Acritical Criticism, Critical Criticism:
Reframing, Topsight and Critical Dialectics

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This paper theorizes critical readings from an interactional / argumentative perspective, providing a semiotic and phenomenological analysis of the scale ranging from consonant, "friendly" criticism, to dissonant, confrontational or "unfriendly" criticism. A number of key critical theories (by theorists such as G. W. F. Hegel, Oscar Wilde, Jacques Lacan, Erving Goffman, Norman Holland, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, Paul Ricoeur, Judith Fetterley, John Muller, Alan Sinfield, and H. Porter Abbott) are examined in the light of this conception of criticism, and situated within the framework of interactional pragmatics, of the dialectics of communication, and of a semiotic theory of truth and of consciousness.

1. Pragmatics, interactionism, and critical discourse analysis

Whenever we say anything, our words have various levels of meaning, one of which is the "dictionary" meaning, i.e. decontextualized meaning.

Different kinds of meaning can be distinguished in our words, and in our actions as well, at several levels of (de)contextualization. The really interesting analysis of meaning is the analysis of fully contextualized meaning. (Although this notion leads to the additional problem, usually best lost sight of, of reflexivity and even infinite regress—since a fully contextualized analysis must include the analyst himself, as well as the analytical methods and disciplinary and contextual constraints of the analyis being carried out).

There are consequently many types of *pragmatics:* some pragmaticists work with more or less abstract (i.e. more or less decontextualized) models of action or language. It is not a matter of all-or-nothing, since the analysis may incorporate many contextualizing dimensions which are nevertheless not fully concretized—for instance, the types of speech acts classified by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words.* Classical approaches to speech act theory use as a matter of course partially contextualized examples (which are moreover constructed by the analyists themselves). These allow them to analyze indirect speech acts and distinguish within them the locutionary meaning from the illocutionary force: two levels of conventionalized meaning, both of which are in fact relatively abstract.

A more contextualized approach to language pragmatics is proposed by Jenny Thomas in *Meaning in Interaction* (Thomas, incidentally, uses for the most part authentic examples in her analyses):

> In this book I shall be working towards a definition of pragmatics as meaning in interaction. This reflects the view that meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor by the hearer alone. Making meaning is a

> dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speakera and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance. (Thomas 1995: 22)

This theoretical stance is remarkably similar to the basic tenets of some versions of Reader-Response Criticism—e.g. in Stanley Fish's work—and, going further back, of George Herbert Mead's and Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, which transcends both linguistics and literary studies. According to the symbolic interactionalist theory of meaning, the meaning of events, things, actions, words, is constructed in the process in social interaction between subjects, and it is not fixed; rather, it is constantly being modified in a continuous process of reinterpretation. Blumer lists three types of theories of meaning (of which the first two are inadequate):

1) For the first theory or group of theories, meaning is intrinsic to the object. (In the case of a text, intrinsic to the words, phrases, the textual structure, etc. Many protocols of legal interpretation are based on this fiction, as are those semantic theories which do not overstep the boundaries of the dictionary meaning of words).

2) Another theory holds that meaning is a subjective affair, created by the interpreter. This is a more psychological theory of meaning, and close to some subjectivist theories of reader reception which start (and sometimes end) their reflections with the observation that "every text means something different for each reader".

3) The third theory of meaning is the symbolic interactionalist theory upheld by Blumer, similar in many respects to Thomas's pragmatic theory of meaning quoted above. According to it, meaning is not inherent to the object, nor is it subjective: it is constructed, instead, through an interactive process. I quote Blumer:

> Symbolic interactionism views meaning as having a different source than those held by the two dominant views just considered. It does not regard meaning as emanating from the intrinsic makeup of the thing that has meaning, nor does it see meaning as arising through a coalescence of psychological elements in the person. Instead, it sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a peron grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing. Their actions operate to define the thing for the person. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. (1986: 4-5)

An objection would seem to arise: in analyzing the meaning of an event, an utterance, a text, it is quite frequently the case that analysts do not find themselves in the original situation (in which the event took place, where the utterance was uttered; or, the analyst is not the intended addressee of the text). Sometimes we do interpret something as it takes place or as it is being said; other times interpretation takes place in a more or less different and distant context. One must therefore take into account the distortion (through an increment of meaning) introduced by the analytic context, which is an interactional context in its own right, and may modify meaning

in subtle ways, invisible even, to those who are not attuned to this dimension of metadiscourse.

Once we take this factor into account, perhaps Thomas's notion of a contextualized and interactive pragmalinguistic analysis might be modified from the standpoint of symbolic interactionism. We would thus articulate a reflexive discourse-analytical approach understood as meaning in interaction, or a fully contextualized critical pragmatics. Adapting Thomas's definition, we would have that

Meaning is not something inherent to the words only, nor is it produced only by the speaker, or by the discourse analyst. The construction of meaning is a dynamic process, which includes the negotiation of meaning between speaker and addressee, the context of utterance (in its physical, social and linguistic dimensions), the potential significance of an utterance, and the critical/analytic context in which the utterance is studied, which includes an interactional dimension of its own between the analyst and other subjects/analysts.

The same definition might be extended to the critique and pragmatics of action, since utterances are actions, and saying, and interpreting, are modes of acting.

2. The colour of the glass we look through: Critical differences

Although the ideas in Stanley Fish's book *Is There a Text in This Class* (1980) evolve from the earlier to the later essays, the work's central and all-encompassing argument is that the meaning of texts does not "already"

exist in the texts themselves, but is instead generated by the structures of meaning preexistent to the text in conjunction with those projected by the reader during the reading process. The meaning is not "in" the text itself, it is "produced" by a reading. This work is possibly the most characteristic instance of the reader-response approach to criticism, and does not flinch when it comes to putting forward exorbitant claims to void of meaning both the text and its linguistic structures, so as to lay the whole load of sense-making on the act of interpretation. One could argue that Fish was dangerously close to Theory no. 2 in Blumer's classification above. Twenty years ago I wrote a rather stern critique of Fish's theory in a paper entitled "Stanley E. Fish's Speech Acts." I found especially irritating Fish's manoeuvering to avoid all reasoning centred on objective linguistic or semiotic structures, dissolving all levels of sense into a primordial soup of interpretations projected by the individual receiver. Today, however, I am more interested in the transforming and liberating potential one should not deny to Fish's interventions. His critique of formalist stylistics and of transformational grammar is highly interesting, and much in line with what would soon would become known as integrational linguistics, and also, in some respects, with symbolic interactionism.

Fish holds that all sense is created not in an abstract generative frame but in a concrete social situation—a conception which has obvious analogies to the interactional theory we have referred to. The constraints upon sense are not to be found, according to Fish, in grammars: "there are such constraints; they do not, however, inhere in language but in situations, and because they inhere in situations, the constraints we are always under are not always the same ones" (1980: 292). Chomsky's phrases (Note 1), whatever their utility in an abstract model, have never existed in actual linguistic performance, and "a language is neither known nor describable

apart from the conditions that Chomsky labels 'irrelevant'" (Fish 1980: 247). Nor can the meanings of a text be separated from the institutional history of their interpretations—an insight which has been much stressed by cultural materialist critics (see e.g. Dollimore and Sinfield 1994).

