

Reconstructing the Old New Criticism

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This essay is an attempt to chart certain transformations in critical theory and practice that have occurred over the last forty years since the advent of the New Criticism, and in reaction to it, since it represents what has happened to me as a practicing critic during that period, and is in effect the story of my continuing reeducation. But except for a few stray comments it will not be autobiographical in tone or procedure. It will be partly an analysis of and partly a meditation on the changes and their implications for interpretive practice. I shall begin with a critical description of certain features of New Criticism with the aim of abstracting from that diffuse body of work a set of clearly defined principles, or postulates, and showing how they compose into a model whose presuppositions regulate a wide range of practices.

As the use of upper case suggests, the New Criticism has itself become mythologized and essentialized since its emergence during and after the Second World War. It has also been reduced to a better wrought form than in fact it had in order to be comfortably inured. Its *hic iacets* have not always (i. e. seldom) been eulogistic. This poses a certain embarrassment to the present writer, who finds himself still kicking about in the urn, still blowing on the ashes, still trying to emerge phoenixlike into the light of the New Day. I consider myself a Reconstructed Old New Critic, and I therefore feel compelled to defend my calling, though since I remain firmly tied to the illusion that "Reconstructed" is the most important term in the title, my defense is sure to add a few cracks to the already battered urn. There were of course more than one New Criticism in the period of emergence, some of them have not to my knowledge succeeded in expiring as perhaps they ought, and even the ashy mythical integer has been refracted into any number of competing posthumous representations. Yet although, as Frank Lentricchia has observed "*The*

New Criticism was --- no monolith but an inconsistent and sometimes confused movement" traversed by real differences, retrospective analysis has brought out certain common themes and impulses whose continuing influence suggests to Lentricchia that if New Criticism is officially dead "it is dead in the way that an imposing and repressive father-figure is dead."² Since my aim is partly to effect a restoration of the father, I do not have a heavy investment in Lentricchia's image.

I have no interest in sketching yet another official portrait or parody of New Criticism. Instead, I shall describe what New Criticism Means To Me. When I was reading *Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Drama*, *Practical Criticism*, *The World's Body*; and *The Well-Wrought Urn*, I had already been corrupted by *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, and *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. In the long retrospect of thirty-five years of practice I can see that it was my reading of Empson and Burke, most of all my frustration with their unsystematic and electric brilliance, that most deeply affected me.³

Even as I embraced New Criticism, there was much in it that I found oppressive. At one extreme, I resisted what I thought were overspecific articulations of the interpretive act into such distinct categories as those of tone, imagery, diction, etc., because, although they were presented as heuristic, they ended up in practice as reified parts of a dismembered body one was supposed to reassemble according to instructions. At the other extreme, I was troubled by (what was then) a vague but sharply felt sense that I was being preached to, was being told what to value and dismiss, and that this was in some way being smuggled in under the surface of an earnest, disinterested, benign, indeed often condescending, pedagogy: moral instruction embedded in sugar coated technical instruction.

That impression became less vague when I came to learn more about some of the political and cultural agendas behind apparently diverse examples of critical practice—"agendas" is probably the wrong word, suggests something more conspiratorial than I mean. Before the Mc Carthy era, when I think agendas did come into play, what existed was a moralism born of a diffuse cultural nostalgia that provided the bond of the so-called "fugitives," and penetrated New Critical practice in some odd thematic insistences, such as the interpretation of *King Lear* as a critique of rationalism. But the most salient manifestation of that nostalgia is of course to be found in the central article of

New Critical belief, the isolation, autonomy, self-sufficiency, unity, and completeness of the literary work as a "world."⁴ For this was clearly the product of an attempt to shelter a paradisaal activity of reading which could regreen a sense of value everywhere bleached out by the arid landscape of science and consumer capitalism.

I don't for a moment mean to imply that the garden wall circumscribed some oasis of pure poetry, some golden age of faith and community.⁵ The garden of literature was full of snakes, toads weeds, and rotten apples. The point is rather that the claims made for literature's inclusiveness and impurity, its tensions, paradoxes, complexities, and all that, tended to estheticize them by immuring them in a garden of *reading*. The moral and political implications of estheticism come out most clearly in moments when its latent didactic impulse is apologetically acknowledged, as it is by Wimsatt and Brooks in the epilogue to their *Literary Criticism : A Short History* :

Of course the reflective and responsible theorist will say that he doesn't call evil itself, or division, or conflict, desirable things. He is sure, however, that facing up to them, facing up to the human predicament, is a desirable and mature state of soul and the right model and source of a mature poetic art. But again, with a certain accent, that may sound somewhat like telling a boy at a baseball game that the *contest* is not really important but only his *noticing* that there *is* a contest.

