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## NINETEENTH-CENTURY IDEALISM AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY TEXTUALISM

### I

In the last century there were philosophers who argued that nothing exists but ideas. In our century there are people who write as if there were nothing but texts. These people, whom I shall call "textualists," include for example, the so-called Yale school of literary criticism centering around Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartmann, and Paul De Man, "post-structuralist" French thinkers like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, historians like Hayden White, and social scientists like Paul Rabinow. Some of these people take their point of departure from Heidegger, but usually the influence of philosophers is relatively remote. The center of gravity of the intellectual movement in which these people figure is not philosophy, but literary criticism. In this paper I want to discuss some similarities and differences between this movement and nineteenth-century idealism.

The first similarity is that both movements adopt an antagonistic position to natural science. Both suggest that the natural scientist should not be the dominant cultural figure, that scientific knowledge is not what really matters. Both insist that there is a point of view other than, and somehow higher than, that of science. They warn us against the idea that human thought culminates in the application of "scientific method." Both offer to what C. P. Snow called "the literary culture" a self-image, and a set of rhetorical devices.

The second similarity is that both insist that we can never compare human thought or language with bare, unmediated, reality. The idealists started off from Berkeley's claim that nothing can be like an idea except another idea. The textualists start off from the claim that all problems, topics, and distinctions are language-relative—the results of our having chosen to use a certain vocabulary, to play a certain language-game. Both use this point to put natural science in its place. The concepts of natural science, idealists pointed out, were shown by Kant to be merely instruments which the mind uses to synthesize sense-impressions; science, therefore, can know only a phenomenal world. In textualist terms, this becomes the claim that the vocabulary of science is merely one among others—merely the vocabulary which happens to be handy in predicting and controlling nature. It is not as physicalism would have us think, Nature's Own Vocabulary. Both use the

same point to exalt the function of art. For the idealists, art could put us in touch with that part of ourselves—the noumenal, free, spiritual part—which science cannot see. For the textualists, the literary artist's awareness that he is making rather than finding, and more specifically the ironic modernist's awareness that he is responding to texts rather than to things, puts him one up on the scientist. Both movements treat the scientist as naive in thinking that he is doing something *more* than putting together ideas, or constructing new texts.

I hope that these two similarities are enough to justify my attempt to view textualism as the contemporary counterpart of idealism—of the textualists as spiritual descendants of the idealists, the species having adapted to a changed environment. The differences in environment, I shall claim, are due to the fact that in the early nineteenth century there was a well-defined and well-regarded discipline, philosophy, which had claims to be architectonic for culture, and within which metaphysical theses could be argued. In our culture there is no such discipline. Idealism was based upon a metaphysical thesis, but textualism is not. When philosophers like Derrida say things like “there is nothing outside the text” they are not making theoretical remarks, remarks backed up by epistemological or semantical arguments. Rather, they are saying, cryptically and aphoristically, that a certain framework of inter-connected ideas—truth as correspondence, language as picture, literature as imitation, for example—ought to be abandoned. They are not, however, claiming to have discovered the *real* nature of truth or language or literature. Rather, they say that the very notion of discovering the *nature* of such things is part of the intellectual framework which we must abandon—part of what Heidegger calls “the metaphysics of presence,” or “the onto-theological tradition.”

If one repudiates that tradition, one repudiates the notion which once held realists and idealists together in a single enterprise called “philosophy”—the notion that there is a non-empirical quasi-science which can weigh the considerations for and against a certain view of what reality or knowledge is like. When textualists claim that issues such as those between nineteenth century idealists and positivists were created by an outdated vocabulary, and are to be dismissed rather than (as some contemporary analytic philosophers would wish to do) reformulated and made precise, they do not attempt to defend this claim by anything one could call a “philosophical argument.” Textualists sometimes, it is true, simply claim that Heidegger ended metaphysics, just as positivists used to smugly claim that Carnap had. Smugness, however, is all the cases have in common. Heidegger did not announce a new philosophical discovery, in the way in

which Carnap claimed to have discovered something about language. The whole idea of adopting a new vocabulary because *something has been discovered to be the case* is just one more element in that “metaphysics of presence” which Heidegger wants to deconstruct.

I have been saying, first, that idealism and textualism have in common an opposition to the claim of science to be a paradigm of human activity, and, second, that they differ in that one is a philosophical doctrine and the other an expression of suspicion about philosophy. I can put these two points together by saying that whereas nineteenth-century idealism wanted to substitute one sort of science (philosophy) for another (natural science) as the center of culture, twentieth-century textualism wants to place literature in the center, and to treat both science and philosophy as, at best, literary genres. The rest of my paper will be an attempt to refine this crude formula and to make it plausible. I shall begin by defining its component terms in the senses in which I wish to use them.

By ‘science’ I shall mean the sort of activity in which argument is relatively easy—in which one can agree on some general principles which govern discourse in an area, and then aim at consensus by tracing inferential chains between these principles and more particular and more interesting propositions. Philosophy since Kant has purported to be a science which could sit in judgment on all the other sciences. As the science of knowledge, the science of science, *Wissenschaftslehre*, *Erkenntnistheorie*, it claimed to discover those general principles which made scientific discourse scientific, and thus to “ground” both the other sciences and itself.