Criticism does not leave the text unaltered, untouched: on the contrary, it is made and remade by interpretations; the very act of describing a text is an act of interpretation, and actively constructs the text's meaning. Fish does not deny the existence of senses which are more "normal" or "usual" than others, nor is he trying to deny their validity; but he does point out that that normality and validity are not inherent to the object of interpretation—they are a function of the interpreter's perspective. If we recognize some ascriptions of sense as more "commonsensical" or "valid" than others, it is not because they are such apart from all interpretation, but because we ourselves are immersed in an interpretive community and share its interpretive protocols and schemes (such as languages, generic conventions, etc.). There is nothing "obvious" in itself; it must be "obvious" for someone:

> Whenever a critic prefaces an assertion with a phrase like 'without doubt' or 'there can be no doubt', you can be sure that you are within hailing distance of the interpretive principles which produce the facts that he presents as obvious. (1980: 341)

— a phrase which is self-descriptive, perhaps even one of the *self-consuming artifacts* Fish is so fond of investigating.

Fish's theory of the "interpretive community" collapses ("no doubt") because of the impossibility to delimit or isolate any such communities,

because they are purely hypothetical mental entities, abstractions, and no better than Chomsky's deep structures in that sense: any actual "community" is an overlapping of multiple communities, and a more or less clear-cut community can only be determined on the basis of what is at issue at any given moment. That is, it is the conflict of intentions, solidarities, interests and interpretations in a specific situation which in practical terms determines the border between two of those supposed "communities"—a map which changes with any shift of attention or of argumentative priorities.

Fish's theory is, perhaps deliberately, not attentive to the relative priority of some interpretations, texts, and contexts, over others. Therefore, in his account the (relevant) text, the relevant context and the interpretation emerge simultaneously as the products of the reading effected by the critic, and from the very assumptions of that reading. In order to solve or indeed focus any debate, it is necessary to have "a set of overarching principles that are not themselves the object of dispute because they set the terms within which disputes can occur" (Fish 1980: 294). It is at this point that a highly suggestive conception of critical debate emerges, one based on interaction and the questioning of assumptions and presuppositions—a model which as a matter of fact has many common elements with the interactive and pragmaticist theory of truth developed by George Herbert Mead (1929, 2002). In this way Fish tries to explain the singular (and otherwise almost comical) state of affairs in literary studies—to wit, that after the passage of generations of interpreters, one can still propose an interpretation of a classical text with the pretension of unveiling some truth about the text which has remained hidden up to now—ensconced and uncommunicated, or overlooked by all previous interpreters. A predicament which, depending on the way it is taken, would seem to reduce

to absurdity and irrelevance not only the efforts of previous critics, but (in advance) the claims of this new reading and as a matter of fact the critical enterprise itself as a whole.

> The discovery of the 'real point' is always what is claimed whenever a new interpretation is advanced, but the claim makes sense only in relation to a point (or points) that had previously been considered the real one. This means that the space in which a critic works has been marked out for him by his predecessors, even though he is obliged by the conventions of the institution to dislodge them. (Fish 1980: 350)

This is a dialogic and interactional conception of criticism which I find congenial—I have examined some of its aspects, for instance, in my paper on "Retroactive Thematization, Interaction, and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Spiral from Schleiermacher to Goffman" to which the reader may be referred as a companion piece to the present essay.

The basic moves in critical debate would then seem to belong to one or the other of these two types (which in the last analysis are the same for Fish): either, within the same interpretive assumptions, providing new data and analyses, or (more radically or perhaps confrontationally) questioning or undermining the interpretive assumptions themselves, the conceptual basis on which previous readings were built. The same, in the last analysis— because this questioning, Fish argues, will always be effected on the basis of a more general shared space; shared, at least, for the moment and for the purposes of this communicative move, but not inherently firmer *per se.*

In Fish's view, "interpretation is the only game in town", and it is interesting to see him pointing out that a favourite manoeuvre on the part of

critics is to hide or disguise the generative dimension of their interpretive activity, claiming that only objective data or neutral descriptions of the works are being offered:

> by a logic peculiar to the institution, one of the standard ways of practicing literary criticism is to announce that you are avoiding it. This is so because at the heart of the institution is the wish to deny that its activities have any consequences. (1980: 355)

And, as if he were deliberately trying to provide a practical instance of this move, Fish argues in his last chapter that his own conception has no consequences for the practice of criticism—that as a matter of fact he was only trying to clarify (i.e. describe) the rules of the game played in academic criticism, and not to change them. That critics may go on producing interpretations at their leisure, ignoring this intervention by Fish, because nothing is the matter, it has no discernible consequences. Perhaps we do understand better the nature of the critical activity, but this activity remains impassive, unaffected by our new perception, and single-mindedly devoted to the production of interpretations, each one running after those truths which are true only from the perspective in question. At most we may become aware that nothing can be demonstrated conclusively in the field of criticism; we can only *persuade* someone to share our perspective (1980: 356-71).

Fish's thought, obviously *in fieri* in this book, did not wholly extract the consequences of this "creative criticism" à la Oscar Wilde ("The Critic as Artist"). He opposes the classical model—according to which there would be objective data, independent from their interpreters, which could be used to decide on the validity of an interpretation—to his own productive and

argumentative model, in which there are no objective facts to use as an argument in demonstrations: "a model of persuasion in which the facts that one cites are available only because an interpretation (at least in its general and broad outlines) has already been assumed" (1980: 365). This notion of *persuasion* might weaken Fish's argumentation (and make it less persuasive!) to the extent that not enough emphasis is placed on the underlying reasons for the persuasion—reasons which are to be found in the interactional and emergentist nature of critical activity. Fish's contribution seems nonetheless to point towards this notion. Seen from today's vantage point, at least, this new perspective provides an emergentist view of the objects of critical knowledge which is close enough to G. H. Mead's ideas:

> In one model [*i.e. the classical model Fish rejects*] change is (at least ideally) progressive, a movement toward a more accurate account of a fixed and stable entity; in the other, change occurs when one perspective dislodges another and brings with it entities that had not before been available. (Fish 1980: 366)

"Entities that had not before been available"—or *did not exist as objects of knowledge.* That is, criticism generates, retroactively, the object on which it acts, through its emphases, intertextuality, the establishing of relationships, extraction of presuppositions… (Note 2). One advantage, Fish notes, of this model that we call emergentist is that it explains more adequately how it is that new meanings keep arising in texts, without making previous critics appear myopic as this happens. It also explains the different emphases and priorities of other ages in literature and criticism without reducing those great men (Sidney, Dryden, Pope, Coleridge, Arnold…) to poor devils who did not quite understand what they were reading and studying. In Fish's

view, they were not merely studying it but rather generating it, and allowing our later perspective, different from theirs, to appear.

Poststructuralists have been sometimes accused of magnifying the role of critical activity in a self-aggrandizing way. If that is the case, Fish offers at any rate one of the best defenses and justifications of that creative criticism which is not afraid to measure itself to imaginative literature in its ability to produce new sense. (Note 3). For Fish,

> No longer is the critic the humble servant of texts whose glories exist independently of anything he might do; it is what he does, within the constraints embedded in the literary institution, that brings texts into being and makes them available for analysis and appreciation. The practice of literary criticism is not something one must apologize for: it is absolutely essential not only to the maintenance of, but to the very production of the objects of its attention. (1980: 368)

It is in this sense that one should understand the suggestive paradoxes put forward by Wilde in "The Critic as Artist," that essay which argues that the critic is not there to tell us *what the work of art tells* (we already have the work for that), but rather *what the work of art should tell* once it has spoken through the critic's sensibility, or has been placed into a new relationship with contemporaneity through the critic's labour, a role which again is not mimetic but generative, creative—emergentist, we might say. (Note 4). Criticism exerts a retroactive influence on art: it transforms art even as it interprets it, and makes the artwork say more clearly what it tried to say, or makes it say what the work did not quite (know it was trying to) say until the critic's arrival. All of this is done according to critical protocols: otherwise the critic would no longer be a critic but would become (without

ceasing to be an artist) what H. Porter Abbott calls an *adapter* (Abbott 2002).

