrutiny. The first necessary observation concerns the typological class to which Greene's proposal belongs. While acknowledging other recent theoretical stances – for instance, the concept of the production of meaning which is the result of a dynamic collaboration between text and reader, the pleasure principle, professionalism and reader consensus – as well as relying implicitly on a canon of great works, Greene does not proceed historically, descriptively and inductively. His statements are, therefore, only denotative in their form; however, he formulates a new prescriptive and ultimately normative definition. It is normative, because whatever does not create the desired 'inexhaustible power' fails the test and may not logically belong to the canon of true literature.