

codes) or in psychological-neurological systems (the interpretation of dreams and neurotic symptoms). It remains a structuralist-scientific enterprise, as defined by Seamon.

The whole enterprise of poetics can now be seen to occupy two separable fields. First, literary scholars working within the methodologies of linguistics can enrich that discipline's power to describe the production of meaning by including literary texts in the linguistic database. Second, the issue of what the categorization *literary* entails within a specific context becomes the object of study for pragmatics as a part of semantics and perhaps for other human sciences, such as history. There is some sign that this is indeed what is happening. The recent study of metaphor may be considered an example of the first; feminist and new historical criticism offer examples of the second.

ELLEN SPOLSKY
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To the Editor:

I was appalled by Roger Seamon's essay in the May issue and surprised that his blatant sexism went unnoticed. Seamon pretends to discuss contemporary theory yet makes no mention of feminism. Is he willfully ignorant? Perhaps only such ignorance could enable him to make sweeping generalizations about all current theory. Or did he choose to ignore material that might contradict his claims? A little reading of Barbara Johnson, Annette Kolodny, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Catharine Stimpson, to name only a few, would expose the silliness of his assertion that poststructuralist theory precludes the interpretation of individual works.

Seamon inexcusably ignores not only feminist theory but also women critics almost entirely. Of the thirty-three authors cited only two are women, and one is relegated to an endnote and the other to coauthorship. Does he honestly believe that women have not contributed to contemporary theory? Perhaps Seamon's interpretive enterprise works only when it excludes any form of otherness that threatens the patriarchal privilege of white males.

It also comes as no surprise the Seamon cannot engage Bakhtinian and cultural critical theory, which are concerned not only with interpretation but also with the conditions of interpretation. Isn't it ironic that Seamon's own essay self-destructs by revealing through absence and silence that which it cannot engage and still speak in universals? Poststructuralists can interpret individual texts, such as Seamon's essay. This one reads there the

trace of a sexism that reveals a fundamental contradiction at the center, an inability to engage the Other in dialogue because such dialogue destroys the illusion of patriarchy's monological claim to universality. The issue is not whether to interpret but whose interests are served when specific interpretations are generated.

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To the Editor:

In "Poetics against Itself: On the Self-Destruction of Modern Scientific Criticism" Roger Seamon tells an engaging story of how modern poetics, embarked on a scientific mission to rescue literary study from antiquarian hermeneutics, instead keeps spinning off "interpretive methods," undone finally by the "subversive secret at its center—interpretation" (304). Seamon implies that the project of scientific poetics might have succeeded had it resisted the hermeneutic urges welling up within it. Perhaps to make this script plausible, he stresses the "continuity and coherence" (299) of the project in its various guises. Despite his article's title, Seamon does not acknowledge until near the end, almost as an epilogue, that the project's failure might be due in part to its own flawed premises. Until then he is content to lay out the project's "foundational" assumptions without challenging or justifying them. Seamon is doubtless aware that some of these assumptions strain credulity. In his account, for example, poetics adopts the "persistent belief" since Plato that "poetry is nonrational." Seamon makes no bones about the implications: "that those who write and interpret poems do not understand what they do, while scientific critics understand what they are doing and thus 'speak' in a way that neither poets nor interpreters can" (296). This would at least explain why poets and interpreters are often poorly paid. It is ironic that Seamon chooses the first line of MacLeish's "Ars Poetica," which argues that poems should be "palpable and mute," to state the claim of scientific poetics that poetry is nonrational. If poems are intrinsically nonrational, how can MacLeish's thesis, framed in what is indisputably a poem, be rational enough to be taken as an axiom of modern poetics? The frequency of such self-theorizing (or metaliterary) discourse in literary texts should immediately dispel the notion—attributed by Seamon to poetics—of a hermetic boundary separating literature's irrational "inside" (works and interpretations) from an enlightened "outside" commanded by scientific theory (296). Seamon hints at the futility of the scientific program when he speaks of its repeated

efforts to “find an Archimedean site where [it] can escape the . . . spell of meaning that generates interpretation” (302). And, as noted, he later acknowledges a “basic theoretical flaw” in the program: that it has yet to draw a convincing distinction between poetic and nonpoetic utterances—a distinction without which, according to him, “the entire project collapses” (303). But why should the (conceivably remediable) absence of such a distinction be considered a flaw more basic, or more fatal to poetics, than the dubious premises listed unflinchingly by Seamon on pages 295–96? Why cast interpretation as the main agent in the self-undoing of scientific poetics, when a “basic theoretical flaw” and several untenable founding assumptions would do just as nicely?

