Timothy,

An intelligent and well-developed response to Fish's argument. A couple of points, though. There is basic tension in your claim on page 2 that (1) author's intentions are important only insofar as they feed into the intended reader, so that time and place of the work are fundamental, and (2) the surrender of a text for public consumption. If one were to give priority to (1), as you suggest, it would be difficult for texts to have an "afterlife". In other words, the implicit assumption that the kinds of meanings derived by a reader who "identifies" as it were with, say, a seventeenth century reader are more valid is problematic both because one would first have to specify (as a 20th c. reader) how that 17th c. reader would read (which already involves interpretation), and because the surrender of the text to public consumption doesn't necessarily require us to prioritise the consumption by a <u>particular</u> public. Indeed, I would say that a great number of very productive readings of Renaissance texts come precisely from using strategies that would not have been "contemporary" with the artist. (There is another interesting problem here: that of the extent to which "our" strategies are to be related to and develop from "their" reading strategies.) Thus, while the statistical frequency of words may not be a meaningful tool for reading texts in the past, it is not clear that turning to them is entirely valueless (one can, after all, posit, shall we say, an "unconscious" of a text in which certain words recur in interesting ways, and we might be able to describe a pattern of recurrence, for example, of the repeated use of the word 'nothing' in Shakespeare's Lear, though in that case it is hard to decide on whether that is conscious or unconscious). And the pentameter is another interesting case for it becomes a purely inherited and conventional form: there is in a fundamental sense nothing "natural" about the form. So, while you are right to say, it is likely that the pentameter would have mattered to, say, Shakespeare, they are actually no more "natural" than syllable counting, even if treated as such by writers and readers. It simply means that you would have to employ a different logic, posit a different kind of relationship between text and meaning depending on whether you deploy syllable counting or the line break as your "formal unit."

But, a nice paper. Well done.

Madan,

A good and engaging response, though in a certain sense it would have been stronger had you pursued your idea of abstraction further rather than jumping to different, though related, questions! The fundamental question is a very good one, though I would probably use something like "formal units" rather than abstraction (since abstract/concrete opposition is a rather tricky one). Your characterisation of abstraction as the separating "interface" from "implementation" is especially intriguing: what would these terms correspond to? Is implementation the text itself or the units out of which the text is comprised? Is the interface the process in the reader's mind (that is, more generally, the interpretive strategy) or the text? Or is the something the text or its meaning? As you can see, there is some clarification that is necessary here. Second, to what extent is the definition of the formal unit dependent upon the concrete instance? Are these cleanly separable? (I don't know the answer to this one either!) The point you make

in your second paragraph is an important one, and indeed, one I think of importance to many of the critical paradigms we are exploring. It is fundamentally the question of what formal units we take to be "natural" and therefore accept without questioning (for example, the existence of words, or paragraphs, or line breaks). Both Fish and others question the idea of the "natural" and argue that the natural results from a process (differently described) of naturalisation, that is, that the natural is on one level just as "constructed" as things that seem explicitly to be constructed.

I could go on, but I think you have raised (and "abstracted") an interesting general question from the specific theories, and it is certainly one worth pursuing further.

Well done

Jyoti,

An interesting and intelligent response that tackles the thorny problem of authorial intention head on. The dimension that seems missing, however, in your critique of how Fish equates authorial intention with the reader's "realisation" (making real) of it through the reading process is the extent to which the first half of the essay rests upon formal, "objective" textual structures (line breaks, for example). These would, in Fish's view, provide a series of controls on the number of interpretations. In other words, he does not seem to believe that the every individual reader will generate an utterly individual response based upon that particular reader's unique mode of being and existence. Rather, the notion of the reader is a formal construct that is tied to the formal features of the text. There is certainly a problem here (as he himself recognises) of relating the claim to the specificity of experience in real readers to the formal notion of the reader. And here, as you rightly suggest, the possibility of infinite readings emerges again. But the infinity of possible readings is not really something he sees as a problem (and why would this be unrealistic?). His problem is rather the reverse: the empirical fact that interpretations don't seem to be infinite despite the possibility. That is, if we look around, we see a finite group---not that readings are identical, but that we can empirically say that this set of readings, despite their variations, are largely all of the same type or say roughly similar sorts of things. It is to explain this that he is forced to the notion of interpretive communities which constrain the types of explanations one provides and do so to a large extent by specifying the "formal units" that are seen as bearing meaning or being meaningful. Authorial intention then would seem ultimately to be of little importance, since it is purely a back-construction, an effect of the reading strategy itself. That is, what an interpretation calls "intention" is merely other side of what its reading strategy allows it to discover as "meaning". It is in this sense that these two remain for Fish indivisible--- not because he wants to go back to the "real" intention of the author (he would agree with you, this is a useless and futile task) but because he seems to think that "intention" is simply the name we give to whatever we get in the process of enjoying the ride (the ride and the enjoyment being different depending on what strategy we follow).

