

career, strenuously challenged and sought to eliminate, both because they are injurious to individual members of the profession and because they operate to the detriment of the discipline and profession as a whole. I do not, however, posit *equality* of authority and rewards (as opposed to *equity*—that is, fairness—of their distribution) as a desirable or, indeed, meaningful horizon for the reform of the profession's practices.

I certainly do recognize that criteria such as *intellectual originality, coherence, and fertility* are "relative" in the sense that they will be interpreted and applied differently at different times, and by different people, in a particular area of study. I also recognize that the judgments of some people in an area—for example, in literary studies—will tend to carry more weight than the judgments of others at any given time. None of this, however, had bearing on my specific point in the passage in question, which was that those criteria are more relevant in judging the products of academic research than such *other criteria* as degree of immediate interest to the general public or accessibility of idiom to nonacademic readers. (Had Cooper not chosen to ignore—and omit—the first part of the "statement" of mine he quotes, he would have seen that the supposedly self-incriminating "one" is specific and restricted ["To the extent that one understands 'the humanities' as an area of study . . . , one recognizes that . . . ," and so forth] and not, as he seems to want to believe, complacently—or otherwise—universalizing.)

Moreover, and more pertinently here (this is, perhaps, the heart of the matter), the general relativity of criterial judgments and the existence, in a specific field, of differences of evaluative authority do not in themselves make the structure of that field *elitist* in the sense of improperly hierarchical. The "serious issu[e] that our profession needs to face," I think, is not whether disparities of authority and rewards exist *at all* but the extent to which the disparities that do exist reflect relevant differences of professional ability, achievement, and contribution as determined by fair and accountable procedures. Rather than issue vague, scattershot, and ineffectual charges of "elitism," Cooper should, I think (given his grievances), join—or at least endorse the efforts of—those who are attempting, with some effectiveness, to ensure that the profession operates more equitably, responsively, and responsibly in those and other respects. As for our preserving knowledge and behaving humanely toward colleagues and other people, I agree strongly that these are desirable practices for those who pursue literary studies, as for those in any other field. But I do not believe that such practices are inconsistent with the goal, also desirable for any intellectual discipline, of (pace Cooper's peculiar sensitivities to the idea and the phrase) *developing knowledge*.

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Poetics against Itself

To the Editor:

I enjoyed reading Roger Seamon's judicious examination of hermeneutic and scientific approaches to the study of literature ("Poetics against Itself: On the Self-Destruction of Modern Scientific Criticism," 104 [1989]: 294–305). Seamon's prophecy of the demise of literary science, however, rests on a basic misperception of that discipline's epistemological presuppositions in their current form.

Seamon quotes Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* ("[w]e have no real standards to distinguish a verbal structure that is literary from one that is not") to bolster his conclusion that "[i]f there is no way to distinguish poetic utterances from any others, the entire project [of scientific criticism] collapses" (303). I maintain that, whether or not scientific critics themselves have always been conscious of the fact, "this basic theoretical flaw" is corrected by the concept of the text as methodological field (Barthes) and by reader-response theory.

Scientific criticism, no less than hermeneutic criticism, contains the means to distinguish literary and nonliterary utterances. The literary utterance will contain structures (themes, subtextual systems of signs and symbols, figures and tropes, etc.) of sufficient complexity to provoke the reader to identify and summarize them (in a real sense, to reproduce them) in the form of critical discourse; that is, to abstract them in order to formulate conceptual models of the text. The Jakobsonian concept of "literariness" (cited by Seamon as "that which makes a given work a work of literature") can thus be defined with greater specificity in the light of more recent findings concerning textuality and the reading process.

This redefinition exceeds mere tautology, for it is objectively demonstrable that verbal utterances whose textual structures are devoid of a certain degree of complexity are incapable of stimulating the reader to abstract meaning from them, to meditate on and contemplate them, in short, to *reread* them so as to "crack open the bone to suck the substantive marrow" (Rabelais's characterization of the search for his text's deeper meaning).

Furthermore, such response will occur independently of the utterance's canonical status. It is nonetheless interesting to note, amidst the contemporary debate of such matters, that precisely those works whose textual complexity enables them to withstand the greatest number of rereadings are the ones to survive the euphemistic "test of time" in order to wind up in somebody's canon.