Given this emergentist nature and function of criticism, it is hard to understand why Fish should argue that his thesis "has no consequences for practical criticism" (1980: 371). To be sure, theorists of cultural materialism, like Jonathan Dollimore or Alan Sinfield, draw very different consequences from a similarly interactive and dialectic conception of criticism (see for instance the preface to their volume *Political Shakespeare*). A similar paradox is to be found in Wilde's aesthetic reflections, which started from the uselessness and unreality of art in "The Decay of Lying"—if art generates our perception of reality, that is to say, reality itself, Wilde's argument would demonstrate the transcendental importance of art, rather than its social uselessness. Similarly, Fish's theory, once its practical consequences are drawn, and its inherent emergentism emerges, cannot but transform critical practices, their objects of attention and the kind of attention which is devoted to them. Moreover, one should consider that the first thing which undergoes a transformation whenever we write about something is not so much the object written about as the writer himself. If the world, and the eye, are going to be the colour of the glass we look through, we had better choose that glass carefully.

3. (A)CRITICAL CRITICISM

Rereading my paper on rereading and repetition (2006c) and at the risk of repeating myself, I decided to develop here one of its aspects as a separate paper, elaborating on my dichotomy between criticism proper (critical

criticism) and acriticial criticism. Here are some relevant paragraphs from that paper on "Rereading(,) Narrative(,) Identity(;) and Interaction":

Narrative is, among other things, a drama of identities, in which the author and the reader interact in a complex way, thorugh the symbolized interaction of a variety of textual selves: implied authors and implied readers, narrators and narratees, characters. The reader is invited, sometimes through a complex rhetoric of address to fictional narratees, to assume an identity proposed by the narrative—to behave as the implied reader. The implied reader position, then, is the provisional locus for the reader's installation—*as reader,* not as a fully authorized interactant. From the moment the reader becomes someone else, a writer, a critic, etc. there is a choice between remaining a friendly ideal reader, or delimiting a stance outside the text's calculation, becoming a resisting reader. (Note 5). Resisting reading involves the delimitation of the subject's ideological positioning vis à vis the text. Resisting reading finds its most congenial space in critical writing: we should speak of *resisting criticism* or *resisting writing,* actually. Reading proper invites participation, temporary surrender (except in the case of offensive material); only *writing after rereading* invites the subtler kind of ideological analyses.

We may now reexamine from this perspective the concept of narrative configuration developed by theorists such as Mink and Ricoeur. Both of them emphasized that narrative has a retrospective or even retroactive dimension, bringing out an interpretive pattern from the events of history or personal experience. In Polkinghorne's account,

> The act of the plot is to elicit a pattern from a succession, and it involves a kind of reasoning that tacks back and forth from the events to the plot until a plot forms that both respects the events and encompasses them in a whole. The 'humblest' narrative is always more than a chronological series of events: it is a gathering together of events into a meaningful story. (Polkinghorne 1988: 131)

The hermeneutic approach to narrative as a distinct mode of knowledge has resulted in a revaluation of the concept of plot. For Paul Ricoeur, "Plot can be isolated from judgments about the *reference* and content of a story, and to be viewed instead as the *sense* of a narrative" (Polkinghorne 1988: 131). Of course, the plot of a narrative is 'the' sense *proposed by the narrative* itself. An unfriendly critic's eye may detect the violence done to the events through their configuration into a plot. This is the thrust of those trends in narrative hermeneutics which denounce the "hindsight bias" and the perspectivistic illusions imposed through narrative form, such as the illusion of fatality or the artificial imposition of tragic or comic patterns on experience (Bernstein 1994, Morson 1994).

Narrative has a retrospective configurational force which may become even a kind of retroaction, as past events are 'generated' by present perspectives and given the kind of ideal identity noted by Hume. What we should emphasize here is that the observation or assessment of a narrative amounts to a new type of reconfiguration, especially when the narrative is critically recontextualized. A new plot is generated, one which includes the observer or reader. One of the main tasks of criticism (of friendly hermeneutic criticism, even) is *making explicit what was implicit*. But this means also transforming, interpreting, shifting emphasis, appropriating, giving a new configuration to events and relationships. (Note 7).

These are, then, the polarities in the binomial of critical attitudes I oppose to each other:

Friendly criticism - Unfriendly criticism

—which are rather intuitive and self-explanatory terms I commonly use, along with their Spanish near equivalents, *Crítica simpática - Crítica antipática*, and also *Crítica acrítica - Crítica crítica* (critical criticism – acritical criticism). These terms of mine are closely related to other current concepts in ideological critical approaches—e.g. the classical Marxist notion of the critcal unmasking of texts as instruments for the spreading of dominant ideologies, or (in feminist criticism) Judith Fetterley's notion of *resisting reading* opposed to an the default acquiescent reading presupposed by texts. In Fetterley's account, the feminist reader has to actively counter the patriarchal and macho assumptions of male writers. But the same concept of ideological resistance can be applied to any kind of divergence between the author's and the reader's attitudes.

A similar polarity, formulated by Erving Goffman and later by H. Porter Abbott, opposes *intentionalist* or *communicative* readings or interpretations to *symptomatic* ones (Goffman 1970; Abbott 2002). In the latter, Abbot argues, interpreters do not restrict themselves to the reconstruction of the sense intended by the author or the uptake of his communicative acts; instead, they interpret textual elements (in conjunctions and combinations not foreseen by the author) as *symptoms* of a given attitude, presupposition, ideology, etc. Thus, an ideological and interpretive difference is opened between the project proposed by the interpreted text and the critical stance and agenda of the critic's text. (Note 8).

Another way of naming this basic polarity in critical attitudes would be:

(Ideologically) Consonant *vs.* (Ideologically) Dissonant criticism, —or:

Constructive *vs.* Deconstructive (or even *destructive*) criticism.

—by which I do not mean that a taste for deconstruction bespeaks a lack of a constructive spirit. We see that terms could be multiplied. One of the most influential formulations of this binomial is Paul Ricœur's in *De l'interprétation: Essai sur Freud*, where distinguishes a hermeneutics of the *recovery of sense* is opposed to the *hermeneutics of suspicion* developed during the twentieth century under the aegis of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche (Ricœur 1970). The former is the traditional hermeneutic stance, associated to the religious origins of this discipline in the interpretation of sacred texts: here the text is treated reverently as the bearer of an important message, a religious one originally, and a cultural or aesthetic one in secularized versions of the literary process. The text is a focus of authority and is set over the interpreter, who must approach it for his own good and that of the community; both will benefit from the sense found in the text. In contrast, the various hermeneutics of suspicion (whether Marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, feminist, postcolonial, etc.) are not only suspicious, but somewhat conceited or patronizing, since in assuming a confrontational attitude they consider the text is blind about itself, and erect themselves as interpreters, as the bearers of truth and of the illumination which is to unveil the shortcomings and errors and biases about the world and about itself that the text is plagued with.

