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Reviewed Work: Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics by T. K. Seung

Steven J. Mailloux

Loyola Marymount University, Steven.Mailloux@lmu.edu

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Seven of the twelve essays were written expressly for this volume, which is a comprehensive consideration of the problems. I have not mentioned the detailed and scholarly essay by Hope B. Werness on van Meegeren the man—his background and motives, his cynicism and reactionary politics (he was associated with Dutch fascists), his view of himself as victim of the art establishment, his desire to get even with the art critics. There is also an excellent bibliography.

REUBEN ABEL

New School for Social Research

SEUNG, T. K. *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics*. Columbia University Press, 1982, 242 pp., \$22.50.

There is a lot right about this book. It argues for a more historical perspective in literary studies, challenging the long hegemony of formalist analyses. More provocatively, it presents a contextual account of interpretation to oppose recent noncontextual versions of intentionalist, reader-response, formalist, and deconstructive theories. Despite the book's title, it makes practical and theoretical suggestions in a language relatively free from critical jargon. Finally, it successfully presents itself as the logical culmination of an ambitious project, a trilogy whose first volume, *Cultural Thematics* (1976), "demonstrated the role of cultural context in the explication of thematic meaning" and whose second, *Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982), "exposed the danger of misinterpretation inherent in the formalist and post-formalist programs of interpretation, due to their disregard of contextual considerations." *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics* elaborates the "theoretical assumptions and methodological commitments" underlying these first two studies (pp. x-xi).

But if there is much right about this book, there is perhaps even more wrong with it. Unfortunately, the strengths of an impressive program for historical thematics (to which I will return later) fail to eliminate the problems in the proposed contextual hermeneutics. Those problems begin in the first chapter. In discussing reader-response criticism, Seung confuses Stanley Fish's theory with Norman Holland's when he accuses both of "textual subjectivism or solipsism" (p. 2). Though Fish and Holland agree that readers write texts when interpreting them, they radically disagree over how such readerly constructions happen.

Holland places hermeneutic power in the individual, but Fish places it in interpretive communities; Holland's model is subjective and psychological while Fish's is intersubjective and social. This difference is an important one. But Seung ignores it in order to claim that the reader envisioned by both theorists is one who can never misread a text. The notion of misreading does tend to drop out of Holland's account (though at times he refers to readers "doing violence" to the text); but misreading remains possible within Fish's theory of interpretive communities, wherein correct or valid readings are defined by the interpretive strategies dominant in a particular historical context. Seung is at best misleading when he says that for Fish's reader "No external constraints can ever intervene between his act of reading and his text" (p. 2), for in Fish's view constraints on valid interpretations always exist: they are those found in the interpretive community to which the reader belongs.

Seung's misunderstanding of Fish's theory leads to later mistakes. In Chapter 8 he accuses Fish of proclaiming "total freedom in semantic interpretation" (p. 148) when Fish argues that the formal units of a text are always a function of the interpretive model brought to bear in stylistic descriptions. But Fish is not advocating interpretive anarchy here: all he is saying is that the formal units you find are determined by the assumptions you use (or, better, the assumptions that you use). If anything, this is a rather disconcerting hermeneutic determinism, not an endorsement of interpretive freeplay. Seung is also wrong when he suggests it follows from Fish's theory that "Two persons may never give the same semantic interpretation of the same text, except by coincidence" (p. 148). Fish's account claims instead that any particular interpretation is determined not by one's idiosyncratic personality (as in Holland's theory) but by interpretive strategies held in common with other people. Meanings are public, not private.

After his misleading portrayal of reader-response critics as textual solipsists, Seung argues that certain post-structuralists are "textual agnostics" who hold that "the domain of textual objectivity is a never-never land lying well beyond the reach of any reader" (p. 3). For the textual agnostics all reading is misreading. After effectively contrasting textual solipsists and agnostics, Seung argues that both groups of misguided theorists are actually suffering from the same "hermeneutic neurosis," pathetically anxious over the supposed loss of textual objectivity. The only real differ-

ence between textual agnostics and textual solipsists, according to Seung, is that the "latter are fanatically suppressing their anxiety complex, while the former are deliberately exaggerating its enormity. Neither of them appears to have found adequate ways to cope with their hermeneutic neurosis" (p. 5).