It is a feature of a science that the vocabulary in which problems are posed is accepted by all those who count as contributing to the subject. The vocabulary may be changed, but that is only because a new theory has been discovered which explains the phenomena better by invoking a new set of theoretical terms. The vocabulary in which the *explananda* are described has to remain constant. It is a feature of what I shall “literature” that one can achieve success by introducing a quite new genre of poem or novel or critical essay without argument. It succeeds simply by its success, not because there are good reasons why poems or novels or essays should be written in the new way rather than the old. There is no constant vocabulary in which to describe the values to be defended or objects to be imitated, or the emotions to be expressed, or whatever, in essays or poems or novels. The reason “literary criticism” is “unscientific” is just that whenever somebody tries to work up such a vocabulary he makes a fool of himself. We don’t *want* works of literature to be criticizable within a terminology we already know; we want both those works and criticism of them to give us *new* terminologies. By

'literature', then, I shall mean the areas of culture which, quite self-consciously, forego agreement on an encompassing critical vocabulary, and thus forego argumentation.

Though obviously crude, this way of separating science and literature has at least the merit of focusing attention on a distinction which is relevant to both idealism and textualism—the distinction between finding out whether a proposition is true and finding out whether a vocabulary is good. Let me call “romanticism” the thesis that what is most important for human life is not what propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use. Then I can say that romanticism is what unites metaphysical idealism and literary textualism. Both, as I said earlier, remind us that scientists do not bring a naked eye to nature, that propositions of science are not simple transcriptions of what is present to the senses. Both draw the corollary that the current scientific vocabulary is one vocabulary among others, and that there is no need to give it primacy, nor to reduce other vocabularies to it. Both see the scientists' claim to discover the ways things really are as needing qualification, as a pretension which needs to be curbed. The scientist, they say, is discovering “merely scientific” or “merely empirical” or “merely phenomenal” or “merely positive” or “merely technical” truths. Such dismissive epithets express the suspicion that the scientist merely goes through mechanical procedures, checking off the truth-value of propositions—behaving like a glorified stock-room clerk inventorying the universe in accord with a predetermined scheme. The sense that science is banal, except perhaps in those rare creative moments when a Galileo or a Darwin suddenly imposes a new scheme, is the essence of romanticism. Romanticism inverts the values which, in the third *Critique*, Kant assigned to the determinate and the reflective judgment. It sees the determinate judgment—the activity which ticks off instances of concepts by invoking common, public, criteria—as producing merely *agreement*. Kant thought “knowledge,” the name for the result of such activity, was a term of praise. Romanticism accepts Kant's point that objectivity is conformity to rule, but changes the emphasis, so that objectivity becomes *mere* conformity to rule, merely going along with the crowd, merely consensus. By contrast, romanticism sees the reflective judgment—the activity of operating without rules, of searching for concepts under which to group particulars (or, by extension, of constructing new concepts which are “transgressive” in that they do not fit under any of the old rules)—as what really matters. Kant, in saying that aesthetic judgment is noncognitive, because it cannot be brought under rules, is assigning it a second-best status—the status which the scientific culture has always assigned to the literary culture. Romanticism, on the other hand, when it says that science is *merely* cognitive, is trying to turn the tables.

I can sum up by saying that post-Kantian metaphysical idealism was a specifically philosophical form of romanticism whereas textualism is a specifically post-philosophical form. In the next section I shall argue that philosophy and idealism rose and fell together. In section III I shall discuss the relation between textualism as post-philosophical romanticism and pragmatism, arguing that pragmatism is, to speak oxymoronically, post-philosophical philosophy. Finally, in section IV, I shall take up some criticisms which apply equally to textualism and to pragmatism.

## II

Maurice Mandelbaum, in his *History, Man and Reason*, tells us that in the post-Enlightenment period “there arose significantly new forms of thought and standards for evaluation” and that throughout this period of about one hundred years—roughly, though not exactly, coincident with the nineteenth century—“there existed only two main streams of philosophic thought, each of which possessed a relatively high degree of continuity . . . metaphysical idealism and positivism.” He defines metaphysical idealism as the view that

within natural human experience one can find the clue to an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality, and this clue is revealed through those traits which distinguish man as a spiritual being.<sup>1</sup>

As Mandelbaum stresses, to take this seriously one has to think that there might *be* such a thing as “the ultimate nature of reality.” One also has to think that science might not be the last word on the subject, even though one does remain “within natural human experience” and does not look for supernatural sources of information. Why would anyone hold either of those beliefs? Why did anyone think that in addition to science there might also be something called “metaphysics”?

If you just spring the question “what is the ultimate nature of reality?” on somebody, he won’t know where to begin. One needs a sense of what some possible answers might be. The Enlightenment had had a simple contrast with which to explain and give sense to the question, the contrast between the world-picture offered by Aquinas and Dante and that offered by Newton and Lavoisier. The one was said to have been produced by superstition and the other by reason. Nobody before Kant suggested that there could be a discipline called “philosophy” which might offer you a third alternative. The so-called “modern philosophers” prior to Kant were not doing something clearly distinguishable from science. Some were psychologists in the manner of Locke and Hume—providing what Kant called a “physiology of the human

understanding” in the hope of doing for inner space what Newton had done for outer space, giving a quasi-mechanical account of the way in which our minds worked. But this was a matter of extending the scientific world-picture, rather than of criticizing or grounding or replacing it. Others were scientific apologists for the religious tradition in the manner of Leibniz, trying to smuggle enough Aristotelian vocabulary back into Cartesian science to have things both ways. But this was, once again, not a matter of criticizing or grounding or replacing science but of tinkering with it in the hope of squeezing in God, Freedom, and Immortality. Hume’s and Leibniz’s conceptions of science were like those of, respectively, B. F. Skinner and LeComte de Noüy. Neither thought that some autonomous discipline, distinct in subject and method from natural science, might demonstrate the truth of a third view about the ultimate nature of reality.