In the last analysis, Ricœur implies, the benefits of humility (friendly criticism) are greater than the hermeneutic arrogance of unfriendly

criticism. But I must here step out in favour of the haughtiness of the skeptical reader, in favour of unfriendly criticism, indeed of criticism proper, as the term "criticism" itself seems to suggest. Understanding comes first, criticism later; hermeneutics first, and ideological critique later. It is so both in the logical structure of the interpretive process and also from a larger historical perspective—the positive hermeneutics applied to sacred texts is part and parcel of traditional religious orthodoxy, while criticism is associated rather more closely to philosophical demythologization, to the humanist contestation of revealed truth, or to the early modern critique of the Church's interpretive authority. Critical thought questions any explanatory system which offers a totalizing or excessively homogeneous, or "finished" version of reality. A text puts forward its systema or world-model—its reading of reality (of reality systematized), and it is the critic's labout to test the limits of that system or the simplifications reality has undergone in order to reduce it to a system, or to a text. In Porter Abbott's terms, in this interpretive modality we no longer consider the text's reasoning or argument as a reasoning or argument (so carefully structured); instead, we treat it as a symptom awaiting our diagnosis, and the supposed truth revealed by the text is nothing but an intellectual syndrome, a delirium of reason, an ideology to be dissected.

Rebellious, unfriendly and dissonant criticism has an ingredient of haughtiness, insisting as it does on the critic's views and offering the critic's reading of the text instead of the generally accepted one, or, one might say, of instead of the text's reading of itself (—*I am commenting Shakespeare for you, since you are interested in Shakespeare, but you shouldn't trust Shakespeare on Shakespeare, he doesn't know himself, but I do, listen to my text—you should be interested in* my *text, ¡don't trust other*

people on Shakespeare, don't trust yourselves, trust me*, don't read Shakespeare*, read me*!).* So much by way of subtext. (Note 9).

But the other version of criticism, reverent or consonant criticism, also has its share of conceit—the more insidious as it poses as humility and self-effacement. After its own way it tells us (again I caricature): *There is no need to look further into truth. We already know the truth, it has been Revealed—it is contained in this sacred text (the Bible, Shakespeare, Derrida, etc.). We can add explanatory footnotes to it, but clearly not a commentary which contradicts its basic presuppositions. That would be the destruction of the Writ. In the last analysis, we don't need any critics or commentators of the Writing, as we have already got the Writing, which is self-sufficient and reads itself in the right way—that is, in the way it has always been read. And we are on Its side. Close your mouth, cap your pen, shut down you computer. Critics, your so-called truths lowercase tee are not necessary, the Truth has already been said and written, it is our humble duty to learn it, understand it and accept it.*

Now isn't that sinister—'umble and respectful towards the Author as it may sound?

Fortunately, this difference between critical criticism and acritical criticism is, like all absolute polarities, more ideal than real. It is not that the pure forms are unknown: commandeered reviews on the one hand, and viciously destructive reviews, on the other, are quite close to chemical purity. They are, too, the least interesting of critical modes (although destructive criticism, in particular, has its own charms and can be extremely amusing to read and write). And both poles fulfil, anyway, their interactional role in the society of letters. But the proper space for reflexive and considerate

criticism is to be found, rather, in the land between them, a terrain in which criticism, without ceasing to be critical, is also attuned to the text's problematics or argumentation, instead of simply rejecting them as irrelevant or wrong-headed. The fine hues and modulations of argument are best perceived in the context of friendly or consonant criticism; the limitations inherent to any author's given position require an ingredient of confrontational critique. But a wholesale negative critique does not contribute much to the development of knowledge: it merely rules out the author's text and suggests that we look aside and attend to other issues and predicaments, other ideologies and world views.. A critique which is partially in tune with the text, on the other hand, may open the way to a synthesis between the critic's initial position and that of the text. When such a synthesis is effected by the critic, the critic occupies both the positions of antithesis and of synthesis, and has brought himself to overcome his initial position, or at least to modify it, supplement it or to delve further into some of its consequences.

When a metatext's critical attitude towards its text (I briefly use here Genette's term, 1979: 10) is more confrontational and does not favour a synthesis in the metatext itself, it is not to be ruled out that the synthesis, or at any rate a syntesis different from the one put forward by the critic, may nonetheless be effected thanks to the antithesis provided by the metatext's unfriendly critique—thanks to it, though not *within it.* The synthesis between both positions, the text's and the critic's, may be effected in this case by the reader (the reader of the critical work and also of the original text). It is on the reader that the more elaborate critical role befalls in this case—and the reader may choose to "criticize the critic" by communicating this reading in a further metatext. More constructive modes of criticism— even if they are 'deconstructive'—must perform a substantial part of this

work of synthesis if the line of thought proposed by the text is to be further developed and investigated, not merely suppressed or declared irrelevant.

And, at any rate, what a critical critic deserves is a taste of his own medicine. Let his text be deconstructed, let it undergo an unfriendly reception, with his asssumptions and conclusions deconstructed and questioned. Or perhaps the critical critic expected to find tame and acquiescent interlocutors? Once the consensus around Writing has been shattered, there is no hope of its being restored. Even though new Writs, both holy and unholy, proliferate and try to gain a hearing—"Silence once broken", Beckett writes in *The Unnamable,* "will never again be whole".

4. Critical interactionalism, Expression and Symptoms

Erving Goffman provides an extremely useful contextualization of symptomatic interpretation within a general theory of expression and interaction—an analysis whose relevance for textual interpretation has perhaps been underrated. In *Strategic Interaction,* Goffman theorizes the interactant's use of expressive elements which are in principle peripheral to overt communication, but are avidly used by observers in order to glean additional information before they act. Besides deliberately *communicated* information there exist, therefore, the *expressive* aspects of interaction: gestures and non-codified information produced by the subject under observation (in our case, the author or more generally the *sender,* the agent or social instance using the author's text in a communicative process).

The central insight of Goffman's book is that as a result of interaction, and of mutual observation, these non-codified expressive gestures can be, first

of all, interpreted for meaning by an observer who goes beyond the communicative dimension of the situation (in our case, the unfriendly critic). Secondly, once the subject under observation knows his gestures can be interpreted, they can be codified and produced as a *constructed show of spontaneity*. Thirdly, this construction or grammaticalization may in turn be discovered by the first observer, leading to a reassessment of the interactional situation and of the value of those "expressive" signs. The game of coding and uncoding may continue with further complications (for instance, establishing a second level of communication through indirect signs, mutually understood but "unofficial" or unacknowledged). Successive complications become both subtler and more uncertain in contexts where the interacting subjects have a close knowledge of each other and of the situation. The information obtained becomes more and more fragile and chancy in the upper levels of the game.

It is at this point that Goffman refers to "symptomatic" (that is, critical or "unfriendly") interpretation, as a strategy of textual reading—a confrontational reading both of the communicated content and of its pragmastylistic periphery:

> Just as the process of communicating information itself expresses information, so also a corpus of communicated signs has expressive aspects. Discursive statements seem inevitably to manifest a style of some kind, and can never be apparently free of "egocentric particulars" and other context-tied meanings. Even a written text examined in terms of the semantic meaning of the sentences can be examined for expression that derives from the way a given meaning is styled and patterned, as when Izvestia and Pravda are read by our intelligence people "symptomatically," for what the Russians do not

know they are exuding thorough the print. Indeed, the very sense of a message depends on our telling whether it is conveyed, for example, seriously, or sarcastically or tentatively, or as an indirect quotation, and in face-to-face communication this "framing" information typically derives from paralinguistic cues such as intonation, facial gestures, and the like—cues that have an expressive, not semantic, character. (Note 10)

This analysis can be extended to any kind of contextual information which is not intentionally communicated. In reading the other's text, we do not limit ourselves to a passive reconstruction of the information it is intended to convey: we also interpret contextual factors in order to obtain supplementary information. Which in turn leads interactants to vie for the control this supplementary and originally uncontrolled information—first the (potential) observer, and then too the subject under observation (an observer of the observer in his own right), in order to limit the observer's ability and gain an advantage in the interactive situation.