That is the accent I remember, and its echo is not dimmed by a subsequent comment in which the interpretive elite reflectively and responsibly build the wall higher, and face up to the contest as if it were a game of croquet :

The great works and the fine works of literature seem to need evil—just as much as the cheap ones, the adventure or detective stories. Evil or the tension of strife with evil is welcomed and absorbed into the structure of the story, the rhythm of the song. The literary spirit flourishes in evil and couldn't get along without it.⁶

The canonizing gesture that makes inclusiveness a criterion of exclusion is inseparable from the properly "cognitive" function of criticism, as Wimsatt calls it, and over even the most innocent metapoetic descriptions it throws the shadow of an inward-turning self-manicuring concern :

Poetic symbols—largely through their iconicity various at levels—call attention to themselves as symbols and in themselves invite evaluation. What may seem stranger is that the verbal symbol in calling attention to itself must also call attention to the difference between itself and the reality which it resembles and symbolizes..... Iconicity enforces disparity. The symbol has more substance than a noniconic symbol and hence is more clearly realized as a thing separate from its referents and as one of the productions of our own spirit. Seeing a work of art, says Ortega y Gasset, is seeing the window pane with the garden pasted behind it, or the world inverted into the belvedere of our own concepts..... As a stone sculpture of a human head in a sense *means* a human head but in another sense *is* a carved mass of stone and a metaphor of a head (one would rather have one's head carved in stone than in cheese), so a poem in its various levels and relations of meaning has a kind of rounded being or substance and a metaphoric relation to reality.⁷

Wimsatt's critical dualism draws its energy from the heroic effort to harmonize yet sustain the disparity between the claims of two conflicting cognitive orientations, one hermeneutic and the other protreptic: one focused on the complexity and integrity of the work, its "truth of coherence," its "poetic value"; the other focused on its relation to "moral value"—on the need to "recognize the metaphoric capacities of language and the moral importance of valid linguistic expression without surrendering our conception of truth as a thing beyond language."⁸ His use of the metaphor of metaphor to characterize the tensional relation between poetry and reality which this dualistic perspective constitutes, testifies to a healthy distrust of any reconciling formula, an unwillingness to articulate the relation in more specific or analytic terms. As Christopher Ricks has remarked in a moving eulogy, Wimsatt's "particular forte" is "his ability to argue very strictly on behalf of 'loose' and limber concepts or principles," like the principle that the poem is metaphor.⁹

Yet the dangers of the position adhere to the images by which the argument of the above passage is given its iconic concreteness. For exactly what lies behind the garden pasted behind the window pane? I am perhaps unaccountably reminded of the precarious belvedere of Isabel Archer's mind in *Portrait of a Lady*, and of the green door in Albany beyond which she dares not look. And why the hilarious aside

about stone and cheese? Those symbols, however casually introduced, "invite evaluation"—between, say, "the great . . . and the fine works of literature" carved in stone to endure our contemplation and "the cheap ones" we consume. Isn't cheese one of the productions of our own spirit? Isn't the engendered body another? And would one rather have one's head carved (and why would one?) by itself, apart from the gendered cheese-eating body? The "rounded being" of that contemplative member transfers its metaphoric substance to the text it circumscribes, and vanishes into the objectivity, the paradisaical innocence, of *the work*. Thus the heroic pastoral of New Criticism consigns to extramural invisibility not only the intentions and affections of author and reader but also those that motivate the interpreter's cognitions.