One may ask not only whether scientific poetics as sketched by Seamon is logically tenable—a question to which his own exposition implies a negative answer—but also whether it is desirable. Consider the program’s aims. Trying to “excavate a nonsemantic structure for literature” (304), “scientific criticism” aspires to be a body of knowledge that “could, in principle, be learned without regard to the meaning of any particular works or the development of interpretive skills” (295); that would also be “independent of signification” (de Man), “divorced from practice,” unconcerned with the (“irrelevant”) “idea of a canon,” and free of “any concern with value” (297). After discarding works, meaning, practice, canon, and value, what would be left for literary science to investigate? A poetics unconcerned with meaning would be roughly analogous to a practice of medicine indifferent to the health of patients and concerned only with the functioning (or “governing rules and structures”) of the patient’s organs. Perhaps poetics and hermeneutics are best conceived as cognate, rather than competing, disciplines within the study of literature.

Support for this suggestion may be found in many of the “scientific critics” cited by Seamon. In the first chapter of *Theory of Literature*, Wellek indeed endorses the ideal of rational, “organized knowledge” for literary scholarship. But he also notes that interpretation is indispensable to such study, “sympathetic understanding”—a legitimate concern for the individuality and value of its objects—being that which distinguishes humanistic inquiry from the methods of the natural sciences (17–18). This is why the olympian detachment from meaning and value that Seamon presents as the necessary stance of scientific poetics seems neither practicable nor desirable as a norm for literary study. In *Structuralist Poetics*, cited as paradigmatic of the project of severing poetics from interpretation, Culler argues in one key passage that “structuralism’s reversal of perspective can lead to a mode of interpretation based

on poetics itself . . .” (130). And Genette’s “Criticism and Poetics,” in which Seamon hears an “echo of the originating ambition of scientific critics,” distinguishes clearly between poetics (literary theory) and criticism (practical interpretation), while stressing their necessary “complementarity” (*French Literary Theory* 10). This is not to suggest that Seamon falsifies, only that he exaggerates, the marginalization of interpretation in the critics cited as proponents of scientific poetics.

Seamon’s task is daunting, his overview not undiscerning. No one could tell the story of modern literary theory in a few pages without simplifying. But to tell that story as a “triumph” (303) of unreasoning hermeneutics over rational poetics is to oversimplify both disciplines and, I think, to misconstrue their properly *interdependent* relationship. One could as plausibly recount the continuing efforts of hermeneutics to elucidate the principles of textual understanding in the face of periodic challenges from naive scientism. Or (to take a less adversative, if more wishful, scenario) one might imagine a gradual rapprochement and mutual illumination of semiotics and hermeneutics, as both disciplines came to affirm the truth of Charles S. Peirce’s insight that there is no thought or discourse but in signs, and no sign independent of interpretation.

R. LANE KAUFFMANN
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Reply:

Ellen Spolsky is right when she says that it is not the change of object from text to reader that is, in principle, decisive in the undoing of scientific literary theory. But she provides me with the clue as to why I said so, and also why the project still seems implausible to me, when she says that poetics is a branch of pragmatics. It is not that I would disallow a lower level of generalization but that there is a fundamental difference between a grammar and a set of conventions governing a practice. The rules of a grammar determine whether a string of morphemes in a language is or is not a sentence, and will assign to the string (if it is a sentence) its structure. There is no sense in which the conventions that govern the production and interpretation of tragedy generate all and only the set of tragedies. (I would like to thank my friend Steven Davis for helping me formulate this distinction.) Works that set forth the conventions of genres are like recipe books, and Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* is the main such work in English. We recognize this when we teach people how to write *New Yorker*-style stories or screenplays. We no longer take such works seriously as examples of what Pope called “na-