In order to have such a notion one needs an idea of what such an alternative view might be. Idealism—the view that the ultimate nature of reality is “revealed through those traits which distinguish man as a spiritual being” is not just a possibility; it is pretty much the *only* possibility which has ever been offered. But, in Berkeley and Kant, idealism becomes something very different from the tradition which goes back to Anaxagoras and runs through Plato and various forms of Platonism. None of these various suggestions that the material world is unreal were presented as the outcome of scientific argumentation—as a solution to an outstanding scientific difficulty. For Berkeley, however, this is just what idealism was—a neat way of coping with the difficulty which had been created by the new and “scientific” doctrine that the mind perceives only its own ideas. As George Pitcher says, the “beautiful and extravagant” Berkeleian philosophy has among its roots a “sober, well-informed account of . . . sense-perception.”<sup>2</sup> The problem which Berkeley confronted was raised by the fact that, as Hume put it “‘tis universally allowed by philosophers that nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion.”<sup>3</sup> The “philosophers” in question were people like Locke, who were doing what we would call psychology, and especially perceptual psychology. Berkeley took himself out of the running as a psychologist by proposing too “quick and dirty” a solution to the puzzle about which ideas resembled their objects—namely, that “*nothing* can be like an idea except an idea.” This struck his contemporaries as the panpsychist suggestion that all matter is alive strikes present-day evolutionary biologists. The problem is not that it’s a silly idea, but that it is so abstract and empty that it simply doesn’t *help*.

Berkeley, however, is important for an understanding of why idealism was taken seriously, even though his own version is only a curiosity. In

Berkeley idealism is not Platonic other-worldliness but a sober answer to a scientific question, Locke's question about the resemblance of ideas to their objects. Hume proceeded to generalize Locke's question into the question of whether we were entitled to speak of "objects" at all, and this enabled Kant to change a scientific question about psychophysiological mechanisms into a question about the legitimacy of science itself. He did so by making three points:

- (a) one can solve the problem of the nature of scientific truth only by saying that science corresponds to a world which is transcendently ideal, made rather than found
- (b) one can explain the contrast between making and finding, transcendental ideality and transcendental reality, only by contrasting the use of *ideas* to *know* with the use of the *will* to *act*—science with morality
- (c) transcendental philosophy, as the discipline which can rise above both science and morality to allot their respective spheres, replaces science as telling one about the ultimate nature of reality.

Kant thus finessed the Enlightenment notion of an opposition between science and religion, reason and superstition, by taking over an unsolved scientific problem—the nature of knowledge—and transmuting it into an issue about the *possibility* of knowledge. This transmutation was made possible by taking Berkeley's suggestion that "nothing can be like an idea except an idea" seriously, while revising it to read "no idea can be true of anything except a world made of ideas." But this latter notion of a world made of ideas needs to be backed up with an explanation of whose ideas these are. Since Berkeley's God was not available to Kant, he had to create the transcendental ego to do the job. As Kant's successors were quick to point out, the only way we could make sense of the transcendental ego was to identify it with the thinkable but unknowable self who is a moral agent—the autonomous noumenal self.

At this point idealism ceases to be a mere intellectual curiosity. For now it offers us not *just* Berkeley's gimmicky *ad hoc* solution to the problem of the relation between sensations and external objects, but a solution to the problem of how to fit art, religion, and morality into the Galilean world-picture. Once one could see a solution to this slightly shamefaced spiritual difficulty as a corollary to the solution of a perfectly respectable scientific problem, one could see the discipline which offered both solutions as *replacing science*, and making respectable Rousseau's distrust of the Enlightenment. Philosophy thus gets to be both a *science* (for has it not solved a problem science was unable to solve?) and a way to regain what science had



seemed to take away—morality and religion. Morality and religion could now be encompassed within the bounds of reason alone. For reason had been discovered by philosophy to be wider than science, and philosophy had thus shown itself to be a *super-science*.

So far I have been arguing that transcendental idealism was necessary to make sense of the notion that a discipline called “philosophy” could transcend both religion and science by giving you a third, decisive, view about the ultimate nature of reality. The Kantian system, on my account, began by borrowing the prestige of science through its solution to a scientific problem, and then proceeded to demote science to the second rank of cultural activities. It promoted philosophy to the first rank by showing you how to have the best of both religion and science, while looking down on both. Idealism seemed a scientific thesis—a thesis for which one might actually *argue*—because of what Berkeley and Kant had in common, namely, a concern with Locke’s psychological problem about the relation of sensations to their objects. Philosophy came to look like a super-science because of what Kant and Hegel had in common—namely, a solution to the problem of the relation of science to art, morality and religion. One side of transcendental idealism is turned toward Newton, Locke, the way of ideas, and the problem of perception. The other faces toward Schiller, Hegel and romanticism. This ambivalence helps explain why, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, transcendental idealism could look like demonstrable truth. It also helps explain why transcendental philosophy could seem as dramatically new and permanent an addition to culture as Newtonian science had seemed a century earlier. Both illusions were possible only because the prestige of one side of Kant was borrowed by the other side. The argumentative character which the first *Critique* shares with Newton’s *Principia* and Locke’s *Essay* created an aura of *Wissenschaftlichkeit* which stretched over the second and third *Critiques*, and even over Fichte.