Just as it can be assumed that it is in the interests of the observer to acquire information from a subject, so it is in the interests of the subject to appreciate that this is occurring and to control and manage the information the observer obtains; for in this way the subject can influence in his own favor responses to a situation which includes himself. Further, it can be assumed that the subject can achieve this end by means of a special capacity—the capacity to inhibit and fabricate expression. (1970: 10)

We see that this contest or war of wits between the observer and the observed subject leads both to become specular images (with a suggestion

of potentially infinite specularity), both assuming the overlaid roles of observer and observed. The process of observation and of the interpretation of contextual and expressive signs becomes thus a fight to occupy the privileged position of topsight—the perspectival and informational control of the interactional situation, with the most reliable information available. And since the observer's labour is not merely passive, but rather an active manipulation and fabrication of the reality which is to be observed, this contest becomes as well a fight for the control of reality. Which of the subjects knows what is real? Which of them can tell apart genuine spontaneity from a constructed show of the same? Which one will orchestrate and arrange an observable reality that is at once most subject to control and most apparently spontaneous? It is almost a metaphysical competition, especially if one considers that the Other faced by each of the subjects is rather the Other-in-himself, the subject's own interpretation of what the other is and of what the other is able to interpret. The occasions for empathy grow at a pace with the closeness of the competition, providing excellent material for detective plots and stories of double agents.

It is arguable that human subjectivity is constructed through the play of reflection and through the internalization of communicative and interactional processes. (Note 11). If that is the case, the close competition and reflexivivity of strategic interaction provides a first-order space for the development of subjective experience. The dialectical dimension of experience is enhanced: any action is already charged with an expectation of possible responses, in such a way that human action is always already interactive: a dialectical response which allows for the attitudes we detect in others, and for their possible responses to our actions.

Of course, a (literary) text is a peculiar kind of discourse act—one which may be read in a context radically different from the one anticipated by the author. In critical interaction, a new context for the reading of a text is in effect a reframing of the text. Cultural materialist critics (such as our test cases Alan Sinfield or Jonathan Dollimore) have been especially sensitive to these changing dimension of the text, according to its "use" as it is reframed in a variety of historical and cultural contexts, or critical projects. This reframing involves not just the communicative context of the author as sender, but also a re-sender (the agent who recycles or reuses the text) in interaction with a new audience, within a new communicational and interactional frame. Such reframings are conducive to an increased attention to expressive and contextual factors on the part of attentive critics—paradoxically, the contextual constraints on the text's meaning become more visible now the original context is no longer there, leaving the text so to speak resting on a void of unstated assumptions. The nonverbalized and expressive aspects of the text are brought into sharper relief—and besides, the text acquires in the new context of its (re)use a new layer of expressive and nonverbalized contextual signs which can be read for additional meaning. It is only natural that critics (even uncritical critics) will enjoy a position of topsight in the new game the text is being asked to play.

This being the case, it is only to be expected that some authors will work ("always already") with this potential recontextualization in mind, finding ways of orientating it, shortcircuiting it with preemptive manoeuvres, or at least minimizing its effects. Or attempting to turn the interactive situation of reframing and critical reading to potential strategic advantage, along the lines analysed by Goffman. An example: Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000) includes not just a haunted house story, but also an

academic monograph with stylistic commentaries on a film in which the protagonist depicts his experiences in the house. The fictional monograph ("by Zampanò") contains abundant critical references both to actual critical essays and to fictional critical responses to that film; there are further notes on the editing of this critical monograph on the film, etc. The novel is thus not so much anticipating its critical response as acknowledging the interactional context of critical discourse, and using it as aesthetic material for creative writing. Such processes of built-in reframing are perhaps the main semiotic foundation for literary reflexivity—a mode of internalized interaction in its own right.

5. POEtics of topsight—and critical negativity

I've been re-rereading Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" and the rosary of critical commentaries collected in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading* (edited by John P. Muller and Brian J. Richardson). The story itself deals with concealment, unveiling and interpretation, and has become a test case or touchstone for interpretive theories, especially psychoanalytic and deconstructive ones.

In the story, a plotting minister steals from the Queen a compromising letter before her very eyes: he substitutes another piece of paper on the table in the presence of both the Queen and King, when both men enter her chamber and catch her unawares reading the letter. The Queen had counted on hiding the letter from the King's attention just by leaving it in plain sight, but the Minister notices, he just picks up the letter and is now in a position to blackmail the Queen. The Queen tries to recover the letter

through her agent the Police inspector, but it is nowhere to be found when the police conduct a secret search of the Minister's house. Enter Dupin, amateur detective-gentleman, Poe's spokesman and alter ego in the story. Reflecting on the Minister's methods and mode of reasoning, he soon discovers that the letter was hidden in plain sight, barely folded upon itself and passing as another letter. He orchestrates a diversion in the street and substitutes another paper for the letter while the Minister was looking away. In this paper, he intimates the Minister's impending doom, mocks his strategy, and reminds him of a long past grudge, a reason for Dupin's personal involvement—all this through the words of a tragedy on Atreus:

> —*Un dessein si funeste*
> *S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.*

Jacques Lacan analyzes "The Purloined Letter" as a manifestation (or perhaps an allegory) of what he calls the "itinerary of the signifier": textual subjects, one after another, subordinate themselves to the role they play in a (compulsively?) repetitive structure. Thus, the story is made up of two scenes or moments, the stealing of the letter and its recovery. In each of them, the characters are displaced to a new position in the interpretive chain, the one previously occupied by the victim of their plans.

In the first scene, the king occupies the position of blindness (A); he can see neither the letter nor the fact that the Queen plots against him or manipulates his blindness. The Queen occupies her position (B) precisely because she sees that the King cannot see, and she exploits her perspectival privilege or topsight, the most encompassing view of the situation available in the field of interaction. But the very way she has of taking advantage of the King's blindness (by leaving the letter in plain sight) makes her fall a

victim to a character with an even more encompassing vision (C): the Minister who completes the triangle of positions: A who cannot see, B who sees that A cannot see, and C who watches B's strategy and turns it against himself. What the Minister sees is that the Queen becomes vulnerable from her topsight vantage point: she believes herself invisible to a third party just because she was invisible for the first one—or rather, she does not allow for the presence of a third party. That is why the third party can grab the letter (the object of desire, a symbol of the text to be appropriated through interpretation) and carries it away.

But, in his turn, the Minister repeats in a compulsive way B's shortsighted strategy which he had been able to turn so skilfully to his advantage. Again he loses the topsight, as happened to the Queen before him. His dangerous self-confidence (and a smug admiration of his own cleverness) lead him to leave the letter in plain sight, in an ironic repetition of the Queen's initial movement, so as to conceal it through openness. And the move does work with the police (the Queen's envoys, and as such blind now by definition). The Minister believes he is still at vertex C of the first structural triangle (A: King, B: Queen, C: Minister)—but in fact he has already moved to vertex B, the position of those who trust their own topsight, in a new triangle: while he observes with satisfaction the blindness of the Queen's police (A), Dupin has set up a new triangle from whose vertex C he observes the Minister's manoeuvres and strategies.

