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## Reviewed Work: Subjective Criticism by David Bleich

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BLEICH, DAVID. *Subjective Criticism*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 309 pp., \$16.00.

Throughout the seventies David Bleich has tried to direct attention away from an objective, autonomous literary text and toward the subjective responses of actual readers. First in *Readings and Feelings* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1975) and now in his more sophisticated *Subjective Criticism*, Professor Bleich has developed his particular form of reader-response criticism by emphasizing the primacy of the individual self in reading and interpretation. Bleich's theory differs from other reader-oriented approaches in several ways: unlike Stephen Booth, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser, Bleich discusses the reading experiences of actual readers rather than those of ideal or informed readers; Bleich's model of reading is subjective and psychological and not structuralist and sociological like Jonathan Culler's; and though both Norman Holland and Bleich rely initially on psychoanalytic accounts of reading, Bleich has challenged the explanatory adequacy of Holland's central concept of an "identity theme." Such distinctions provide only the general shape of Bleich's complex theory of interpretation. The most detailed elaboration of that theory is presented in *Subjective Criticism*, a book that is challenging in its pedagogical proposals, wide-ranging in its use of interdisciplinary resources, and ultimately flawed in its hermeneutic project.

*Subjective Criticism* outlines a framework for literary engagement that places the individual reader at the center of critical concern. In its simplest form, Bleich's model progresses from subjective response, to resymbolization, to negotiation resulting in validated knowledge. "Subjective response" refers to an individual reader's "first perceptual initiatives toward a symbolic object" (p. 96). When there are no prior utilitarian motives constraining these initiatives, response will be an act of "evaluative symbolization"—a combination of perception and affect—which serves as the basis for all further discussions of the text (p. 98). In fact, for Bleich the text as symbolic object does not exist prior

to or independent of subjective initiative. It is only on the basis of such individual subjective creations that interpretation can proceed.

The second stage in Bleich's model, resymbolization, occurs when the first acts of perception and identification—the subjective response or symbolization—produce in the reader "a need, desire, or demand for explanation" (p. 39). Resymbolization "is the conceptualization of symbolized objects and processes in terms of subjective motives" (p. 88). In most cases, resymbolization is motivated and motivational explanation: it is *motivated* by the initial subjective response which requires an explanation, and it is *motivational* in that the explanation provided is in the form of psychological motives. This individual resymbolization "is commonly known as *interpretation*" (p. 67).

In the third, and most problematic, stage of Bleich's model, individual interpretations are negotiated within communities and new knowledge is produced. Negotiations in Bleich's classes, for example, begin with proposals for knowledge by individual students, proposals that take the form of "response statements." "The response statement is a symbolic presentation of self, a contribution to a pedagogical community, and an articulation of that part of our reading experience we think we can negotiate into knowledge" (p. 167). Response statements resymbolize individual reading experiences in terms of perception, affects, and associations, and these resymbolizations are then negotiated into knowledge about language and literature.

In discussing negotiation, Bleich writes that "the synthesizing of communal knowledge cannot begin without the substrate of individual subjective knowledge" (p. 151). This statement points to a problem area within Bleich's hermeneutic theory that he does not seem to recognize: the dynamics of moving from one interpretive level to the other, from the individual to the communal. Given the primacy of the individual self as creator of texts, how can Bleich's model account for agreement in negotiation? More specifically, if, as Bleich argues, texts are functions of individual subjective initiatives, resymbolized on an individual basis, how can different subjectives participate in a *negotiating* process? What is negotiated, and how? Since texts are individually constituted, readers might be able to share their resymbolizations in a kind of show-and-tell ritual (see, for example, p. 98), but "negotiation" seems a rather misleading name for such a process, since the term suggests some kind

of interpretive trade-off. Furthermore, following Bleich's logic, response statements must have the same ontological status as literary works: as texts, both are constituted by subjective initiative. In negotiation, then, there could be a different version of each negotiator's response statement created by each of his/her fellow negotiators, just as all the response statements represent (constitute) various versions of the literary text (or reading experience). Each reader creates a different text, which when shared is constituted differently by different perceivers. If no text (either literary or critical) is prior to *individual* initiative, no negotiating process is comprehensible, let alone possible in practice.

The strongest attempt that Bleich makes to resolve this hidden impasse is his explanatory use of the concept of "motive." Within his theory, motives function as explanations of subjective response in resymbolization and of resymbolization itself. In both cases, motives serve as whys and not hows: "*a motive is a subjectively regulated cause and is the name for causes originated in human initiative*" (p. 44). Bleich also attempts to use motives to explain the dynamics of negotiating resymbolizations. As I have noted, here is where Bleich runs into problems: how to move from individually-motivated responses to negotiated consensus. Bleich attempts to bridge the gap by positing a category of *shared* motives, such as a desire to reach consensus, a need for perceptual validation, or a goal of self-enhancement. However, this move explains *why* negotiation occurs but not *how* it works. Unlike Kuhn's "paradigms" or Fish's "interpretive strategies" (which I discuss below), Bleich's "motives" cannot provide specific *constraints* for insuring the possibility of shared interpretations.

Bleich has, in fact, presented himself with an impossible task: to account for interpretive agreement after having established the absolute primacy of the individual as interpreter. This theoretical impasse is hidden from its author and his readers in Bleich's attempt to associate his individualistic model of reading with interpretive theories that have agreement built into them from the start. Bleich points to what he sees as theoretical analogues to negotiated consensus, first in Thomas Kuhn's concept of "paradigm" and then in Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive community." Unfortunately, Bleich misunderstands the *social foundation* of the work by these theorists he takes to be his allies.