The next step in the development of idealism, however, was the beginning of the end for both idealism and philosophy. Hegel decided that philosophy should be speculative rather than merely reflective, changed the name of the Transcendental Ego to “the Idea,” and began treating the vocabulary of Galilean science as simply one among dozens of others in which the Idea chose to describe itself. If Kant had survived to read the *Phenomenology* he would have realized that philosophy had only managed to stay on the secure path of a science for about twenty-five years. Hegel kept the name of “science” without the distinctive mark of science—willingness to accept a neutral vocabulary in which to state problems, and thereby make argumentation possible. Under cover of Kant’s invention, a new super-science called “philosophy,” Hegel invented a literary genre which lacked any

trace of argumentation, but which obsessively captioned itself *System der Wissenschaft* or *Wissenschaft der Logik*, or *Encyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*.

By the time of Marx and Kierkegaard, everybody was saying that the emperor had no clothes—that whatever idealism might be it was not a demonstrable, quasi-scientific thesis. By the end of the century (the time of Green and Royce) idealism had been trimmed back to its Fichtean form—an assemblage of dusty Kantian arguments about the relation between sensation and judgment, combined with intense moral earnestness. But what Fichte had been certain was both demonstrable truth and the beginning of a new era in human history, Green and Royce disconsolately knew to be merely the opinion of a group of professors. By the end of the century the word ‘philosophy’ had become what it remains today—merely the name, like the words ‘classics’ and ‘psychology’, for an academic department where memories of youthful hope are cherished, and wistful yearnings for recapturing past glories survive. We philosophy professors stand to Kant and Fichte as our colleagues in classics stand to Scaliger and Erasmus, or our colleagues in psychology to Bain and Spencer. Philosophy is an autonomous academic discipline with pretensions to be architectonic for culture as a whole not because we can justify either the autonomy or the pretension but because the German idealists told us that such a discipline was the hope of mankind. But now that idealism is no longer *anybody’s* opinion, now that realism-vs.-idealism is something one learns about only in history books, philosophers have lost the conviction that they can tell one about the ultimate nature of reality, or of anything else. They vaguely feel that it is their birthright to preside over the rest of culture, but they cannot figure out how to justify their claim. If I am right in my historical account, philosophers will not regain their old position unless they can once again offer a view about the ultimate nature of reality to compete with that of science. Since idealism is the only interesting suggestion along these lines they have come up with, only if they can resurrect idealism will the rest of culture take their pretensions seriously. The one event seems as unlikely as the other.

### III

What survived from the disappearance of metaphysical idealism as a scientific, arguable, thesis was, simply, romanticism. In section I, I defined ‘romanticism’, unromantically, as the thesis that the one thing needful was to discover not which propositions are true but rather what vocabulary we should use. This may sound both vague and innocuous, but I think that nevertheless it is the best formula to express the sense of liberation from

science which was Hegel's legacy to the nineteenth century. Hegel left Kant's ideal of philosophy-as-science a shambles, but he did, as I have said, create a new literary genre, a genre which exhibited the relativity of significance to choice of vocabulary, the bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the intrinsic instability of each. Hegel made unforgettably clear the deep self-certainty given by each achievement of a new vocabulary, each new genre, each new style, each new dialectical synthesis—the sense that now, at last, for the first time, we have grasped things as they truly are. He also made unforgettably clear why such certainty lasts but a moment. He showed how the passion which sweeps through each generation serves the cunning of reason, providing the impulse which drives that generation to self-immolation and transformation. He writes in that tone of belatedness and irony which, as Snow rightly says, is characteristic of the literary culture of the present day.

Hegel's romantic description of how thought works is appropriate for post-Hegelian politics and literature and almost entirely inappropriate for science. One can respond to this difference by saying "So much the worse for Hegel," or by saying "So much the worse for science." The choice between those responses is a choice between Snow's "two cultures" (and between "analytic" and "Continental" philosophy, which are, so to speak, the public relations agencies for those two cultures). From Hegel on, intellectuals who wished to transform the world or themselves, who wished for more than science could give, felt entitled simply to *forget* about science. Hegel had put the study of nature in its place—a relatively low one. Hegel had also shown that there can be a kind of rationality without argumentation, a rationality which works outside the bounds of what Kuhn calls a "disciplinary matrix," in an ecstasy of spiritual freedom. Reason cunningly employed Hegel, contrary to his own intentions, to write the charter of our modern literary culture. This is the culture which claims to have taken over and reshaped whatever is worth keeping in science, philosophy, and religion—looking down on all three from a higher standpoint. It claims to be the guardian of the public weal—Coleridge's "clerisy of the nation." This culture stretches from Carlyle to Isaiah Berlin, from Matthew Arnold to Lionel Trilling, from Heine to Sartre, from Baudelaire to Nabokov, from Dostoevsky to Doris Lessing, from Emerson to Harold Bloom. Its luxuriant complexity cannot be conveyed simply by conjoining words like 'poetry', 'the novel', and 'literary criticism'. This culture is a phenomenon the Enlightenment could not have anticipated. Kant has no place for it in his threefold division of possible human activities into scientific cognition, moral action, and the free play of the cognitive faculties in aesthetic enjoyment. But it is as if Hegel knew all about this culture before its birth.