Thus Lacan's version of Poe's tale. (Note 12). Jacques Derrida showed that the analyst himself (Lacan) becomes trapped in this interpretive circuit, and in analyzing Dupin's moves he offers a vulnerable flank to whoever observes his analytic operations, deconstructing this process of reading (Derrida 1988). Dupin was himself a competent analyst, Derrida argues,

and had already announced to us that he could not escape the circuit he was analyzing—that is, there is no possibility of a critical metalanguage uncontaminated by the object-language it tries to analyze.

But Barbara Johnson (1988) points out that Derrida's analysis was already announced, or perhaps carried out, in Lacan, if not in Poe. That deconstruction does not add much to the story, as the story was already self-deconstructed. Derrida is a latecomer (and Johnson too, presumably) and points belatedly to a blindness which is not such, since Poe's story, amplified by analyiss, has brought to light the compulsive mechanism which governs the dialectics of of concealment and unveiling.

The story becomes thus a challenge for its interpreters, who observe from a topsight position the blindness of those who think they can encompass from their own vantage point the blindness of a third party. It also becomes an allegory of the uselessness of trying to carry their efforts any further: they will only repeat almost ritually a structure which is fixed beforehand, and follow the steps already traced out by the characters in the story. Or so the story goes.

The series of mutual deconstructions might thus continue indefinitely without throwing much further light on the story. In *The Purloined Poe* we find readings by Marie Bonaparte, Shoshana Felman, Irene Harvey, Jane Gallop, Ross Chambers, Norman Holland, Liana Klenman Babener, François Peraldi and John Muller. And in an article on "the hermeneutic spiral" (2004), I too added my grain of sand, interpreting the Lacanian-deconstructive reading of this story from the standpoint of communicative interactionalism.

My point was that an act of interpretation pays attention to certain significative elements of the object: its intentional aspects, and its textual aspects, as well as some unintentional, and some contextual aspects, so as to integrate them within an explanatory system which accounts both for the conscious plan of the author (of the object text) and for the unconscious elements which have been perceived by the interpreter once the text has been recontextualized—elements which s/he interprets as symptoms, or as non-conceptualized gestural language, and which only now, in the present interpretation, reach an explicit linguistic formulation Style, expressive or "gratuitous" elements not integrated in the conscious model of the work as constructed by the interpretation, are a kind of textual gesticulation. Any interpretation may choose to reply only to the communicative intention perceived in the work (or in the complex constitued by the work and a previous interpretation). That is what we call understanding, or collaborative, criticism. Alternatively, the critic may interpret as symptoms part of the perceived signification which is not integrated within that communicative whole, and see the work (or the complex formed by the work and previous interpretations—or the work in a new context) from a topsight, i.e. from vertex C of the triangle. That is what we have been calling critical criticism—quite often, confrontational or *unfriendly* criticism.

For instance, in order to be unfriendly to the various interpretations of Poe's story offered in *The Purloined Poe,* we might point out some element which disturbs the neat textual figure constructed by the critics (in this case the double triangulation pointed out by Lacan). We may note that the second triangle or episode of the story is not exactly a repetition of the first. In the first scene, the Minister sees that the Queen sees that the the Minister sees that the Queen sees that the King does not see, and (at the same time)

the Minister sees that the Queen has not planned in advance any defensive manoeuvre against anyone who should see that, which means that she is trapped in her own strategy. In the second scene, there are similarities, but, facing Dupin, the Minister cannot see that Dupin is carrying the letter away. Quite possibly he does not even know that he is fighting Dupin; moreover he doesn't perceive at this point (as the Queen perceives to her own mortification) that he is trapped in his own strategy.

One could manufacture an allegorical interpretation which used these elements which are left aside by the Lacanian interpretations. Of course Derrida had already pointed out in that general direction, although other latecomers try to criticize him and steal the letter from him. It is easy to be (or try to be) overingenious in trying to recycle, or allegorize, this tale—although Poe warns us already with his first word, the pseudo-Senecan epigraph "nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio" (nothing is more hateful for wisdom than an excess of wit). According to Johnson (1988), that was the case with Derrida, who didn't pay enough attention to the tale. The story lets us know, between the lines, that the protagonist Dupin does not escape this irony of fate or compulsive repetition: in figuring himself as Atreus taking revenge from Thyestes, in the story's closing words, the story suggests that the curse that befell the House of Atreus will likewise fall on the self-confident Dupin, and that he too will become a victim of his own plotting.

Whoever has an interpretive scheme has a plan. In my courses on narrative analysis, I tell my students that one must always have a plan, because a plan gives you topsight; it makes you observe from the watchtower of your superior information all those poor individuals walking around without a plan—subordinated to your plan. However, plans will usually fail, and

possibly the most common narrative scheme, together with the heroic quest, is the story of the failure of a plan (García Landa 2006d). One must acknowledge of course that plans often have their own limited or local successes. But even when they succeed, they usually do so in unforeseen ways, a success mixed with failure and luck. These stories can only be told from a higher viewpoint than the original planner's—that is, from the topsight of retrospection.

Similarly, any interpretive strategy can be deconstructed when it is contemplated from the vantage point of a different interpretive project. From there we see what the former critical eye cannot see—the back of the first critic's neck. This vantage point is afforded more particularly by critical criticism—since friendly criticism tends to look with the first critic, from his perspective or as close to it as possible; at most, it adds to that viewpoint an optical instrument which may enhance it. Critical criticism, on the other hand, tries to identify the blind spot in another's reading— although it is not immune, as a reading of Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* shows, to a blindness similar to the one it contemplates in the other. (Note 13).

My argument on Poe's tale has some similarity, then, to Ross Chambers's, who extracts from the story the conclusion that the meaning is not properly speaking in the text (in the letter) but rather in the text's situatedness in an interpretive context, a system of relationships around that text:

> for all its insistence on textual drift and the absent signifier, "The Purloined Letter" does not deny meaning. Rather, it situates it, not in the domain of signs, but in the world of the relationships that signs serve to mediate. Dupin has 'a quarrel on hand . . . with some of the

algebraists of Paris', and his disagreement with these specialists in signs (whose discipline depends precisely on the equivalence and substitutibility of signs) stems from the fact that 'occasions may occur where x2+px is not altogether equal to q', or, in other words, that situations alter the value of signs and meaning is contextual. (Chambers 1988: 303)

Chambers admits, too, that an interpretive article like his seems to assume Dupin's position, but he ends up recognizing the superiority of Poe's text, beyond the previous interpreters. (A conclusion which might seem to defeat his argument… and anyway, isn't Poe's story the richer because of the critical readings it has given rise to?).