A good job all in all. Keep it up! B+/A-

Leila,

This is a good response, and it is nice to see that Fish has one convert! The interesting thing about New Criticism, though, is the extent to which New Critical readings of poems routinely rest upon the notions of paradox and ambiguity. (Brooks' reading of the Urn, for example, grows out of and repeatedly returns to the paradox of the urn, static/dynamic and so on). Thus, in a manner of speaking, one might argue that the kind of tension that Fish marks as part of the reader's experience can in a New Critical reading be taken into the text itself---that is, one may not have to choose between one New Critical reading and another but posit a third New Critical reading that focuses precisely on the ambiguity and paradox (not as reader's response but as something "in" the text itself). In this sense, Fish and New Criticism may not be so far apart as Fish would like to think---his defence of affective reading, for example, does not seem to coincide exactly with what the New Critics think of as "affect": emotional response. Fish's "affects" are less the reader's feelings or emotions but formal and linguistic effects that he links to the temporal unfolding of a poem. Indeed, your final suggestion that we see "ambiguities in a text as an integral part of the work" reflects the practice of much New Criticism and thus interestingly reveals the commonalities between Fishean Reader Response and it.

A very clear, cogent and coherent development of the argument. Well done.

A-

Shankar

An engaging and imaginative response to Structuralism and New Criticism (and a nice title, too). I find your suggestion that we use NC to specify our "object" and to provide the means through which to convert structuralist "oppositions" into meaning quite intriguing. What might have been useful though is to have come up with some concrete instance of such a combination. I think you are right to claim that these theories are not in themselves necessarily incompatible, and that they aim as it were of different levels of the text (deep structure and surface structure, generally speaking). Of course, as the reading of Freud's theory of dreams suggest, the problem still unresolved here is the movement from depth to surface structure, and this presumably is where you would wish to locate reader-response theory. The other sticking point has to do with an implicit assumption that these different terms are in fact cleanly separable from one another. The question is, is that the case or does, for example, a sense of surface structure shape or influence what we take to be the deep structural oppositions (or vice versa). And finally, we might ask what effect the exclusion that creates the text has on the text? This would be the Derridean question of the frame…

Nice job!

A-/B+

Emily,

A good response paper, though your writing needs a little work. I have edited your second paragraph carefully to indicate what you need to focus on. As you can see, the main flaws tend to be (1) overuse of "is" or some form of "to be" as the main verb (2) insufficient use of adverbial or logical connectors (whereas, either, instead). Keep an eye out for these sorts of habits when you edit your paper, for the flabbiness in the writing tends to weaken an otherwise clear and intelligent summary of the arguments you are dealing with.