I would claim, then, that the principal legacy of metaphysical idealism is the ability of the literary culture to stand apart from science, to assert its spiritual superiority to science, to claim to embody what is most important for human beings. Kant's suggestion that using the vocabulary of *Verstand*, of science, was simply *one* of the good things human beings could do, was a first and absolutely crucial step in making a secular but non-scientific culture respectable. Hegel's inadvertent exemplification of what such a culture could offer—namely, the historical sense of the relativity of principles and vocabularies to a place and time, the romantic sense that everything can be changed by talking in new terms—was the second, no less necessary step. The romanticism which Hegel brought to philosophy reinforced the hope that literature might be the successor subject to philosophy—that what the philosophers had been seeking, the inmost secrets of the spirit, were to be discovered by the new literary genres which were emerging.

There was, however, a third step in the process of establishing the autonomy and supremacy of the literary culture. This was the step taken by Nietzsche and William James. Their contribution was to replace romanticism by pragmatism. Instead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, they said that new ways of speaking could help get us what we want. Instead of hinting that literature might succeed philosophy as discoverer of ultimate reality, they gave up the notion of truth as a correspondence to reality. Nietzsche and James said, in different tones of voice, that philosophy *itself* had only the status which Kant and Fichte had assigned to science—the creation of useful or comforting pictures. Nietzsche and James interpreted metaphysical idealism, and, more generally, the metaphysical urge to say something about “the ultimate nature of reality,” in psychological terms. Marx, of course, had already done this, but, unlike Marx, James and Nietzsche did not attempt to formulate a new philosophical position from which to look down on idealism. Instead, they self-consciously abandoned the search for an Archimedean point from which to survey culture. They abandoned the notion of philosophy as super-science. They applied Kant's and Hegel's metaphors of making (as opposed to traditional realist metaphors of finding) not only to Kant and Hegel but to *themselves*. As Nietzsche said, they were the first generation not to believe that they had the truth. So they were content to have *no* answer to the question “Where do you stand when you say all these terrible things about other people?” They were content to take the halo off words like ‘truth’ and ‘science’ and ‘knowledge’ and ‘reality’, rather than offering a view about the nature of the things named by these words.

This replacement of romanticism by pragmatism within philosophy was paralleled by a change in the literary culture's self-conception. The great

figures of that culture in our century—the great “modernists,” if you like—have tried to show what our lives might be like if we had no hope of what Nietzsche called “metaphysical comfort.” The movement I am calling “textualism” stands to pragmatism and to this body of literature as the nineteenth-century attempt to make literature a discoverer of ultimate truth stood to metaphysical idealism and to Romantic poetry. I think we shall best understand the role of textualism within our culture if we see it as an attempt to think through a thorough-going pragmatism, a thorough-going abandonment of the notion of *discovering the truth* which is common to theology and to science.

M. H. Abrams, in an essay about what he calls “Newreading” and I am calling “textualism,” opposes it to the traditional “humanistic” conception. He states that conception as follows:

the author actualizes and records in words what he undertakes to signify of human beings and actions about matters of human concern, addressing himself to those readers who are competent to understand what he has written. The reader sets himself to make out what the author has designed and signified, through putting into play a linguistic and literary expertise that he shares with the author. By approximating what the author undertook to signify the reader understands what the language of the work means.<sup>4</sup>

The textualist conception of criticism, however, brushes aside what the author undertook to signify and takes one or the other of two quite different tacks. The first tack is, to quote Edward Said, to treat the text

as working alone within itself, as containing a privileged, or, if not privileged, then unexamined and a priori, principle of internal coherence; on the other hand, the text is considered as in itself a sufficient cause for certain very precise effects it has on a (presumed) ideal reader.<sup>5</sup>

Alternatively, however, the textualist may brush aside the notion of the text as machine which operates quite independently of its creator, and offer what Bloom calls a “strong misreading.” The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary—a “grid,” in Foucault’s terminology—on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens. The model here is not the curious collector of clever gadgets taking them apart to see what makes them work and carefully ignoring any extrinsic end they may have, but the psychoanalyst blithely interpreting a dream or a joke as a symptom of homicidal mania.

It is important for an understanding of textualism to see both the similarities and the differences between these two models of criticism. The chief similarity is that both start from the pragmatist refusal to think of truth as correspondence to reality. The kind of textualist who claims to have gotten the secret of the text, to have broken its code, prides himself on not being distracted by anything which the text might previously have been thought to be about or anything its author says about it. The strong misreader, like Foucault or Bloom, prides himself on the same thing, on being able to get more out of the text than its author or its intended audience could possibly have found there. Both break with the realism illustrated by the passage I have cited from Abrams. But they differ in that the first kind of critic is only a half-hearted pragmatist. He thinks that there really is a secret code and that once it's discovered we shall have gotten the text right. He believes that criticism is discovery rather than creation. The strong misreader doesn't care about the distinction between discovery and creation, finding and making. He doesn't think this is a useful distinction, anymore than Nietzsche or James did. He is in it for what he can get out of it, not for the satisfaction of getting something right.