In a similar way, Norman Holland recognizes the ingredient of vanity, of masculinist and childish competitiveness, evident in the story's combat of wits—a competitiveness and vanity which is contagious for readers:

I share the ambition Poe reveals in Dupin's disquisition on mathematics, the feeling that his own intellect has powers not granted to lesser beings. How intelligent I thought myself when I was reading this story at thirteen; and I am not entirely over that vanity yet, as you can see by my choosing to write about a story that two major French thinkers have analyzed. They are all to be outwitted, all these fathers like the Prefect or the Minister, or, for that matter, Lacan or Derrida. (Holland 1988: 313)

For Holland, Derrida's reading stems out of a need *not to believe*, to mistrust. (We may recall here Derrida's role as a major theorist of the hermeneutics of suspicion). But even that negativity and absence becomes

pradoxically a kind of presence, he says: "Disbelief is itself a belief in disbelief" (Holland 1988: 316). Interpretations follow a traject which Holland sees as a function of the interpreter's personality—which leads him to argue for a transactional criticism, that is, "a criticism in which the critic works explicitly from his transaction of the text" (1988: 316-17). The advantage of recognizing that personal transaction, according to Holland, is that we use the differences between various readings to enrich our mutual experience of the text. The more so, I would argue, when through our personal transaction we are able to identify and describe elements and processes which are necessarily present (but subconsciously so) in any other personal transaction with the text.

The question remains, however, to which extent can we absorb the negativity of another's reading, a reading which is not our own, in those cases in which that reading does not focus on generally sharable elements in experience. This is the real test for a transactional theory of reading— how to allow for, and assimilate, a transactional experience which is fully *another's*? It seems that there is an element of self-denial or negativity in accepting this otherness, in absorbing or integrating it into the text as we finally see it, after the Other's reading—(perhaps the text-as-transformed-by-Another).

That is why John Muller's Hegelian analysis of negativity in "The Purloined Letter" is especially interesting. Interpretation appears in the guise of a Phenomenology of Spirit, in Hegelian terms. (Hegel, incidentally, provides us with the philosophical model for absolute topsight on the evolution of Spirit and of understanding).

Why is it, Muller wonders, that the subjects in Poe's triangular A-B-C structure have to shift place once they acquire possession of the letter? He answers through an Hegelian interpretation of that triad in terms of thesis – antithesis – synthesis. Consciousness progresses throught the negativity of antithesis (a negation which both transcends and preserves) and the antithesis' own subsequent negation, giving rise to an interpretive synthesis.

> Each moment of this complex process is initially given as if its truth were known with certainty; but as the assumed truth is examined, it is incommensurate with ongoing experience, it is negated and given up in dismay, and a new perspective takes its place. (Muller 1988: 345).

Hegel presents this dialectical process of the overcoming of negativity (*aufhebung,* sublation) as a triadic series of stages of consciousness whose positions are defined as Being "in itself", "for-itself" and "for us". Naturally enough, the final structure of consciousness which emerges as the truth of things as they are is a structure "for us", which according to Hegel is not known to the consciousness we are observing. This places us in a position of topsight. There is a price to be paid for this, Hegel notes—overcoming the resistance of ego, which tends to become fixed in its own position and to resist change or the assimilation of negativity. The ego prefers a familiar state of affairs rather than a change to increased understanding—it is the narcissistic attitude of consciousness, happy with itself and with what it possesses.

But an increased understanding is also an increased acknowledgement of intersubjective experience, through the assimilation of that negative

moment represented by an alien perspective. As Muller observes, it is also in intersubjectivity that human experience is constituted for Hegel, who argues in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that human nature is actually realized only in the achievement of a community of minds. This is an insight that we might relate to symbolic interactionalism and its search for sense in a continual process of transaction which uses semiotic objects (such as texts etc.), rather than searching for sense than in the semiotic objects themselves; that is, the sense is not in the purloined letter but in the use which is made of it.

This would mean that rather than absolute truths, there are localized and contextual truth effects produced through communicative transaction. A truth effect needs, in order to appear to best effect, a dialectical contrast with a false account or explanation, a false consciousness which we contemplate as overcome (*aufgehoben,* from a position of topsight). Truth, insofar as it is the bringing to light of concealed relationships, needs to be contemplated from the outside, panoramically. The semiotic structure which generates truth effects appears fully visible when we observe its operation for others, e.g. when we observe the generation of a truth effect for another mind (a truth we no longer share) for someone whose vision is limited within the semiotic system which generates the effect, while we ourselves contemplate, from an Olympian perspective, both the system which generates sense and the subject's viewpoint positioned to see that truth, as structured or generated by that system. It is this semiotically superior level that Lacan calls "the Symbolic" (vertex C of the triangulation), while he reserves the name of "the Imaginary" (vertex B) for the partial and insufficient system (the one we can easily conceive of as an "effect") which is contained by our own system. (The "Real", by the way, would be vertex A, a blind or unstructured point). In Jane Gallop's reading

of Lacan (1988: 273), "It is the imaginary as imaginary which constitutes the symbolic"—that is, the perception of a semiotic system as the product of a positionality, a desire, an intention—something whose consequences are only perceptible from the outside, from a more elaborate and insightful symbolic position, a more comprehensive interpretive frame—or from the topsight of hindsight.

The imaginary position is narcissistic insofar as it reduces the world to the system it perceives (or rather to the system through which the world is perceived). It does not see how that (imaginary) system acquires a new sense once it is recontextualized: the lynx's eye of the first interpreter is blind to the new context. In the last analysis, the meaning is what we have in front of us, and it is its very immediacy and presence that prevents us from seeing it. Muller quotes a pertinent observation to this effect from Stanley Rosen's book on Hegel: "The essence of visibility, the visible as visible, hence as most fully or actually itself, is invisible" (Rosen 1974, 146). Conversely, the emergence of sense to visibility is only the first step towards its negation or its overcoming from a higher position of consciousness.

> Since what first appeared as the object sinks for consciousness to the level of its way of knowing it, and since the in-itself becomes a *being-for-consciousness* of the in-itself, the latter is now the new object. Herewith a new pattern of consciousness comes on the scene as well, for which the essence is something different from what it was at the preceding stage. It is this fact that guides the entire series of the patterns of consciousness in their necessary sequence. (Hegel 1977, 56; quoted in Muller 1988: 353).

This objectualization of the other's consciousness is for Hegel analytical—we might say *critical*—since it does not limit itself to the reproduction of the structure of the first conscious gaze (B) on the object (A), rather, it captures that perceptual relationship as a new object, from a third conscious standpoint (C). Actually, this standpoint will only be fully objectualized from the vantage point of a fourth position (D)—for the time being, it is not yet an object but only the truth of the relationship A-B as it is manifested to C's topsight. Truth is, as we have argued, a continual process of emergence—that Thought which in Luis Eduardo Aute's song "cannot take seat" ("Que el pensamiento / no puede tomar asiento / Que el pensamiento es estar / siempre de paso / de paso, de paso, de paso").

Thought may be just passing through, but we ourselves remain fixed—especially in our texts—in one of those narcissistic, partial and reified positions, while alien Thoughts go further on and transform us into an object of interpretation and analysis (and laughter sometimes) for other eyes which will observe us, without our being aware of that gaze. Such is the fate of those who are read for their symptoms by critical critics.

Of course this phenomenon is continually taking place simultaneously in millions of local contexts—not just in the grand Hegelian syntesis of an abstract Idea which culminates (not by chance) in Hegel himself as the watchtower of history. One can wonder whether Hegel was not bothered by the suspicion or fear that he might be himself a local object, rather than the prow of Spirit opening its way into the Absolute. Today it appears inevitable to take into account such a dissemination of contexts, which leads us as well to qualify or relativize C's superior perspective over B and A. C sees the relationship between B and A, and what is at issue in their relationship *for C*—but may well be unaware of other things which are at

issue *for them,* that are being seen by B, or by A, not to mention D, another myopic or long-sighted subject.