Robert Scholes observes that for the New Critics "the ambiguity of the text is an objective correlative of a purely contemplative state in the reader, who recognizes that the text is not seeking to denote a reality but to connote an elegantly balanced esthetic structure."¹⁰ I think that, given its etymology, "contemplative": catches the implications of the attitude better than "congitive": *contemplatio* is what one does in a *templum*, a space marked off for augury or visionary survey or sanctuary; its Greek forebears are *temnein* (to cut) and *temenos*, not only a chief's stronghold but also "a piece of land cut off from common uses and dedicated to a god" (Liddell & Scott); in this case, the god Hermes.¹¹

The fact that our word *contempt* comes from the same root may suggest the slanderous turn this portrait of New Criticism seems to be taking. For if anything has come to appear obvious, it is that New Criticism democratized literary study, released it from a higher humanism which masters of taste and erudition sought to instill in select cadres of gentleman scholars and oligarchs. New Criticism enabled "even the meanest student who lacked the scholarly information of his betters" to make "valid comments on the language and structure of the text." This statement seems all the more credible in that it is a concession with which Jonathan Culler prefaces his argument that "what is good for literary education is not necessarily good for the study of literature in general," and that the task for literary study is to move beyond the interpretation of "one work after another" toward inquiry into literature as an institution.

It is of course in a different manner that New Critical contemplation cuts off its piece of land from common uses. "In the name of

improved interpretation," Scholes writes, "reading was turned into a mystery and the literature classroom into a chapel where the priestly instructor (who knew the authors, dates, titles, biographies, and general provenance of the texts) astounded the faithful with miracles of interpretation." Instructors who used that parenthetically immured knowledge "officially asserted that such material was irrelevant to the interpretive process," and this was not a question of "conscious fraud" but a consequence of the commitment to "the notion of the bounded, self-sufficient work" (Semiotics, P. 15).

Though their projects differ considerably, Scholes and Culler agree about the need to destroy the hegemony of an interpretive method that invests its power in an aristocracy of canonized works. Where Culler is against the continued focus on interpretation, Scholes is for it. He not only advocates but also demonstrates an interpretive method based on an eclectic semiotic approach the literariness of *texts* considered as acts of communication ("literary" in his lexicon means dominated by "duplicitous" communicative features)¹³ He bases his move beyond New Criticism on the distinction between *work* and *text* :

A text, as opposed to a work, is open, incomplete, insufficient. This is not a quality inherent in any particular piece of writing - - - but only a way of regarding such a piece of writing or any other combination of signs. The same set of words can be regarded as either a work or a text. As a text, however, a piece of writing must be understood as the product of a person or persons, at a given point in human history, in a given form of discourse, taking its meanings from the interpretive gestures of individual readers using the grammatical, semantic, and cultural codes available to them. (pp. 15-16)

From this standpoint, New Criticism is simply a set of closure techniques for blocking textuality and constructing works. These techniques were based on the selection of discriminative criteria (organic unity, tension, ambiguity, etc.) in which the descriptive and the evaluative were strategically confused. Therefore the criteria for producing *the work* were at the same time the criteria for producing *the canon* of works worthy of being Newly Criticized. New Criticism was seminary for oysters, not clams, and its divers not only extracted the pearls from textual shells but also assembled them in strings.¹⁴

Culler's countermove from work to text is similar to Scholes's in its objective, and responds to that double mode of production :

arguing that literary study should deemphasize the production of "interpretations of works," he urges teachers to "think of literature not as a hallowed sequence of works defined by literary history but as a species of writing, a mode of representation, that occupies a very problematic role in the cultures in which our students live." As Scholes proposes to extend the hegemony of literary study by pursuing literariness throughout the entire domain of sign production and communication, so Culler wants us to appreciate "the importance and pervasiveness of structures that we traditionally regard as 'literary,'" to explore "textuality" in non literary as well as literary discourse, and above all to explore the theoretical problems that beset any inquiry into "the relationship between the literary and the non literary" (*Pursuit of Signs*, pp. 213, 217, 221, 218).

The most problematic register in which this relationship is formulated, and one that impinges directly on New Critical practice, is the theme of *fiction*. Meditating on that theme in the middle 1950's Frank Kermode finds it "surprising, given the range and minuteness of modern literary theory, that nobody, so far as I know, has ever tried to relate the theory of literary fictions to the theory of fictions in general."¹⁵ He takes the influence of Vaihinger's philosophy of "As If" on Wallace Stevens as his starting point, and goes on to discuss fictional emplotment in history-writing, in the organization of time and space, in theology, and in modern physics. Culler, referring to Kermode's discussion a decade or more later, still finds that "we ought to understand much more than we do about the effects of *fictional* discourse.. What is the status and what is the role of fictions, or, to pose the same kind of problem in another way, what are the relations (the historical, the psychic, the social relationships) between the real and the fictive?" (*Pursuit of Signs*, p. 6). Our failure to understand these things is "in part due to the preeminent role recorded interpretation" which is "the legacy of the New Criticism" (pp. 6-7).

