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# Forum

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## Poetics against Itself

To the Editor:

Roger Seamon's "Poetics against Itself: On the Self-Destruction of Modern Scientific Criticism" (104 [1989]: 294–305) is an excellent clarification of the theoretical situation in American English departments these days. The suggestion the essay partially demonstrates—that "scientific" criticism (or "poetics") often reverts back to the same hermeneutic (or work-interpreting) model it seeks to transcend—is thought-provoking. Still, it seems *prima facie* doubtful that all scientific criticism in the twentieth century has succumbed to this tendency, despite Seamon's telling instances from critics as various as Norman Holland, Northrop Frye, Robert Scholes, and Fredric Jameson.

Yet I would grant the larger implication of Seamon's argument: that "pure" scientific criticism has had relatively small impact on professional academic practice in American criticism—in contrast to the influence of critics who have fudged the scientific rigor of their enterprise by importing terms and goals from the scientific to the hermeneutic level, which for Seamon "marks the point at which the scientific enterprise . . . thereby loses its identity as science" (300).

Lacking in Seamon's analysis is an explanation of why this should be so. Why does this "transference of the idea of an underlying system from literature as a whole to the individual work" occur, and keep on occurring? The question is important, because this shift is indeed "contrary to what theorists claimed was the crucial principle of scientific criticism—the distinction between work and system, interpretation and science, understanding and knowledge" (298).

The answer lies in the nature of the historical and social mission, or function, of most American academic literary work. Despite the chronology implicit in Seamon's outline of the stages of scientific criticism's development in the twentieth century, his approach is essentially synchronic, representing that development as a sequence of logical difficulties overcome and methodological possibilities realized. Such an analysis overlooks, or takes for granted, the fact that almost all of the "self-destructive" process he illuminates has taken place in the United States, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century. In short, his analysis needs a historicist dimension, of the sort he shows to have been the big loser in earlier twentieth-century efforts to devise a model of scientific literary criticism (i.e., the "genetic" model, rather than the victorious linguistic model). The necessary corollary to his essay can be found

in Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. The opposition Seamon shows between scientific and hermeneutic motivations in the study of literary works roughly parallels Graff's demonstration of alternating cycles of dominance by scholarly and by humanist (or aesthetic) poles within the American academic literary profession.

We are, by and large, interpreters, not scientific theorists, by past training and preference, and this accounts in large part for the still strong "resistance to theory" in almost every English department in the land. Furthermore, we teach future readers or interpreters or consumers, not, as most other disciplines do, future scientists or practitioners or producers. People—students and teachers—want to go on enjoying literature qua literature, no matter how problematic that *qua* is rendered by deconstruction, feminism, historicism, reader-response, or other theories. They have no answer to the point that Seamon makes powerfully by citing Roland Barthes and Jonathan Culler: that we have little need any more, as a scientific or intellectual profession, for repeated readings of classic texts. But such readings are what hermeneutics produces—and what it wants to produce.

Hence one might suspect that the constant return to the hermeneutic circle is not the logical error or impersonal process that Seamon presents but a historically determined practice by which many scientific critics show the usefulness of their findings to their audiences, both of peers and of students. Instead of being an internally self-contradictory process, the tendency of scientific criticism to present itself in compromising practical dress is the result of its response to enormous historical, institutional, and social pressures.

But it is also among professors themselves that resistance to the intellectual compromises inherent in such a continued practice has arisen, suggesting that Seamon's implication of a withering away of the scientific critical ideal is not yet justified. Seamon leaves us with the impression that scientific criticism will always and necessarily be undermined by the "subversive secret" of interpretation lurking at its core. Yet deconstructive criticism routinely demonstrates just the opposite: that is, how interpretation is always subverted by the secret of *system* (of language) lurking at *its* core. Contrary to the impression Seamon gives, a professional scientific approach to literary study seems to me to have increasing attractions, despite the dangers of its putative self-destruction.

Viewed pragmatically, a more historicized sense of the intertwined development of scientific and hermeneutic criticism in the United States might provide a way for both to reclaim some of the role and authority of the

public criticism that disappears early from Seamon's analysis—correctly, in terms of the historical presence of that criticism in American academic criticism's social effect. The role of a Hazlitt or an Arnold, of a Raymond Williams or a Lionel Trilling, has unfortunately been lost in our increasingly scientized and professionalized world. The education and production of public critics, informed by both hermeneutic and scientific models, might provide a better goal for our massive English establishment, rather than the present situation, in which the hermeneutic majority produces readings of great private satisfaction but little intellectual utility, while the scientific minority produces theories of great intellectual rigor but little emotional satisfaction or social attractiveness.

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#### Reply:

I agree with all that Johnston says up to the penultimate paragraph. His letter points out omissions and wrong emphases in my essay and thus "thickens" the story. I gave no account, as Johnston does, of *why* critic after critic treads the same path, and I agree that the subversion of science by interpretation is a process much repeated rather than a historical sequence, except perhaps for the general drift from text to reader. My "historical" account now looks like a mythological one; I made a single story out of repeated actions. Or, more generously, one might call it a phenomenological narrative of the critical *geist* in our time. Johnston's account of the outside pressures also seems right to me; however, the fact that institutional imperatives were against scientific criticism logically has no bearing on the theoretical objections to the scientific project that I briefly sketched in an earlier response in the Forum (*PMLA* 105 [1990]: 305–06).

Where I would strongly disagree with Johnston is in his assertion that deconstruction is the exception to my "rule." Quite the reverse. Deconstruction is a powerful interpretive method, not a science of writing. It shows again and again that meaning dissolves under interpretive pressure, just as New Critics repeatedly showed the pervasiveness of deep and previously overlooked organic unity. Deconstruction is, as Paul de Man said, the descendant of New Criticism because it is a form of close reading (*Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986, 23–24; for an account of de Man's relation to New Criticism, see Christopher Norris, *Paul de Man*, New York: Routledge, 1988, 39–40, 173–76). I cannot argue the point here, but I believe that both New