

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

Limited Pluralism

To the Editor:

In his article "The Conflict of Interpretations and the Limits of Pluralism" (*PMLA* 98 [1983]: 341–52), Paul B. Armstrong proposes three tests for validity in interpretation: inclusiveness, intersubjectivity, and efficacy. These three tests, it may be noted, correspond roughly to the three dimensions of literary analysis developed in the medieval trivium: grammar—the relation of parts to whole, rhetoric—the relation of means to ends, and logic—the relation of cause to effect. (This theoretical view of the relations in the trivium, simplified here for brevity, has been proposed by Hugh Davidson in unpublished work on literary analysis in seventeenth-century France.) With regard to the test of inclusiveness, Armstrong argues for an essentially "grammatical" norm that relates parts and wholes: "If understanding is a matter of fitting parts into a whole, then that belief about their relations will be superior which can encompass the most elements in the configuration it projects" (346). Armstrong's second test—intersubjectivity, or "communal agreement"—involves persuading others to assent to an interpretation and hence "necessarily entails the use of rhetoric" (347). The third test, efficacy, requires "the evaluation of a hypothesis or a presupposition on pragmatic grounds"; it examines "consequences [of holding a position] that may rebound to cast doubt on what we believe" (347). Clearly, efficacy (effect or consequence) concerns relations of logic, of cause and effect.

The medieval perspective may illuminate limitations in Armstrong's tests. In particular, his first criterion, inclusiveness, offers an incomplete view of the relation between parts and wholes. Insofar as "wholeness" is distinct from an agglomeration of parts, inclusiveness is an insufficient concept by which to measure the relations between parts and wholes. Armstrong implies that inclusiveness is quantifiable (encompassing "*the most parts*"), but as he himself observes, a Stanley Fish can slip through the net of inclusiveness by insisting that anomalous parts can always be reconciled with one's sense of the whole. Such reconciliations, however, may weaken the overall quality of an interpretation. Interpretations (and texts) are integral and patterned constructs, not merely the additive sum of parts. A test for

a structured "grammar" of parts and wholes is consequently preferable to a test of simple inclusiveness.

Of Armstrong's three tests, only that of inclusiveness pertains directly to the relation between interpretation and text. The test of efficacy applies to the consequences of holding a particular "hypothesis or presupposition," consequences that may or may not relate to a specific text or a specific act of interpretation. Similarly, intersubjective questions of agreement and disagreement Armstrong explains as conflicts between the persuasive powers of critics, who may rely on "tactics to overpower or trick others into granting assent" rather than on the "correctness" of their specific interpretations (347). Tests of logic and rhetorical effectiveness, however, may also be applied to the relation between interpretations and texts. An interpretation may claim validity by identifying, without violating, or being irreconcilable with, the logical or analytical aspects of a text—its use of cause and effect—and by disclosing a text's rhetorical purpose—its focus and direction, the means by which the text attains its ends.

Armstrong does not believe that texts can provide a determinant of the correctness of interpretation. We do not need a text in order to exchange interpretations, he argues, we need only a few "points of comparison and contrast, of overlap and divergence." "A text is not an independent object that remains the same regardless of how it is construed. . . . it exists only in and through its 'concretizations'—so that it will cease to exist in any meaningful sense if it is no longer read" (345). But a text is not merely construed, it is also constructed, directly or indirectly, by a human author or authors. A text must be read in order to exist meaningfully, but it cannot exist if it remains unwritten (or otherwise unrepresented through the medium of language). We cannot separate a text from its origin and essence as a made thing, an artifact. And because texts (and interpretations) are human constructs, they are analyzable through mental processes characteristic of *Homo sapiens* (such as relating parts to wholes, causes to effects, and means to ends).