This kind of historical accounting, appropriate to Culler's polemical purpose, skims over the problem shrewdly if impressionistically formulated by Kermode. But the problem becomes discernible when we superimpose Culler's reference to relations between the fictive and the real on his reference to relations between the literary and the nonliterary. For the New Critical tendency to enclose fictiveness in works defined as literary diverted attention from the fictiveness of the nonliterary and the "real." It diverted attention from precisely the large questions explored

in Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*. For example, the estheticized morality of New Criticism, welcoming evil into the work and proclaiming that the literary spirit can't get along without it, shows poorly when confronted with such events as the Holocaust :

How, in such a situation, can our paradigms of concord, our beginnings and ends, our humanly ordered picture of the world satisfied us, make sense? - - - If *King Lear* is an image of the promised end, so is Buchenwald; and both stand under the accusation of being horrible, rootless fantasies, the one on more true or more false than the other, so that the best you can say is that *King Lear* does less harm.

Of course there are differences, since

anti-Semitism is a fiction of escape which tells you nothing about death but projects it onto others; whereas *King Lear* is a fiction that inescapably involves an encounter with oneself and the image of one's end. This is one difference; and there is another. We have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. In this sense anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth; and *Lear* is a fiction. (Kermode, pp. 38-39)

Kermode then itemizes the types of nonliterary fictions discussed by Vaihinger and concludes with "what Vaihinger calls, in words remembered by Stevens, 'the last and greatest fiction,' 'the fiction of an Absolute'" (p. 41). Such explorations of the contrast between literary and nonliterary fictions, and between fiction and "myth," cannot be undertaken from within the premises of New Criticism.

A practice that leaves the Real standing immaculate outside the domain of fiction, and that refers the adequacy of literary representations to some reified and dehistoricized standard of absolute good and evil, cannot avoid being ideological, cannot avoid falling into myth, whether it means to or not. The New Critical *templum* or garden of work is situated like the Terrestrial Paradise in a domain of higher fiction: below the higher actuality of the Real; above the Weberian iron cage of a lower actuality where the degraded fictions of "adventure or detective stories" flourish like parasites hosted by the internal triad of bureaucracy, technology, science.¹⁶ The fictiveness of this paradise, as "one of

the productions of our own spirit," guarantees the priority and independence of the Real. But if iconicity produces this reality effect by enforcing disparity, that disparity nevertheless obtains between an *icon* and a "reality which it resembles and symbolizes." Thus although it is not as pure as Marvell's dewdrop, although it does not exclude the world, the "little Globes Extent" contemplated by New Criticism shares, like its template, some of that "Figure's" coyness: "Dark beneath, but bright above : / Here disdainng, there in Love."

This, then, is the substance of a brief against the New Criticism. It is a brief in which I largely concur, and I have given what I take to be a fairly harsh formulation of the critique which may indeed seem both unjust and facile. But I do so partly because I want to justify the unraveling of the New Critical enterprise, and partly because I want to argue, finally, that two or three decades of unraveling have made possible a way of restoring the most significant features of that enterprise in a new form. For I am convinced that the sum of New critical parts is greater than the whole, and that the insights inscribed in those parts had to be extricated from the blindness of the whole if their power was to be realized. Looking back through those decades, the diversity of American New Criticism does seem to compose into a kind of organic unity that tenuously integrates several interpretive tendencies and delutes their force. Those tendencies subsequently fell, like the fountain that watered Milton's Eden, "united...../Down the steep glade" of Critical Archetypology and Contextualism. There, meeting more than one "nether Flood," they divided into several streams, ran "diverse, wand'ring many famous Realm/And Country whereof" eventually needs some account (*Paradise Lost*, IV. 230-35). These streams remain recognizably New Critical, and my aim will be to show what has happened to them, how some of them may be reconvened, and how that reconvening can open up a new perspective on the way Shakespeare's fictions by their very textuality, represent the problematic at the heart of all discourse which is the object of semiotic and deconstructive inquiry.