Nor are either hermeneutic or scientific approaches *efficacious* if applied to nonliterary verbal utterances. In that circumstance, there will be no discursive result, either interpretative or analytic. The very fact that a verbal utterance responds to sustained hermeneutic or poetic inquiry is an assurance of at least minimal literariness.

The strength of scientific criticism as a historical proj-

ect is its ability to upgrade its theoretical framework. The theoretical assertions devised by, for example, the Russian formalists or the American New Critics are not to be inherited on faith; instead they must be tested against more recent developments. This is the essence of a self-correcting scientific theory of literature.

Scientific criticism has also learned, I believe, that it cannot eliminate textual significance from its data and findings. Recognition of this fact was certainly the blind spot of various earlier structural and linguistic approaches, whose epistemologies stopped short of revealing meaning. But contrary to what Seamon claims, textual significance as set forth in (for instance) a semiotic analysis is part of the research findings and not merely a fall into the “temptation” to interpret.

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To the Editor:

In the key statement of his essay “Poetics against Itself,” Roger Seamon says that “the shift from the literary system to the system of the work marks the point at which the scientific enterprise transforms itself into another source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science” (300). I would like to test this statement against a series of statements about recognized sciences:

1. When an astronomer looks at a particular quasar for the purpose of understanding the structure of that particular object, astronomy becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

2. When Watson and Crick looked at the particular DNA molecule for the purpose of deciphering the structure of that particular molecule, chemistry became a source of interpretation and thereby lost its identity as science.

3. When a geneticist looks at a particular gene sequence for the purpose of understanding how to alter it to produce artificial human insulin, genetics becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

4. When a medical doctor looks at an individual patient for the purpose of recommending interventions to cure that individual patient, medicine becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

5. When a geologist looks at an individual rock formation to recommend for or against mining or drilling operations, geology becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

6. When physicists looked at a specific ball of plutonium for the purpose of determining whether they could make it into a bomb that could kill 200,000 people, physics became a source of interpretation and thereby lost its identity as science.

These statements all seem false to me, and by analogy they seem to discredit Seamon’s thesis.

Suppose that we grant that the Oppenheimer team was

doing applied and not pure science—or even that the medical doctor and the oil-company geologist are not doing science at all? The existence of such practitioners—who use existing insights of a science without generating new basic insights—does not imply that the respective sciences as practiced by others, or by Oppenheimer before and after the bomb project, have ceased to exist, or even that they no longer exist *as science*. Further, we can distinguish in the abstract between scientifically founded practitioners and impostors who use the jargon of medicine or geology although ignorant of the respective scientific principles, even though it may be difficult in practice to identify such impostors.

A reason exists for a theorist to say, “I am not trying to interpret this object in isolation; rather, I am using this object in a project aimed at understanding the principles of the entire class to which the object belongs.” Seamon repeatedly quotes variations of this statement in his essay. The reason for such statements is not that theory must be kept perpetually separated from interpretation in order to be scientific. The reason is that some start must be made toward an understanding of underlying principles before that understanding can be made useful in interpretation.

The scandal is not that some interpretations have been based on theory; it is that for too long the assumptions on which interpretations have been based were unexamined or even unconscious.

RAYMOND J. WILSON III
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Reply:

Louis Morra thinks that we can tell a literary work from other sorts of discourse by certain features of the text. W. C. Williams, among many others, deliberately wrote poems which were (lineation aside) meant to be, and are, linguistically indistinguishable from prose. That convention became the mark of one sort of modernist poetry; indeed it is the poetic diction of our time. And are Wittgenstein and Hegel deficient in “textual complexity”? In *The Tangled Bank* Stanley Hyman found plenty of tropes in Darwin, Marx, Fraser, and Freud; and Hayden White did the same turn for historians in *Metahistory*. This procedure has become a major form of deconstruction. If it is claimed that what this shows is that all these works are “really” poems we would be stuck with the oddity that many canonical literary works are “really” less literary (less tropical) than allegedly nonliterary ones. Or we must conclude that all discourse is literary, which is fine—but we thereby end the effort to discover the underlying structure of poetry, since writing and poetry would be identical and poetics would collapse into pragmatics generally. The effort to distinguish the “literary work of art” from other forms of discourse *by linguistic features* simply won’t work, so I will stick with Frye and modern aestheticians, among whom there is a consensus on this matter. This does