Returning to Muller's Hegelian interpretation, "The Purloined Letter" might be regarded as a symptom, or an intuition, of that negativity which structures the relationship between action and its interpretation. (One should take into account that linguistic negativity, for Müller, as well as for Benveniste and others, also signals and preserves what has been negated, drawing attention to it as a reference point—besides negating it). As Muller points out, there is a disproportionate amount of negative elements in the verbal surface of Poe's story, and moreover, negativity also organizes its macrostructure, the sequence of narrated events:

> When we examine the story's action from this perspective of negation, we find that the story proceeds as a series of negating actions: that is, each action is a precise negation of a previous action of another and is, in turn, negated in the dialectical shifting of actors' positions. But in each negation the truth of the previous position is preserved. The Queen negates the King's power but preserves its role in her secretiveness as she turns the letter over and puts it down. (Muller 1988: 364)

Muller, too, allegorizes the letter, in line with his own interpretive context, when he sees it in its dynamic character as a "pure signifier" of negativity, and an emblem of the repression which preserves experience in the very act of structuring consciousness around the absence of that repressed gap. This system of repression is identified by him (in a Lacanian mode) with symbolic systems: the subject finds his own limits in symbolic action,

which therefore entails this element of negativity and of delimitation with respect to another's consciousness.

> Psychic structure is established only through that negation to which the subject must submit upon entering the register of the symbolic, and this fundamental splitting of the subject into *an sich* and *für sich* may be understood as constituting primary repression. (Muller 1988: 366)

An interpretive theory, too, is for Muller a system which establishes limits and fixes senses—which constitutes a truth resistant to other systems and to the truths they generate. Truths are for Hegel, in this interpretation which brings him close to pragmatism, or to symbolic interactionalism, communicative effects generated within a specific community.

> For Hegel, truth is always embedded in a community that rests on the structure of language whose history includes 'the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative' ([Hegel]1977, 10). (Muller 367)

This may offer some consolation to people who are considered to be "too negative". Poe himself had much of the negative about him, according to Muller: "For Poe—as for Hegel and Lacan—negation is the dynamic corollary of the ego's self-assured notions about reality" (367).

It is the others—our personal unfriendly critics—who most visibly perform the negative labour of limiting and correcting our egotistic perspectives. But this negative dialectic can also take place within the individual subject—within the self-interacting consciousness which according to

Hegel is intrinsically unsatisfied with its own limits. And therefore it is the path of reflection to burn its own stages or to deconstruct itself, in advance of the Other's more radical negative labour. That is what Solger and Schlegel called romantic irony—the relativization of the attitudes recently assumed by the poetical subject, the continuous frame-breaking of the rules of the subject's games, giving rise to a dynamic self which escapes from external limitations, or self-imposed limitations which are bound to be felt as external ones—

Shedding off one more layer of skin /
Keeping one step ahead of the persecutor within. (Note 14)

NOTES

(Note 1). Fish refers here to the classical version of generative-transformational linguistics formulated by Noam Chomsky in works such as *Syntactic Structures* and *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax.* On this subject see also Jahn (2002). One should note, however, that Fish's statement is not entirely accurate: Chomsky's decontextualized phrases have appeared at least in one specific context, Chomsky's text—and this is a reasoning which cuts both ways.

(Note 2). On the role of retrospection and retroaction in literary criticism, see my papers in *Objects in the Rearview Mirror May Appear Firmer Than They Are.*

(Note 3). My paper "Rereading(,) Narrative(,) Identity(,) and Interaction" provides a preliminary approach to some of these issues.

(Note 4). For a detailed account of the notion of emergence as a process inherent to the nature of reality and human consciousness, and to the temporal and creative unfolding of experience, see George Herbert Mead's *The Philosophy of the Present.* As to Oscar Wilde, my paper "Wilde y el enigma de la esfinge" explores some striking aspects of his interpretive theory expounded in *The Critic as Artist.* See also David Walton's paper on Wilde's critical foresight (1996).

(Note 5). The term is Judith Fetterley's (1978). Cf. the "symptomatic readings" we'll deal with in a minute, and my paper on the transformations of triangular communicative situations when they are interpreted by a third (or rather a fourth) party ("Retroactive Thematization, Interaction ,and Interpretation," 2004).

(Note 6) Cf. Kerby on self-narratives: "A split or noncoincidence in the subject is also apparent here due to the interpretive nature of this participation. One may not, for example, accept the expression as an adequate representative of oneself, which may cause the cycle to continue again. This cycle of ever new signification and appropriation is, of course, none other than the dynamic framework within which personal develoment takes place" (1991: 108). Kerby's account of the self's circular and hermeneutic predicament in achieving interpretation through self-expression is also influenced by Taylor (1985).

(Note 7). These five paragraphs come from my paper "Rereading(,) Narrative(,) Identitty(,) and Interaction".

(Note 8). Porter Abbott also distinguishes a third kind of reading, *adaptive reading,* which uses the text as a starting point for creative textual developments. This is not, therefore, a really interpretive or critical stance, although there are transitional zones between these three kinds of reading. We will address Goffman's conception of symptomatic reading in section 4.

(Note 9). This is the perspective taken by critical egocentrism, memorably formulated by Anatole France in the prologue to *La Vie littéraire.*

(Note 10). Goffman (1970: 9). In his notes to this passage, Goffman refers to work on conversational settings by H. Garfinkel and H. Sacks, and to A. George's book on propaganda analysis (1959), as a good illustration of symptomatic textual analysis.

(Note 11). See Arbib's paper (2000) and my commentary (García Landa 2007).

(Note 12). But the story remains notoriously open to further readings… A commentator in my blog (2007b), Marcos, formulates a number of objections against the Lacanian assumption of a "repeated trajectory". I sum them up here:

> 1) the Queen's position (in the first triangle) and the Minister's (in the second) cannot be equated, because the Queen ignores that the minister may be looking for the desired object. The Queen acts on impulse, which is all she can do, but the Minister's action is "repeating" her gesture is strategic—perhaps inspired by a precedent, the success of the Queen's action. The Minister is actively trying to hide through openness as a chosen strategy.
>
> 2) The object does not even exist for the King. He cannot see because he doesn't know what it is that he should see—there is "nothing" for him to see. But the Police, the Queen's emissaries, know what they are looking for, they know its existence, they have a mission. Their position is completely dissimilar from the King's.
>
> 3) The Minister is an observer: he notes and analyzes other people's moves, while Dupin does not "observe", he analyzes in advance, he foresees other people's actions (which is where the Minister fails lamentably).
>
> Therefore, if there are two triangles, they are anything but a repetition of one another.
> Marcos points out that the story could be read as the conversion of the letter from a non-object (for the King) into an object of desire (for the Minister) because it has become an object in the first place for another (for the Queen). It eventually becomes a scientific object (for Dupin) after it has become an object of bureaucratic-professional labour (for the Police, the silliest subject in this story, the only one who looks for the object but does not find it). Or perhaps a story of how the context, or its knowledge, transforms objects and our relationships to them by developing our perception of those objects.

It would seem that Poe's story is ready now for a new batch of readings.

(Note 13). For a reading of de Man in this light, see García Landa (1998).

(Note 14). Bob Dylan, "Jokerman", from *Infidels*. My account of romantic irony is indebted to Schulz (1973) and Schröder (1981).

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