Since my account of New Criticism has so far been impressionistic, I shall now articulate the "parts" I mentioned above, prefacing this analysis with two cautionary remarks :

1) The scheme or model that follows is not put forth as an objective or comprehensive description and takes no account of differences among the

always fluctuating number of practitioners admitted into what Cleanth Brooks wryly calls "the guild."¹⁷ It describes no more than my own sense of New Criticism - - what I have both used and struggled against in my own practice - and since it is the product of retrospective reflection it probably represents my present interests more accurately than those I have in previous pages attributed to my New Critical salad days. 2) The model is retrospective in another way. It depicts New Criticism as being held together by a cluster of overlapping postulates. Several of them may seem redundant, and my reason for listing them separately is that they represent different facets or emphases that become more significant when the structure is decomposed. I have in effect constructed the model in terms of later critical developments.

There are six facets - or *postulates*, as I shall call them from now on - and I list them below in three pairs, each of which speaks to a recognizable set of interrelated concerns.

1) The *structural* postulate of organic unity that under-writes the integrity of the work and is challenged by theories of the text and intertextuality:

2) The *esthetic* postulate of self-sufficiency: construing the work as autonomous and autotelic made it the proper object of a "cognitive" and "disinterested" attention, protected it against the intentional and affective orientations of the older criticism, and subsequently, therefore, exposed the construal to the reconstructed forms of those orientations in semiotic theories of text production, reception theory, reader response theory, etc., all of which raised questions about any claims of disinterestedness.¹⁸

3) The *deistic* postulate of the dissociation of the text and its speaker or "point of view" from the author, which encourages the interpretive pursuit of "unbound" or "surplus" meaning (unbound by the author's intention and exceeding that of the speaker or narrator), and which has been not so much challenged as radicalized by expansion into theories of the text and of the subject.

4) The *rhetorical* postulate of the complexity, irony, ambiguity, etc. of the work, subsequently radicalized in the intensification of "duplicity" to undecidability, and in its extension to all discourse, understood as the discourse of one or several kinds of Other.

5) The *cosmological* postulate of the work as "in some sense" (the evasion is useful) a fully meaningful *world*, that is, as embodying a coherent

world view; this adds to the structural and esthetic postulates the implication that the work as microcosm makes some kind of "statement" about the macrocosm, and it is vulnerable to ideological analysis.

6) The *epistemic* postulate of the fictiveness or imaginariness of the work, which is, so to speak, wrapped around the other five postulates; fictive circumscription detaches the second world of the work, and while it elicits "disinterested" interpretation, it also presents itself as a representation, an image of the first world; as such, it offers a kind of play or staging ground for the *serio ludere* rewarded by fuller knowledge of "the human predicament" than is possible in the hustle of the iron cage; this postulate is also vulnerable to ideological analysis, to the charges that there are interests in interpretation and that the fictiveness of the actual world has been neutralised.

I visualize these postulates clustered together in the form of a cube which - like one of those puzzle toys - can be disassembled. The cube consists of three pieces. Its skeleton or armature is a central axis at the ends of which are affixed the faces of the deictic and rhetorical postulates. By itself this piece adumbrates the principles of any kind of "close reading," and New Criticism is not reducible to that. Hooking into the axis a second piece that consists of the adjacent structural and esthetic faces molded at right angles to each other produces a model of formalist interpretation, and New criticism is not reducible to that either.¹⁹ Attaching to this pair a balancing piece that contains the cosmological and epistemic faces completes the cube and *almost* completes the New Critical model. But not quite. For, as I noted above, in a competing visualization, the epistemic mode of fictiveness encloses figure. And I think of *that* figure as a sphere. These incompatible visualizations continually oscillate, and keep the cube from declining into literalness. For the cube or sphere, like a poem, is an icon, a metaphor, which is intended to call attention to the disparity between itself and any New Critical reality it resembles or symbolizes. The cube or sphere represents an analysis that simultaneously *includes* fictiveness as one of its analyzed constituents and *is enclosed* in fictiveness. The cube or sphere is my New Critical model of New Criticism.

