

alectic of the sublime the first phase is suffused with intimations of mortality; of course, we can't experience death directly as long as we're alive, so such emotions as this Homeric terror and Sapphic love are exactly the kinds of affective anticipations of death emphasized by later theorists—feelings that give way, in the final phase of the sublime, to the opposite feelings of power and transcendence.

Further, Longinus subtly links these death rehearsals to our “terrifying” encounter with the “danger” of Sappho's and Homer's overwhelming words. Although many other of Longinus's examples center on war, destruction, fury, horror, killing, and rage, such spectacles are not sufficient in themselves to precipitate the sublime. Rather, orators or writers must be able to incorporate this violence into their own rhetoric, so that hearers or readers will experience a kind of proleptic death, becoming overwhelmed or terrified. Out of such defeat arises the illusory counterassertion that “we have created what we have only heard”—an illusion permitting the “joy and pride,” or transport and elevation, that Longinus terms the sublime.

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Poetics against Itself

To the Editor:

Roger Seamon's article (“Poetics against Itself: On the Self-Destruction of Modern Scientific Criticism,” 104 [1989]: 294–305) is itself good evidence against his claim that poetics as a branch of literary study is about to fall off the tree of knowledge. It would be a shame for his powerful generalizations to be lost because of the mistake he makes in concluding his argument. His conspicuous categorization and analysis of the group of projects that he names as scientific criticism should, rather, be of great help to the very project whose imminent death he incorrectly predicts.

Having followed the progress of literary study and the changing perceptions of the object(s) of that study, Seamon concludes that when students of poetics recognize that the field of their study is not literary works or even texts but the reader's production of meaning, then the specific literariness of the study will have disappeared and there will be no scientific literary criticism. Seamon's error seems to me to be his mistaking a change of the focus of study for a change of the object. He misses a sense of the hierarchies of theories and of their embeddedness; scientific fields of study are nested such

that the study of any particular subject depends on the conclusions of a broader one. That study in both broad and narrow fields proceeds simultaneously and that the fields inform each other may well obscure their hierarchical relation. Seamon has correctly observed that literary theory has recently discovered this dependency. His mistake is to infer that the more particular field has disappeared.

As Ellen Schaubert and I argued in *The Bounds of Interpretation: Linguistic Theory and Literary Text* (Stanford UP, 1986), poetics is a subcategory of the study of language interpretation; one cannot understand how a poem can be meaningful unless one understands how language is meaningful. It is, then, reasonable to claim that poetics falls within the bounds of the study of semantics, or pragmatics (depending on how one wanted to define the relation between those two aspects of linguistic study). Conversely, if linguists study the overall system of language interpretation, their descriptions should in principle be able to describe the interpretation of all language texts, including those that a particular culture subcategorizes as literary. Since linguists have consistently refused to take literary texts into account as part of their database, it is not surprising that the grammars they have produced have not been able to account for many salient aspects of those texts that are now considered literary. This is a methodological failure of linguistics, but not an argument for a distinction between literary and nonliterary texts.

At an even higher level of generalization the study of the system of poetic interpretation belongs, as Seamon correctly notes, under the rubric of semiotics—the study of all sign systems. But if there is a higher level of generalization, there is also a more particular, or lower, level of generalization. Far from having been put out of business by the recognition of its dependency, poetics can now define its own purpose more precisely: the project of poetics is to study the systematic production and understanding of meaning by both speakers (poets) and hearers (readers and audience), under the pragmatic or sociocultural conditions of significance that, in a given society, are categorized as literary.

Although Seamon almost recognizes this purpose, he fails to take the final step and notice that as long as a culture considers that it has literary texts, as long as it retains a separate category or several separate categories for those texts, then even if the current tools of description cannot account for the distinction, poetics hasn't put itself out of business. It must, however, redefine itself. Poetics can now be seen as parallel to the study of other subsystems of interpretation within a community—the production of meaning in, for example, legal-judicial systems (judicial opinions, legal

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