I can restate this contrast in another way which may make somewhat clearer what I have in mind. Abram's "humanistic" critic thinks that there is a large, overarching, communal vocabulary in which one can describe what various works of literature are about. The first sort of textualists—the weak textualist—thinks that each work has its own vocabulary, its own secret code, which may not be commensurable with that of any other. The second sort of textualist—the strong textualist—has his own vocabulary and doesn't worry about whether anybody shares it. On the account I am offering, it is the strong textualist who is the true heir of Nietzsche and James, and thus of Kant and Hegel. The weak textualist—the decoder—is just one more victim of realism, of the "metaphysics of presence." He thinks that if he stays within the boundaries of a text, takes it apart, and shows how it works, then he will have "escaped the sovereignty of the signifier," broken with the myth of language as mirror of reality, and so on. But in fact he is just doing his best to imitate science—he wants a *method* of criticism, and he wants everybody to agree that he has cracked the code. He wants all the comforts of consensus, even if only the consensus of readers of the literary quarterlies, just as the microbiologist wants the comfort of consensus, if only that of the other three hundred microbiologists who understand his jargon and care about his problem. The strong textualist is trying to live without that comfort. He recognizes what Nietzsche and James recognized, that the idea of *method* presupposes that of a *privileged vocabulary*, the vocabulary which gets to the

essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself as opposed to those which read into it. Nietzsche and James said that the notion of such a vocabulary was a myth—that even in science, not to mention philosophy, we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want.

I can summarize what I've been saying as follows. Metaphysical idealism was a momentary, though important, stage in the emergence of romanticism. The notion that philosophy might replace science as a secular substitute for religion was a momentary, though important, stage in the replacement of science by literature as the presiding cultural discipline. Romanticism was *aufgehoben* in pragmatism, the claim that the significance of new vocabularies was not their ability to decode but their mere utility. Pragmatism is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism, the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience or its discovery of pre-existing significance. Strong textualism draws the moral of modernist literature and creates genuinely modernist criticism.

This summary puts me in a position to return to the somewhat artificial parallel I drew at the beginning of this paper—between the claim that there are only ideas and the claim that there are only texts. The only textualists who make the latter, metaphysical-sounding sort of claim, are the weak ones—the critics who think that they have now found the true method for analyzing literary works because they have now found the fundamental problematic with which these works deal. This sort of claim gets made because such critics have not grasped that, from a full-fledged pragmatist point of view, there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, between protons and poems. To a pragmatist, these are *all* just permanent possibilities for use, and thus for redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation. But the weak textualist thinks, with Dilthey and Gadamer, that there is a great difference between what scientists do and what critics do.<sup>6</sup> He thinks that the fact that the former often agree and the latter usually don't shows something about the natures of their respective subject-matters, or about the special epistemological difficulties encountered by their respective methods. The strong textualist simply asks himself the same question about a text which the engineer or the physicist asks himself about a puzzling physical object: how shall I describe this in order to get it to do what I want? Occasionally a great physicist or a great critic comes along and gives us a new vocabulary which enables us to do a lot of new and marvelous things. Then we may exclaim that we have now found out the true nature of matter, or poetry, or whatever. But Hegel's ghost, embodied in Kuhn's romantic philosophy of science or Bloom's philosophy of romantic poetry, reminds us

that vocabularies are as mortal as men. The pragmatist reminds us that a new and useful vocabulary is just *that*, not a sudden unmediated vision of things or texts as they are.

As usual with pithy little formulae, the Derridean claim that “There is nothing outside the text” is right about what it implicitly denies and wrong about what it explicitly asserts. The *only* force of saying that texts do not refer to non-texts is just the old pragmatist chestnut that any specification of a referent is going to be in some vocabulary. Thus one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing rather than a description with the thing-in-itself. This chestnut, in turn, is just an expanded form of Kant’s slogan that “Intuitions without concepts are blind,” which, in turn, was just a sophisticated restatement of Berkeley’s ingenuous remark that “nothing can be like an idea except an idea.” These are all merely misleading ways of saying that we shall not see reality plain, unmasked, naked to our gaze. Textualism has nothing to add to this claim except a new misleading image—the image of the world as consisting of everything written in all the vocabularies used so far. The practices of the textualists have nothing to add save some splendid examples of the fact that the author of a text did not know a vocabulary in which his text can usefully be described. But this insight—that a person’s own vocabulary of self-description is not necessarily the one which helps us understand him—does not need any metaphysical or epistemological or semantic back-up. It is the sort of claim which becomes convincing only through the accumulation of examples of the practices it inspires. Strong textualists like Bloom and Foucault are busy providing us with such examples.