The six postulates provide the means of production by which works are manufactured from textual raw material and placed on the interpretive market presided over by Hermes. I noted earlier that New Criticism (or at least the practice I was first familiar with) was held together by this model, but it is better to say that the postulates were held, indeed squeezed, together by the interpretive, academic, and cultural interests of the

practitioners who contributed to its assemblage and often collaborated in its maintenance. From the fact that different if related critical forces press on each postulate, I deduce that even where the postulates seem virtually identical, as 1 and 2 do, and perhaps also 5 and 6, they have divergent theoretical implications; redundancy, mutual reinforcement, may provide the attractive counterforce that binds them together so that their interdependence lends each postulate more theoretical power than it actually has, and thus defers the working of the centrifugal logic discernible in the developments that decomposed the model. There is, for example, a significant contradiction between the requirement of autotelic organicity (1 and 2) and the referential skew of 5 and 6. The first pair of postulates encodes strategies of decontextualization that distinguish "art" from "life," confine the interpretive gaze within the boundaries of the "work," and privilege the self-rewarding acts of attention performed in the presence of so complex a unity. The third pair encodes strategies of contextualization that distinguish but interrelate the work and the world, fiction and "reality," art and morality, the forms of representation and the meaning they induce on the "experience" they represent. These four postulates provide defensive reinforcement against the older criticism and lend moral weight to the new enterprise. The two pairs run in seemingly opposed directions, the first inward and the third outward. This tension is mitigated by foregrounding the operations specified in the second pair, since 3 and 4 are the active kernel of New Criticism and remain its most significant legacy. But the opposition they mediate, when viewed as a sequence, is familiar: the ancient pattern of withdrawal-and-return. The estheticism of the inward flight is justified by the claim that unlike the structures of science, prose, and daily life in capitalism, the structures of art and poetry are deliberately organized to offer the devout interpreter a "redeemed vision" of "experience" in the world dominated by science, prose, and capitalistic reason—a "truer," more adequate, perspicuous, etc., image of itself than the world (from which the work has been subtracted) would proffer of its own accord.

The cubic organization of the postulates thus has ideological implications which, as my language must suggest, I don't find very attractive, and which I shall discuss in a later chapter. And in spite of the surface inconsistency or tension between the tendencies of the first and third pairs, it has arguable theoretical coherence. Since I think this coherence constricts the range of interpretive possibilities latent in the individual postulates,

I welcome critiques of New Criticism even though I find many of them off target. It has been too easy for its critics to single out the ideological issues or harp on apparent logical inconsistencies and then to illustrate these flaws in the work of this or that practitioner. But critiques of this sort tend to be trivial because they do not take into account the structure of the cube and the work it does. For example, the kind of inconsistency Gerald Graff triumphantly exposes in *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma* is the mere symptom of the ideological pattern that gives the cubic structure its equilibrium. It is by no means peculiar to the practices of New Critics.

My hypothetical abstraction of the cube from New Criticism is in fact intended to exhibit an "objective" structure that has a specific historical provenance which New Critics have themselves obscured, and that gives the cube positive value as an instrument of historical analysis. It remains true, however, that the generative power of the postulates is inhibited both by their cubic association and by the ideological skew of the model. Post-New-Critical theory and practice have shown how to realize this power, and in the next section I shall explore two paths out of the cube that have been, or can be, taken. The first puts pressure on the postulates of organic unity and esthetic autonomy; the second entails a new approach to the deictic and rhetorical postulates.

ii.

Recent developments have led, on the one hand, to the broadening of the scope of textual hermeneutics well beyond the domain of traditional literary criticism, and, on the other hand, to more "politicized" variants of the practice once associated with the New Criticism. Of course, "recent" is misleading, since much of what I shall describe has been going on for a long time, much antedates the heyday of New Criticism, and in many cases the "developments" may have occurred with no awareness of or debt to New Criticism. When I speak of the disassembling of the cube and the subsequent career of its postulates, I am concocting a narrative which is fictional in all respects but one: it corresponds to my own experience and practice over the years, and perhaps to those of others in my generation. Many of us who were inducted into the community of the cube and have followed the different filaments of our practice along paths leading to foreign shores find them rewoven in the volatile and interpenetrating fields of inquiry that produce the texture of the so-called "human science." For me that meander has been almost as problematical as it has been revelatory, and my purpose in this study is to some extent reactionary: it is to

resist the drift away from the cube without sacrificing the increase of interpretive power released by the drift; to inscribe the traces of a reconstructed old New Criticism on the postulates in flight from the cube.

I begin with a summary of the logical trajectory imposed on this flight by my fictional narrative. Its precondition is the breaking down of the barriers erected around the work by the structural and esthetic postulates. This leads to the universalized application of the deictic postulate and problematizes the intentional framework in terms of which the rhetorical postulate guides interpretive practice. The breakdown of the distinction between work and nonwork puts the cosmological and epistemic postulates in question by threatening the distinctions between (1) the esthetic microcosm and the macrocosm it represents, and (2) fiction and non fiction. Interpretive processes and categories which the cube confines to the language and "world of literature or art transgress their boundaries to participate in "the social construction of reality," "ways of worldmaking," "the discourse of the other," and the constitution of the subject by ideology, language, or "power/knowledge."