Bleich at first seems well aware of the social basis of Kuhn's notion of paradigm, which Bleich defines as "a shared mental structure, a set of beliefs about the nature of reality subscribed to by a group of thinkers large enough to exercise leadership for those similarly wishing to observe and understand human experience" (p. 10). Furthermore, he takes what I would call a "maximally constitutive" view of Kuhn's central concept: a dominant paradigm does not simply guide the perception and investigation of nature, it constitutes "nature" itself. This interpretation of Kuhn's theory makes it look very much like Bleich's. Just as for Bleich there is no text prior to subjective response, for a maximally constitutive paradigm theory, there is no reality independent of a paradigm. "The paradigmatic perception of reality at any moment in history *is* the reality at that time. The implication of this thought is that for all practical purposes, reality is invented and not observed or discovered by human beings" (p. 11). Bleich endorses this maximally constitutive view of Kuhn's paradigm theory and then proceeds to distort its social nature in the following way:

When Bleich speaks of "the socially subjective character of knowledge" (p. 25), he means "consensually validated perception" (p. 11). For Bleich, "knowledge in general comes through synthesized interpretations" (p. 33), that is, negotiated consensus. The "common world of sense," then, is "determined by extended negotiation among perceivers" (p. 20). Bleich believes Kuhn's position is essentially in agreement with his own on these matters. Yet, this is not the case at all. Bleich is talking about *consensus reached after perception*, but Kuhn is describing *shared exemplars prior to and constituting perception*. Bleich's "consensus" is achieved after negotiation; Kuhn's shared "paradigms" are what make negotiation possible. In fact, Kuhn's sociological theory directly contradicts Bleich's psychological model of individuated perception: for Kuhn, *initial* perceptions are communal, not individual, with paradigms being shared by scientists (in the same community) *from the start* (at least during periods of normal science). If Bleich wants help explaining how individual subjective responses and resymbolizations become validated knowledge through negotiation, he will not find it in Kuhn's theory of paradigms.

Nor will Fish's theory of interpretive communities provide the needed theoretical support. Bleich's misappropriation of Fish's theory is more subtle than his misunderstanding of

Kuhn's, more subtle because Fish and Bleich both use the same key term, "community." What Bleich fails to realize is that *the communities he refers to are radically different from the interpretive communities Fish describes.*

Fish agrees with Bleich that there is no text prior to interpretation. However, for Fish, interpretation is a communal affair from the outset, constrained by shared interpretive strategies. Texts are constituted by interpretive communities, which consist of interpreters that share ways of reading (and therefore "writing") texts. For Bleich, communities are groups where negotiations of resymbolizations take place; a community exists so that new knowledge can be synthesized in discussions. The interpretive communities Fish describes form the basis for such discussions; they provide the conditions necessary for the interpretive and persuasive acts that Bleich's negotiators perform.

A single community (in Bleich's sense) can consist of representatives from several interpretive communities (in Fish's sense). Fish's interpretive communities can include members not present (i.e., interpreters who share strategies but are not members of Bleich's discussion group). Thus interpretive communities cannot be viewed simply as physical groupings of individuals with common purposes (pp. 125, 134); rather they are constitutive of the discussions taking place within those groupings. For Bleich, MLA meetings, classrooms, and journal forms are the communities in which individuals come to (or fail to achieve) consensus. For Fish, such physical "spaces" have little to do with the set of members composing interpretive communities; membership in an interpretive community is not determined by proximity or common goals, but by shared ways of interpreting. Consensus can then be seen as the agreement articulated in critical discussion; shared interpretive strategies assure that agreement, providing the foundation for its recognition.

As with Kuhn's concept of paradigms, Bleich misses an essential point about Fish's notion of interpretive community. In both cases, Bleich cannot use these sociological theories to support his attempt to move from individual subjectivities to group consensus, because agreement is built into these theories from the start as it can never be in Bleich's psychological account. Negotiation as ongoing accomplishment and consensus as achieved goal remain unexplained in Bleich's interpretive theory.

I have discussed these two examples of misappropriation at such length because I believe they are symptomatic of Bleich's central theoret-

ical problem. His discussions of Kuhn and Fish unintentionally disguise a theoretical impasse which, if it continues unacknowledged and unresolved, will undermine the most important goal of *Subjective Criticism*. That goal is a bold one: to reinscribe the organized discussion of literature with a discourse that aggressively advocates the freedom of the individual self in a pedagogical community. Bleich's pedagogical program places the individual student and his subjective response at the center of literary study. "Subjective criticism assumes that each person's most urgent motivations are to understand himself," Bleich writes in his final paragraph. The pedagogical premises challenge teachers to reevaluate their notions of authority, to reexamine their attitudes toward their students, and to redefine their rationales for teaching literature. Such challenges raise basic questions that deserve serious consideration. Unfortunately, such consideration may be withheld because a flawed theory of interpretation supports Bleich's pedagogical program. The problems in his account of negotiation need to be resolved before discussions of his challenging proposals for teaching can proceed.

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MACHEREY, PIERRE. *A Theory of Literary Production*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, 326 pp., \$19.75.

Macherey's *Theory of Literary Production*, first published in France in 1966, is at last available in English. Macherey is a student of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and adopts his philosophical project. Althusser has been concerned with the nature of ideology and particularly with the various forms of empiricism and idealism (Marxist versions included) that conceal the complex determinations of the representations of reality furnishing us our world. Macherey extends this project to literary theory and criticism.

For Macherey, literature is never what it appears to be. Instead, a literary work must be reconstructed according to its ideological determinations. In traditional Marxist criticism, ideology is considered a false knowledge, opposed to some truth that is easily ascertained. For Macherey, as for Althusser, ideology cannot be eluded, for no one lives science. Indeed, ideology is understood as an historical force alongside material forces. The peculiar value