I conclude, therefore, that textualism has nothing to add to romanticism and pragmatism save instances of what can be achieved once one stops being bothered by realistic questions such as “Is that what the text really *says*?” or “How could one *argue* that that is what the poem is really *about*?” or “How are we to distinguish between what is in the text from what the critic is imposing upon it?” The claim that the world is nothing but texts is simply the same sort of light-hearted extravagance as the claim that it is nothing but matter in motion, or a permanent possibility of sensation, or the sensible material of our duty. Taken in a strong and ironic sense, the claim that everything is texts can be read as saying: “It makes as much sense to say that atoms are simply Democritean texts as to say that Democritus is merely a collection of atoms. That is because both slogans are attempts to give one vocabulary a privileged status, and are therefore equally silly.” Taken in a weakly literal-minded sense, however, this claim is just one more metaphysical thesis. There are, alas, people nowadays who owlishly inform us “philosophy has *proved*” that language does not refer to anything non-linguistic, and thus that everything one can talk about is a text. This claim is on a par with the claim that Kant



proved that we cannot know about things-in-themselves. Both claims rest on a phony contrast between some sort of non-discursive unmediated vision of the real and the way we actually talk and think. Both falsely infer from “We can’t think without concepts, or talk without words” to “We can’t think or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk.”

The *weakest* way to defend the plausible claim that literature has now displaced religion, science and philosophy as the presiding discipline of our culture is by looking for a philosophical foundation for the practises of contemporary criticism.<sup>7</sup> That would be like defending Galilean science by claiming that it can be found in the Scriptures, or defending transcendental idealism as the latest result of physiological research. It would be acknowledging the authority of a deposed monarch in order to buttress the claims of a usurper. The claims of a usurping discipline to preside over the rest of culture can only be defended by an exhibition of its ability to put the other disciplines in their places. This is what the literary culture has been doing recently, with great success. It is what science did when it displaced religion and what idealist philosophy did when it briefly displaced science. Science did not *demonstrate* that religion was false, nor philosophy that science was merely phenomenal, nor can modernist literature or textualist criticism *demonstrate* that the “metaphysics of presence” is an out-dated genre. But each in turn has managed, without argument, to make its point.

#### IV

In saying that textualism adds nothing save an extra metaphor to the romanticism of Hegel and the pragmatism of James and Nietzsche, I am agreeing with critics of textualism, like Gerald Graff. Graff rightly says that current fashions in literary criticism continue to develop the themes already stated in New Criticism—“modernist assumptions about language, knowledge, and experience”<sup>8</sup>—assumptions he opposes to the older view that literature can “contribute to man’s understanding of how things really are, not merely how they appear to our consciousness.”<sup>9</sup> He is also right in saying that only rarely is any argument given to support these assumptions. But I think he is wrong in saying that

from the thesis that language cannot correspond to reality, it is a short step to the current revisionist mode of interpretation that specializes in reading all literary works as commentaries on their own epistemological problematics.<sup>10</sup>

It is in fact a rather long step, and a step backward. The tendency Graff speaks of is real enough, but it is a tendency to think that literature can take the place of philosophy by *mimicking* philosophy—by being, of all things,

*epistemological*. Epistemology still looks classy to weak textualists. They think that by viewing a poet as having an epistemology they are paying him a compliment. They even think that in criticizing his theory of knowledge they are being something more than a mere critic—being, in fact, a philosopher. Thus conquering warriors might mistakenly think to impress the populace by wrapping themselves in shabby togas stripped from the local senators. Graff and others who have pointed to the weirdly solemn pretentiousness of much recent textualist criticism are right, I think, in claiming that such critics want to have the supposed prestige of philosophy without the necessity of offering arguments.

Where I chiefly differ from Graff, however, is in his claim that

writing, to be effective, has to spring from a coherent and convincing philosophy of life—or at least of that part of life with which the writer deals. There seems no way of getting away from the fact that literature must have an ideology—even if this ideology is one that calls all ideologies into question. The very act of denying all “naive” realisms presupposes an objective standpoint.<sup>11</sup>

This seems to me wrong as a statement about effective writing. It would force one to say either that Baudelaire and Nabokov did not write effectively or that their ironism expressed a “coherent and convincing philosophy of life.” Neither alternative is attractive. It also seems wrong about what is required to deny the truth of realism. One *can* do that without proposing an “objective” theory about the real nature of reality or knowledge or language. It is just not the case that one need adopt one’s opponents’ vocabulary or method or style in order to defeat him. Hobbes did not have theological arguments against Dante’s world-picture; Kant had only a very bad scientific argument for the phenomenal character of science; Nietzsche and James did not have epistemological arguments for pragmatism. Each of these thinkers presented us with a new form of intellectual life, and asked us to compare its advantages with the old. Strong textualists are currently presenting us with such another new form of life. There is as little point in asking for epistemological arguments in its favor as in pretending that it gives us a new and better way of doing epistemology.