The material basis of esthetic autonomy is suggested in Catherine Belsey's remarks that the weakness of New Criticism "originates in the attempt to locate meaning in a single place, in the word of the text, 'on the page'" (*Critical Practice*, p. 19). Autonomy is secured by identifying "the words of the text" with their material signifiers "on the page." The New Critics, as Walter Ong puts it, "assimilated the verbal art work to the visual object-world" and "insisted that the poem or other literary work be regarded as an object, a 'verbal icon.'"²¹ It is significant, and hardly surprising, that much talk about organic unity is carried on in terms that subordinate temporal process to spatial form—the verbal artwork as icon, image, world, well-wrought urn. The dynamic implications of organic process are too easily transformed by the concept of organic unity into the static image of the parts and whole of a visualizable *one* protectively enclosed within imaginary outlines. The beginning, middle, and end are those of a finished product, like a page or a book. The structural unity and esthetic autonomy of the work are guaranteed by the reductive identification of the text with the words on the page in the book. Its material position underwrites the work's independent existence. So blatant an example of "the falacy of simple location" (Whitehead) is an obvious target and has often been criticized for screening out those systems of differences, or "discursive formations," within which and against which the work

participates in the logically more tenable kind of uniqueness conferred by its position in the system.

Such systems have been distinguished as *intertextual* and *extratextual*. Critics of New Criticism have exploited their possibilities to show how they can remove the barriers established by the structural and esthetic postulates, and open up two paths out of the cube. In the first, the concept of intertextuality is employed to dissociate the text from the page and the simply-located work. In the second, the intimate relation of text to page is emphasized in all its materiality to produce a very different orientation toward the interplay of work and text with their extratextual environment. I shall now discuss examples of each approach, noting by way of preface that the distinction between intertextual and extratextual is itself relative to specific interpretive projects: it is sometime useful to distinguish them as intersecting coordinates of the discursive field within which the work is located *and* which the work represents; for other purposes the extratextual may itself be subsumed under an expanded concept of intertextuality so that cultural and institutional contexts are approached on the model of the work or the text.

(1) Jonathan Culler's brief account of intertextuality in *The Pursuit of Signs* exemplifies the present state of the lore on the subject:

"Intertextuality"... .. has a double focus. On the one hand, it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written. Yet in so far as it focuses on intelligibility, on meaning, "Intertextuality" leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification. Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts. (p. 103)

The final sentence indicates how the traditional procedures suppressed by New Criticism have been recuperated on the entirely new basis of a structural or synchronic systematics in which the work is inscribed, which it

presupposes, and which makes its particular "effects of signification" possible.

Culler illustrates "the dangers that beset the notion of intertextuality" (p. 109) with sympathetic critiques of the way Riffaterre, Kristeva, and Bloom conceive and deploy it: on the one hand, its theoretical focus is on a general and anonymous discursive space; on the other hand, their intertextual practice puts the general theory in question by seeking out particular pretexts and precursors. Advocating a flexible and variable procedure with "multiple strategies" and "different focuses" (p. 111.) Culler nevertheless agrees with Kristeva's statement that "every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it" (quoted on p. 105), and it is the implied emphasis on imposition and jurisdiction which I find telling in his insistence that the task of poetics is to relate

a literary work to a whole series of other works, treating them not as sources but as constituents of a genre, for example, whose conventions one attempts to infer. One is interested in *conventions which govern* the production and interpretation of character, of plot structure, of thematic synthesis, of symbolic condensation and displacement. In all these cases there are no moments of authority except those which are retrospectively designated as origins and which, therefore, can be shown to derive from the series for which they are constituted as origin. (p. 117, my italics)