Putting aside the validity (and perhaps the irony) of such metacritical psychologizing, we can ask: how *should* one cope with this hermeneutic neurosis? Seung offers two theoretical answers, one negative, the other positive. What critics should not do is return to New Critical objectivism, for "the textual objectivity of the New Criticism was dialectically as unbalanced as the interpretive subjectivity of the textual agnostics and solipsists" (p. 5). Seung develops this negative answer a bit more through an interesting comparison between New Criticism and reader-response theory. Focusing on the difference between these text-centered and reader-oriented approaches, Seung concludes: "The truth of the matter is that the lively reader and the lively text are the two essential partners in constituting a lively reading experience. Hence the dispute between the response-critics and New Critics is, at best, a dispute in emphasis" (p. 12). It is difficult, however, to reconcile this "solution" to the debate with Seung's earlier claim that everything about a text, except its ink and paper, is "an object of constructivistic inference" (p. 9). How exactly can a text be "lively" if all that "is intrinsically or intuitively present in the text is its physical properties," lifeless ink on inert paper (p. 10)? How can a text be a true partner in "constituting" a lively reading experience if almost everything about that text is itself constituted by readers and critics, if the source of the text's "inexhaustible power" to mean "is not the text itself but its readers and their changing semantic contexts" (p. 38)? One possible answer is buried in a footnote: "All expressions in which Stanley Fish appears to attribute any acts to the text, e.g., 'the text encourages,' or 'the text disallows,' are intended to refer to the text not as an independent entity, but only as an object constituted by the reader's interpretive strategies" (p. 219, n. 4). But Seung appears to reject this answer since the footnote is a clarification of Fish's supposed subjectivism which Seung heartily condemns.

Explaining how we can avoid textual objectivism and solipsism leads Seung to this dead end. So much for his negative answer to the question of coping with hermeneutic neurosis. More promising is the positive answer which

involves the central thesis of his middle chapters: Only by recognizing the role of context can we escape the hermeneutic problems of textual formalism, solipsism, and agnosticism. Seung uses the term "context" in several strategic ways throughout his book. The two most important usages are the "interpretive context" of the critic's reading and the "historical or cultural context" of the author's writing. His general theory of interpretation centers on the former and his specific methodological prescriptions emphasize the latter. In effect, Seung argues that in the critic's interpretive context there should be a focus on the author's historical context.

In Chapter 3 Seung skillfully develops his contextual theory in a discussion of Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics. Seung first explains the notion of "pragmatic meaning," which is the meaning a sign "gains through its use: it inevitably involves the sign users, their intentions and actions, and their situations and circumstances" (p. 38). Seung then claims that "To read a text as a poem is to place it in a pragmatic context" (p. 39). From this contextual theory Seung then develops a historicist argument: "The recognition of pragmatic contexts always depends on our knowledge of cultural contexts. Since we can recognize the speaker's (or author's) intention through his pragmatic context, our recognition of this intention is always dependent on our knowledge of his cultural context" (p. 42). These arguments allow Seung to build up a consistent theory of communication: "That our intentions are not only formed but also expressed through our shared cultural context makes our intentions and their expressions communicable and understandable to other members of our community" (p. 42).