The serious objections to textualism, I think, are not epistemological but moral. Writers such as Lionel Trilling and M. H. Abrams would join Graff in offering such objections. Abrams sympathizes with Bloom in his protests against Derrida’s and Foucault’s attempt to eliminate the author of a text, and to substitute inhuman intertextuality for human influence. But he is unable to accept Bloom’s self-descriptions of his books on Yeats and Stevens as “strong misreadings.” He thinks Bloom often gets Yeats and Stevens right, in a good old-fashioned realist sense of “right,” and he wants Bloom to admit

it. He wants this, I think, because he wants Yeats and Stevens to be more than grist for their successors' mills. He thinks their moral integrity is impugned by Bloom's treatment. Further, he wants literary criticism to be a field in which one can argue, and thus one in which one is *not* free to lay down any grid one pleases in the hope of getting "creative or interesting mis-readings."<sup>12</sup>

Though Abrams admits that what he calls "Newreading" can provide "new and exciting things to say about a literary work which has been again and again discussed," he thinks that the "choice between a radical Newreading and the old way of reading is a matter of cultural cost-accounting":

What we lose is access to the inexhaustible variety of literature as determinably meaningful texts by, for and about human beings, as well as access to the enlightening things that have been written about such texts by the humanists and critics who were our precursors, from Aristotle to Lionel Trilling.<sup>13</sup>

Implicit in this remark is the moral outlook which Abrams shares with Trilling: the view that, in the end, when all the intellectuals have done all their tricks, morality remains widely shared and available to reflection—something capable of being discovered rather than created, because already implicit in the common consciousness of everyone. It is this Kantian conviction, I think, which leads Trilling to protest against one of the most distinctive features of romanticism and of our literary culture, its ability to make what Trilling called "figures" out of writers—a term which he defines as follows:

figures—that is to say, creative spirits whose work requires an especially conscientious study because in it are to be discerned significances, even mysteries, even powers, which carry it beyond what in a loose and general sense we call literature, beyond even what we think of as very good literature, and bring it to as close an approximation of a sacred wisdom as can be achieved in our culture.<sup>14</sup>

Here Trilling echoes what Kant said about the "metaphysics of the schools"—about learned men who claim to know more of morality and its supposed "foundations" than the ordinary decent citizen. This is the side of Kant which is turned towards the Enlightenment rather than towards Hegel and romanticism. It is the side which is democratic rather than elitist, which regards culture as in the service of the people (rather than, as with Hegel, conversely.) Trilling and Abrams and Graff do not want there to *be* a sacred wisdom which takes precedence over the common moral consciousness. Therefore they resist the romantic attempt to make a "figure" out of a poet and also the suggestion that a misreader has no obligation to argue with those who disagree with his reading. Because they want criticism to bring an antecedent morality to light, enlarge upon it and enrich it, they resist the sug-

gestion that there is no common vocabulary in terms of which critics can argue with one another about how well this task has been performed.

This moral objection to textualism is also a moral objection to pragmatism's claim that all vocabularies, even that of our own liberal imagination, are temporary historical resting-places. It is also an objection to the literary culture's isolation from common human concerns. It says that people like Nietzsche and Nabokov and Bloom and Foucault achieve their effects at a moral cost which is too much to pay. Put in the pragmatist's own preferred cost-accounting terms, it says that the stimulus to the intellectual's private moral imagination provided by his strong misreadings, by his search for sacred wisdom, is purchased at the price of his separation from his fellow-humans.<sup>15</sup>

I think that this moral objection states the really important issue about textualism and about pragmatism. But I have no ready way to dispose of it. I should like to do so by drawing a further distinction among strong textualists—a distinction between, for example, Bloom and Foucault. Bloom is a pragmatist in the manner of James, whereas Foucault is a pragmatist in the manner of Nietzsche. Pragmatism appears in James and Bloom as an identification with the struggles of finite men. In Foucault and Nietzsche it appears as contempt for one's own finitude, as a search for some mighty inhuman force to which one can yield up one's identity. Bloom's way of dealing with texts preserves our sense of a common human finitude by moving back and forth between the poet and his poem. Foucault's way of dealing with texts is designed to eliminate the author—and indeed the very idea of “man”—altogether. I have no wish to defend Foucault's inhumanism, and every wish to praise Bloom's sense of our common human lot. But I do not know how to back up this preference with argument, or even with a precise account of the relevant differences. To do so, I think, would involve a full-scale discussion of the possibility of combining private fulfillment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice.

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#### NOTES

1. Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 6.
2. George Pitcher, *Berkeley* (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 4.
3. David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* I, ii, 2.

4. M. H. Abrams, "How to Do Things with Texts," *Partisan Review* vol. 46 (1979).

5. Edward Said, "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism," *Contemporary Literature* vol. 17 (Summer, 1976): 337. In this article Said draws a distinction between Bloom and Foucault (and others such as Bate and Lukacs) on the one hand and textualist critics who exemplify the approach described in the passage I have quoted. This roughly parallels my distinction between strong and weak textualists, but Said puts the difference in terms of "formality vs. materiality," rather than in terms of a half-hearted and a whole-hearted pragmatism.

6. On this point, see my remarks directed at Charles Taylor's Diltheyan views in a symposium called "What Is Hermeneutics?" forthcoming in *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 33 (1980).

7. Thus when Geoffrey Hartman says, in the preface to *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, p. 6) that it would be fruitful for literary criticism and philosophy to interact, he strikes me as simply being courteous to a defeated foe. But perhaps he may be read simply as saying, quite rightly, that it would be useful if people who had read a lot of philosophy books would join with people who had read a lot of poetry and novels in relating these two streams of texts to one another.

8. Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 5.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

12. Cf. Abrams, "How to . . .," pp. 584–85.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 588.

14. Lionel Trilling, "Why We Read Jane Austen" in *The Last Decade* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 206–07.

15. I have discussed, inconclusively, the claim that pragmatism is morally dangerous in "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," forthcoming in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 53 (1980).