As Culler describes it, the series, the code, the system of conventions, the genre, govern the construction of a particular text. And the passages cited make it clear that he conceives of the "discursive space" of intertextuality in diachronic as well as synchronic terms: earlier and later texts form the series through which the system of conventions, genre, etc., is elaborated and continuously modified. This raises a question about the sources of power and authority. Who or what retrospectively designates moments of authority, and what does it mean to say they "derive from the series"? Toward the end of his discussion, Culler momentarily wavers from his emphasis on the hegemony of "the series" or of general discursive space, and gestures toward an alternative approach, which is to look at the specific presuppositions of a given text, the way in which it produces a pretext, an intertextual space whose occupants may or may not correspond to other actual texts. The goal of this project would be an account of how

texts create presuppositions and hence pre-texts for themselves.....” (p. 118). This implies a different relationship between the given text and its intertextual environment, one in which the lines of force and “moments of authority” derive not from the series but from the text. But Culler does not develop this alternative. He merely states it as the first of two useful if “limited approaches to intertextuality,” and goes no to restore his major emphasis in describing the second : “a poetics which is less interested in the occupants of that intertextual space which makes a work intelligible than in the conventions which underlie that discursive activity or space” (p. 118) I think both the first alternative and the functional relation between the two deserve more attention and articulation than Culler gives them, and I shall briefly illustrate this contention with the genre of epic, in which the creation of generic presuppositions and pre-texts is especially salient.

Any intertextual series may be viewed in the complementary perspectives which Saussure called *prospective* and *retrospective*. When the series of epic poems inaugurated by Homer is viewed prospectively as if from the past forward, it may appear to be the continuous development of a formal paradigm which accommodates variations revisions, and is subject to few revolutionary violations of “paradigm-induced” expectations. From this standpoint, revisions sequentially effected by Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Spenser, Milton and even Wordsworth, only confirm the durability of normal epic practice, the flexibility with which the paradigm “evolves” by adjusting to changes that “bring it up to date.” But when viewed retrospectively, from the latest work backward, every new epic poet appears to invent his own version of the genre he “inherits” (represents as inherited), and to do so in order to overthrow that paradigm. From this standpoint, every canonical epic is a revolutionary crisis, an anomaly, and a paradigm shift.

In this divided perspective, the “discursive space” of genre as a code or system of conventions assumes two conflicting aspects. On the one hand, it becomes the preexisting code that governs new practice, “impose[s] a universe on it,” and “makes possible the various effects of signification.” On the other hand, it becomes the revisionary representation or perhaps caricature of the first aspect : the new poem chooses the particular set of epic norms and precursors to be represented as its source, tradition, and target. Retrospectively, then the code that makes the new poem’s “effects of signification” possible is itself an effect of the new poem’s signifying strategies. Thus we return, though in qualified measure, to a focus on the

autonomy of the new poem and on the uniqueness not only of its bounded form as a verbal icon but also of the discursive space, the generic universe, it constitutes "outside itself" as the condition of its possibility.

Given this complementarity, it might be thought that the best way to establish both the evolving structure of the generic paradigm and the uniqueness of the new poem's retrospect would be to compare the two perspectives. The reason I don't think this a tenable procedure is that the generic paradigm along with its prospectively determined "evolution" is a fantasy produced either by an academic tradition of interpreters who abstract and reify the genre, or by the new poem's retrospect itself. The existence and character of the genre as an intertextual "space" or system can be established only by close interpretation of the poems that announce their membership in the genre, interpretations that attend to the way they characterize it, and attend also to poems that define themselves over against it in such parasitic anti-genres as mock epic and Alexandrian bucolics. The "epic tradition" then emerges as a series of representations of epic that poems set up as points of departure, and the resultant picture of repetitions and differences provides a profile which, ranging over the series becomes that reader's (or those readers') representation of the genre. Now at least in the case of epic, the new poem's retrospective characterization tends to identify the genre with one or more particular precursors. This confronts the reader with the task of comparing, for example, Homer's practice with his representation of epic conventions, Homer's practice and representation with Virgil's practice and *his* representation of Homer's practice and representation, and so forth. Such an intertextual approach to epic resolves into a series of close readings that situate intertextual space within each poem as a fictitious projection of its "external" generic context, and these readings may well conform to the principles of the cube even as they revise or ignore distinctions that the cube enjoins: distinctions between the autonomous text and its literary-historical context, between literary and nonliterary (in this case, historical) interpretation, between the bounded "interior" of the fictional microcosm and its nonfictional "exterior" in the intertextual macrocosm of the generic code. Thus in the retrospective view to which the cube postulates give primacy, the poem circumscribed by the cube becomes the constitutive source both of itself and of the intertextual universe around it. Later, I shall generalize this proposition, arguing that a reconstructed version of the cube enables us both to extend the interpretive operations of the postulates to any aspect of the