Unfortunately, the persuasiveness of this account is threatened by misleading distinctions leading up to it and mistaken conclusions drawn from it. Seung writes: "The meaning of a sign can be interpreted on two levels: semantic and pragmatic. Its semantic meaning is the meaning it has on its own; it is its dictionary meaning"; while its "pragmatic meaning" is its meaning within the "contexts of its use" (p. 38). But this is an empty distinction. The semantic level does not exist: as Seung himself points out elsewhere, a sign, sentence, or text has no meaning "on its own." It only has meaning within the contexts of its use, and the dictionary simply records the most common past contextual usages. By separating the semantic and pragmatic, Seung comes close to positing a level of acontextual meaning that in

other places he rejects (e.g., on pp. 10 and 37). One is tempted to salvage the distinction by saying that the semantic level refers to meaning in the context of a linguistic system while the pragmatic level refers to significance in the context of language use. But language outside a context of use has no meaning. As Wittgenstein puts it, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (quoted by Seung, p. 85; for a recent argument related to my point here, see Steven Knapp and Walter Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 8 [1982], 723-42).

More dangerous than this empty distinction made by Seung is a distinction he should make but doesn't. Seung equates "cultural context" with a "system of conventions" (p. 42, 45) and thus falls prey to the error made by many conventionalist theories (including my own proposal in *Interpretive Conventions* [1982]). These conventionalist accounts fail to recognize that conventions always have to be interpreted and appropriated within every new context. Systems of conventions are a *part* of interpretive contexts, but conventions and contexts are not the same things. (For more on this point, see my "Convention and Context," *New Literary History*, 14 [1983], 399-407.)

In Chapter 6 Seung presents an incisive critique of "universal pragmatics," theories trying to set up "universal pragmatic principles" valid in all situations. Using the proposals of Jürgen Habermas and H. P. Grice as examples, Seung shows how every universal pragmatics is actually only a disguised "regional pragmatics," descriptions that are valid for limited pragmatic domains within specific contexts. He concludes that "Perhaps the only thing that can be proposed as a universal pragmatic principle is: 'Be appropriate in what you say and how you say it'" (p. 107). He adds that appropriateness is determined only through reference to specific situations, which are partially described by regional pragmatics.

But in Chapter 8 Seung ignores his own strictures on universal pragmatics when he attempts to establish universal criteria for valid literary interpretations. "The value of a projected interpretation can be decided only on the basis of how well it coheres with a given text, just as the value of a proposed scientific theory can be decided on the sole criterion of how well it fits its data" (p. 152). Is Seung returning here to the textual objectivity that he earlier rejected? In an assertion like "All thematic interpretations must be tested by the common measure of textual coherence" (p. 152), Seung assumes that a text stands outside

hermeneutic activity ruling on the validity of interpretive acts, when in fact the text is only available from *within* those activities.

Because this confusion threatens to undermine Seung's general hermeneutic account, Chapter 9 on textual and thematic coherence becomes crucial. Seung tries to clarify his proposals by discussing the question: What is the proper theological framework for correctly understanding Dante's *Commedia*? He does present a persuasive critique of past theological readings of Dante's poem, but what the chapter ends up demonstrating is not that textual coherence is a principle of validity applied by comparing an interpretation to a pre-given text. Rather, it shows that the text is only available through interpretive work in the first place and that what Seung has done is present a more convincing case for his interpretation than he has for the traditional reading. If we still want to use the term "textual coherence" to refer to the principle underlying Seung's rhetorical success, then we have to understand this to mean that he has skillfully persuaded us to interpret the *Commedia* according to one theological framework rather than another. He has *not* compared each explication with some free-floating text outside interpretation and thus proven that readings other than his own are "incoherent in relation to the text" (p. 169). I am not saying that an interpreter can't appeal to the text. I am simply arguing that such an appeal is to a text already embedded in on-going interpretive work taking place within a context of accepted procedures, beliefs, ideologies, etc.

In addition to textual coherence, Seung also argues that *thematic* coherence can be used as a standard for determining validity in interpretation. By the principle of thematic coherence, he means that a reading should not produce themes for a text (or at least for Dante's *Commedia*) that are "incompatible with each other" (p. 169). Seung uses this principle as the basis for further invalidating the traditional readings of Dante's poem. Though I personally find this critical demonstration persuasive, there are many today who accept thematic incoherence as the rule and would be more persuaded by a deconstructive reading, one which produced contradictory themes for any and every text. Indeed, neither textual nor thematic coherence, as Seung defines them, can serve as a universal principle of validity in interpretation.

