

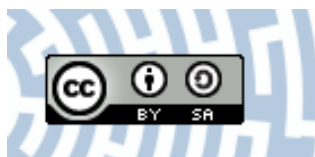


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Title: The formalist roots of Stanley Fish's and E.D. Hirsch's hermeneutics

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Citation style: Stopel Bartosz. (2013). The formalist roots of Stanley Fish's and E.D. Hirsch's hermeneutics. "Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies" Nr 22/1 (2013), s. 19-33



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THE FORMALIST ROOTS OF STANLEY FISH'S AND E.D. HIRSCH'S HERMENEUTICS

Abstract

The paper investigates the extent to which Stanley Fish's constructivism and E.D. Hirsch's hermeneutics are similar in their assumptions and program. Although it is commonly accepted that they constitute polar opposites of literary theory, Fish and Hirsch are embedded in the theoretical discourse of New Criticism's approach to literary studies and develop in a form of critique of the formalist stance. The problems they encounter and the way they approach literary texts are shaped by formalist assumptions that eventually lead to serious discrepancies between their postulated theory and practice. Both theories of interpretation seem to be operating within a similar framework of ideas which determines their understanding of the problems regarding literary studies as well as their solutions. What appears to be even more important is that the "textual" theoretical framework itself causes serious problems for both programmes of literary hermeneutics.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the article will be to investigate to what extent are Stanley Fish's constructivism and E.D. Hirsch's hermeneutics similar in their assumptions and program. It is commonly accepted by literary scholars that Hirsch and Fish constitute polar opposites of literary theory. Both of them started their intellectual careers as diehard rebels against the formalism of the New Critics who, nevertheless, attempted to follow radically different paths of neopragmatist constructionism, and of traditional intentionalist hermeneutics respectively. However, both Hirsch and Fish are firmly embedded in the theoretical discourse of New Criticism's approach to literary studies, and develop in a form of critique of the formalist stance.

Although their critiques follow different paths, the problems they encounter and the way they approach literary texts are largely shaped by formalist assumptions that eventually lead to many possibly erroneous claims concerning both language and interpretation. Eventually, the theories of interpretation of both Hirsch and Fish seem to be operating within a similar framework of ideas which determines both their understanding of the problems regarding literary studies and their solutions. Finally, it will be argued that the “textual” (which is understood here as any form of semantic autonomy with regards to literary texts) theoretical framework itself causes serious problems for both programmes of literary hermeneutics.

2. E.D. Hirsch

To consider E.D. Hirsch a scholar who is unable to move beyond essentialist thinking about literary texts is somewhat of a cliché in literary theory. For instance, Stanley Fish explicitly contrasted his own views with Hirsch’s by beginning his famous *Is There a Text in This Class?*, by answering the eponymous question that “there isn’t a text in this or any other class if one means by text what E.D. Hirsch and others mean by it, ‘an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next’” (1980: VII). Apart from the fragment quoted by Fish, Hirsch made many other strong statements concerning the text’s stability. For example:

When, therefore, I say that a verbal meaning is determinate I mean that it is an entity which is self-identical. Furthermore, I also mean that it is an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next – that it is changeless (1967: 46).

In the face of taking such a strong stance, it is indeed very tempting to classify Hirsch as a traditional essentialist. A closer analysis enacted here, will, however, try to cast some doubt on such a simplistic treatment of Hirsch. It will also attempt to show how Hirsch, who started his theoretical work as a critical response to the textualism of the New Critics, fails to abandon some of their assumptions, and in the end, his theory encounters unsolvable problems and moves towards something different than what the aforementioned critics thought.

Hirsch’s major work, *Validity in Interpretation*, begins with a fierce attack on the formalist, New Critics’ theories which claim that the structure of the text itself contains the meaning and any kind of authorial information is irrelevant to its understanding. Hirsch opposes what he calls the “doctrine of semantic autonomy” (1967: 1), which holds that meaning is located in the text itself, as for him it cannot exist “outside the realm of human consciousness”

(1967: 4). Text, as represented by graphic symbols, is empty and cannot mean anything. In fact, we cannot even say that it contains words and sentences unless we acknowledge that it represents somebody's meaning, which, in turn, initiates the process of construing. The claim that textual meaning exists only in human consciousness leads to a recognition that meaning can only be attributed to an author or a reader, which is obviously in stark opposition to what New Critics considered the source of textual meaning. Hirsch does not accept the New Critical maxim that appealing to authorial intention is irrelevant in analyzing texts, the famous "Intentional Fallacy", as for him it seems obvious that one can never avoid authorial meaning, and the abolishment of the original author as the final determiner of textual content only leads to embracing of the reader as a new author.