The fact that a text is constructed (by humans, through language) puts limits on its cognizability and hence on the validity of textual interpretation. Valid interpretations of texts cannot involve only our own hermeneutic construals of meaning; they must include some apprehension of the author's cognition, mediated

through the text. The obvious existence of some degree of consensus and understanding among interpreters (even those with widely divergent interpretations) is dismissed rather summarily by Armstrong, though he recognizes agreement as a worthy, if unattainable, goal. Nevertheless, the miracle of entering another's mind through a text cannot be taken for granted. Such agreement and understanding (between author and reader or among interpreters) may result from pure coincidence—bolts from the blue—but the frequency of such occurrences makes this possibility statistically unlikely. (If governed by coincidence, literary studies are not then the “rational enterprise” that Armstrong rightfully suggests they are.) If not coincidental, then our understanding and agreement about texts must be restricted by whatever conditions are necessary for our performance of sharable interpretive acts, and such conditions must be found within a text or without (or both). The conditions outside the text—the raw stuff of life—are so various that they cannot constrain a high degree of rational agreement with regard to a particular text. Clearly, external conditions influence and restrict our interpretations, but they do not furnish the primary basis of understanding and agreement with regard to specific texts. Rather, the conditions that constrain understanding must derive primarily from the interpreted text itself. A text is not necessarily an “autonomous essence,” but as a constructed entity sharing one person's experience, it both appeals to and constrains other people's ability to construe it.

Armstrong's democratic insistence on limited pluralism in interpretation is commendable, but the limits to that pluralism, particularly the textual limits, must be more fully acknowledged.

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Reply:

Although Adele Davidson finds my theory of limited pluralism “commendable,” her position is fundamentally monistic. She suggests that the correctness of an interpretation should be measured against pre-given norms. In her view, reading is the duty to recognize what is in the text and to obey the instructions embedded there. The problem, however, is that an interpreter discovers the norms of a work only by helping to create them—by projecting hypotheses about how to make the text cohere that reflect deeper presuppositions about literature, human being, and the world. Interpreters will not find the same norms in a work if they have different definitions of art. A norm is a rule for how to order a text, and different conceptions of aesthetic structure imply different instructions for how to put the work together.

The tests for validity that I propose—the inclusiveness of a hypothesis, its efficacy in producing continued comprehension, and its ability to win the agreement of others—attempt not only to make room for the full diversity of beliefs that may guide understanding but also to suggest that their range is bounded. Not all assumptions about literature work equally well or are equally able to rally a community of believers to their side. All applications of a particular set of assumptions to a specific text are not equally successful in avoiding anomalies and proposing useful, convincing interpretive patterns. The tests of inclusiveness, efficacy, and intersubjectivity do not presume unchanging, pre-given norms in the work but do establish boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate readings.

Davidson's comparison of my tests to the medieval trivium is misleading in a way that reveals her monistic notion of textual identity. Although the intersubjective test requires interpreters to exercise persuasion, this use of argument is not the same as the disclosure of “a text's rhetorical purpose—its focus and direction, the means by which the text attains its ends.” A text's “ends” are not given in advance. Rather, interpreters will disagree about the purposes a work serves according to their different understandings of the functions of literature, and these differences will help to decide in turn what kinds of arguments they will find convincing. By the same token, my test of efficacy is not reducible to the process of identifying, “without violating, or being irreconcilable with, the logical or analytical aspects of a text.” A work's order and ideas are not simply “there,” awaiting discovery. Interpreters may operate effectively with radically different assumptions about the structure of works and the cognitive powers of literature. The test of efficacy refers not to pre-given textual features but to the ability of a method to meet a variety of interpretive challenges. Both my tests of intersubjectivity and that of efficacy can encompass a range of divergent, even irreconcilable assumptions about interpretation and literature, but Davidson wrongly rephrases them to assert that textual meaning is independent and invariable.

Her critique of my test of inclusiveness is similarly inaccurate and unacceptably monistic. She is mistaken to charge that in my view “inclusiveness is quantifiable.” On the contrary, as my essay makes clear early on, the inescapable circularity of understanding stipulates that interpretations must be (to borrow her words) “integral and patterned constructs, not merely the additive sum of parts.” Interpretation is a quest for coherence because our understanding of a text's elements depends on our sense of its overall configuration (and vice versa). The test of inclusiveness can permit a variety of irreconcilable readings, however, because competing conceptions of wholeness can suggest different standards of thoroughness and depth.