While Chapter 9 marks the culmination of Seung's general hermeneutic account, many problems remain. But the same interpretation

of the *Commedia* that fails to help resolve these problems does provide a valuable example of Seung's historicist program of practical criticism. Seung advocates understanding a literary text by placing it in its original historical context, and he earlier equates this context with the author's pragmatic context, which consists of the author's intentions (p. 39) and his culture's intentions and expectations (p. 118). Seung deftly examines the hermeneutic obstacles to his approach. Unanswered questions do arise: When Seung seems to endorse Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that "the context of the [interpreting] subject always functions as the primary context, into which the [historical] context of the [interpreted] object must be fused" (p. 190), does Seung mean that textual projection and appropriation always take place entirely within the interpreter's context? But this is to return to the problem of Seung's general hermeneutic account rather than to unfold the value of his historicist program.

What Seung calls his appropriation of historicism reaches its climax in an excellent analysis of the "thematic dialectic" in Chapter 11. Every culture embodies a cluster of "cultural themes." "A work of art turns out to be an attempt to work out its thematic problems because it reflects our way of being human, which consists in a series of existential projects for resolving the perpetual conflict of cultural themes" (p. 193). Improving on cultural morphology and Hegel's dialectic, Seung provides a dynamic model for describing the possible resolutions of a culture's thematic conflicts. Seung emphasizes the historical nature of this "thematic dialectic": "Which of the various forms of thematic resolution can be used for any given dialectical conflict can be determined only by our understanding of the complex relations of its thematic components with each other and to their historical context" (p. 215-16). He also alludes to the political nature of the thematic dialectic: "Every thematic conflict is likely to produce conflicting alliances and allegiances among the members of a [historical] community" (p. 217). Thus, Seung's cultural thematics provides a useful framework for a study of literature that could be simultaneously historical, literary, and political.

As a general theory of interpretation, *Semiotics and Thematics in Hermeneutics* is ultimately disappointing. But as specific arguments for a historicist program, it certainly succeeds. For this latter reason, Seung's book should encourage many readers to return to his

earlier studies, *The Fragile Leaves of the Sybil: Dante's Master Plan* and, especially, *Cultural Thematics: The Formation of the Faustian Ethos*.

STEVEN MAILLOUX

University of Miami

SADDLER, BARRY and ALLEN CARLSON, eds. *Environmental Aesthetics: Essays in Interpretation*. Western Geographical Series, Vol. 20. University of Victoria, Canada, Department of Geography, 1982.

Environmental aesthetics recently has emerged as an amorphous area of inquiry directed toward identifying the nature and scope of aesthetic values in our experience of urban, rural, and wilderness landscapes and spaces. Two approaches, divergent poles of a continuum, seem to dominate. First, there is the empirical social scientist, who attempts to quantitatively measure the objective qualities of environments that occasion positive affective responses (and which somehow get labelled "aesthetic"). Second, there is the approach of the humanist, who through conceptual or phenomenological analysis purports to discover aesthetic values in the environment. The editors note that the difficulties due to widely divergent approaches are compounded by the fact that very few environments are specifically designed for aesthetic purposes, that most landscapes have evolved through vernacular rather than artistic traditions, and that they are open to a wide range of culturally divergent aesthetic preferences. Few recent studies have attempted to uncover a general underlying basis for the aesthetic appreciation of the physical world.

Six papers in this volume originally were presented at an interdisciplinary symposium entitled *The Visual Quality of the Environment*, held at the University of Alberta in 1978—four by geographers, plus one each by professors of landscape architecture and English. The editors (a geographer and philosopher, respectively) have contributed jointly written introductory and concluding essays.

The most speculative essay ("Pleasure and the Perception of Habitat: A Conceptual Framework") is by the British geographer Jay Appleton, who summarizes his "prospect-refuge theory" of landscape preference. Appleton suggests that we ascribe aesthetic quality to an environment based upon pleasure in perceiving what satisfies our biological needs for protec-