(1) A good summary, though two things need to be added to this: first, that Fish's initial position involves the text as providing the formal units that constrain readerly experience. So that while in theory every reader has his/her own response (and therefore there are potentially infinite interpretations), since response is construed not as emotional affect but as structures of potential meaning driven by the text, that infinity is quickly reduced. Second, the empirical fact that readings of a particular text seem to be limited. That is, while in theory infinite readings are possible, it turns out that we can pretty much identify in practice a limited range of groups or types of interpretation (hence the move to interpretive communities to explain both the limits and the variation).
(2) A fair criticism, though I suppose if one were to defend NC one would argue that what they do is allow specification of the object (the text) as opposed to earlier critical modes where the boundaries of what was to be analysed were utterly fuzzy. By constraining what one studies and what one is allowed to bring to bear on the text from the outside, one constitutes an object whose being one can study (because one knows what it is, so to speak). And if things like "syntactical elements" are treated as being actually there, in the work, then the fact that an individual reader does not see them marks a readerly failure and thus the weakness of that interpretation, since a proper interpretation would have to take into account (from their point of view) what is undeniably there in the text.
(3) An interesting turn, but there is a big divide between the neuron firing and the interpretive act, between the physiological processes that one might identify as constituting thinking and the thinking or the thought itself. Indeed, this problem is buried in your word "manifestation": for everything depends upon what we understand is going on in the manifesting (assuming one grants the autonomy and connection of the biological process and the realised intent to begin with). Also, this idea of translation assumes that meaning is something that moves from one container to another, and Derrida's critique of that conception would be worth pursuing. Nice job overall. Keep it up! B+

Dear Laurel,

There is one immediate problem with your in general well-written and engaging paper: that you confuse Structuralism with New Criticism on the first page. I take it that this is to some degree a result of having missed the classes on Structuralism (which is associated not with Brooks et al, but with Saussure et al). At any rate, fortunately, if we simply substitute New Criticism in every instance that uses Structuralism in your opening, we end up with quite a coherent paper. It does mean, however, that you need, on your own

time to go over the structuralism readings in more depth and get a firmer handle on them! When you do get to the structuralists, you are right to feel that something has happened to the notion of the text. In part, this is so because the question does not really raise itself for them in so far the text is effectively on the level of the utterance (parole) for Saussure, and since the focus is on langue rather parole, namely, the underlying structure of oppositions governing, say, myth as a language, each individual text provides essentially the equivalent of a sentence (that has to be correlated with other sentences) from which one begins the task of reconstructing oppositions.

      I think your scepticism regarding Post-structuralism is a healthy one, and indeed one voiced often enough by its critics. There is a problem here, however: first, the only way to get hold of Post-structuralism is in fact to suspend one's initial skepticism, to read in a way that assents to belief. Only then can one then return to one's skepticism in a fashion that legitimates it. But treating them thus does imply being willing to risk one's own assumptions (for example, that one knows what a text is). If one does so, one might find a number of interesting things: (a) that the post-structuralist insistence on not being able to separate text from world does not in fact mean that one can do without the distinction between text and world. Rather it means focusing on the conditions under which we make such distinctions. We always need to distinguish the text and yet---this is the paradox they reveal---that distinction is never as stable as we think it is, and such instability has a specific significance in each case. Second, you actually come quite close to one dimension of poststructuralism when you say that "some definition of text…makes more sense" than having none at all. For, what the reveals is a need for a text, and in a sense that is precisely what poststructuralism is interested in: why is it that we need texts, so that we prefer flawed ones to none at all? What kinds of anxieties and pleasure, demands and drives are bound up with that need?

      Finally, in your response to Fish (and throughout your response, actually), you want desperately to hold on to precisely those whose nature and definition is put under pressure in different ways by different theorists: text, quality, beauty, and so on. The point is that these terms do their work for most people in a sense precisely because they remain vague and loose: it is the looseness that allows one to say, that's a beautiful book or it has lovely images, it sounds wonderful, and to stop there, without probing the question of what specifically constitutes sounding wonderful, looking lovely or being beautiful. What theory makes one do (in different ways) is to ask that question. (And of course one could easily think of ways in which a VCR manual could be regarded as literature---without those sorts of ways much of modern art would be impossible. So the question is again, why the resistance to the question of what constitutes beauty, art etc? Why the need to hold on to the distinction between literature and the VCR manual, and indeed to bring in intention as the criterion for the latter!?)

      An engaging and strong response overall, despite my problems with some of its positions.
Needs a little cleaning up though (word choice, spelling, who belongs to what school). Well done. B+/A-