Even worse, according to Hirsch, semantic autonomy leads to a replacement of one determiner of meaning with an infinite number of others. This, in turn, leads to a confusion, as the rejection of the original author is also a rejection of "the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation" (1967: 5). Hirsch admits that the actual non-existence of such a principle could only be true if any of the arguments held against the author were justified, since the abolishment of the author indicates that "no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of a text" (1967: 5), with the readers creating their own meanings, among which there cannot be any convincing criteria of distinguishing the correct and the wrong ones, leaving the textual meaning in a state of indeterminacy.

After attacking the followers of formalist textual autonomy, he proceeds to confront the rest of the claims raised against the author. Although Hirsch agrees with the anti-psychologistic argument that we cannot know the *intentio auctoris* with certainty because we cannot enter his psyche, he claims this is irrelevant to interpretation, as our object of investigation is the text, and we can only access the meanings which are sharable through language and not the private meanings in the author's mind, "in the world beyond the reach of written language" (1967: 14). Since we lack certainty, interpretation must rely on probability judgments based on all the accessible data in determining the textual meaning. Finally, Hirsch responds to those who claim that the meaning of the text changes over time by introducing a crucial distinction into a text's "meaning", which is unchangeable, and its "significance", which is prone to change:

It is not the meaning of the text which changes, but its significance... . *Meaning* is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable (1967: 8).

Thus, Hirsch offers a definition of verbal meaning that is binding in the investigation of *intentio auctoris*: “[v]erbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs” (1967: 31).

It is important to note at this point that before Hirsch proceeds to the positive part of his work, which includes his ideas on the very practice of interpretation, he makes a clear statement about the ontological status of texts. The text, he suggests, has no meaning and no content unless it is construed in the reader’s mind. Therefore, there is nothing in the nature of a text that requires the interpreter to choose *intentio auctoris* as a normative ideal. The sign as such is devoid of any content, it is mute, and every interpreter faces a choice of the interpretive ideal, determined by his goals and values. For Hirsch, any kind of reader-oriented reading is rejected precisely on ethical grounds, as whenever the interpreter sets himself a goal which can be reduced to exploring the contents of his own mind, the interpretation is, for Hirsch, pointless and unnecessary in the first place. At the same time, however, Hirsch points out that anyone who claims validity for his interpretation is caught in a “web of logical necessities” (1967: 26) that anti-intentionalists cannot successfully disentangle. If this validity is to be accepted, the interpreter has to face his interpretation with a “genuinely discriminating norm” (1967: 26) and it appears to him that, apart from appealing to the authorial intention, no other compelling and sharable norm exists.

From the very beginning, Hirsch’s theory is marked with a paradox. The aim of his work is to defend the traditional hermeneutical concepts of the stable, determinate meaning and the possibility of objective interpretation, but, at the same time, he acknowledges some of the ideas about the text’s indeterminacy and temporality that question the objectivity of interpretations or the author’s importance, and which became increasingly popular with the emergence of New Criticism. His merging of the two contradictory trends proved to be highly problematic. The need to control the text’s meaning and to save its monolithic identity, yet, still accepting its dynamic character, has been regarded by some scholars as a “schizophrenic” approach to the text (Kalaga 2001: 27). Moreover, Hirsch’s insistence on placing ethics and values as the foundation of every interpretive and critical activity appears to be actually questioning the strict meaning/significance distinction, as significance is, in fact, granted the superior role that determines meaning according to the interpreter’s personal preferences. Even in the process of construing authorial meaning, what is considered evidence supporting some hypothesis, has to be rooted in the reader’s own values and ethics. Hirsch’s idea of collecting evidence that supports specific interpretive hypotheses is rather simplistic and mechanical. He seems to omit the fact that according to his

own views, the interpreter's choice of evidence will also be value-driven. Thus, different readers, cultures, scientific and interpretive communities may consider different things as proper evidence. This, in fact, implies the shift from the temporal and dynamic character of Hirsch's notion of significance to the temporal character of the author's meaning. It can be sensed on the pages of Hirsch's works but it is never verbalized or carried to its logical implications.

The problem is also noticeable when Hirsch uses his meaning/significance distinction to rebut psychologism. Although he makes a general statement that it is possible to reproduce another person's meaning, he then seems to take it for granted that such attempts are always successful, and claims that different perceptions of meaning might, in fact, belong to the sphere of significance. Regardless of the question whether Hirsch is right or wrong in this case, he does not solve the problem of psychologism, but simply dodges it. The meaning/significance problem is treated too light-heartedly, as Hirsch does not explain whether certain changes and revisions in what the interpreters might call the author's meaning would belong to the sphere of meaning or significance, or how to differentiate between them. His accusation that psychologism confuses the mental processes with their object is also questionable, since it posits the literary object as being totally independent of mental processes, or maybe even external to them. That would imply a form of semantic autonomy, or formalism, that Hirsch fiercely attacked. Furthermore, if the interpreter's task is to reconstruct the author's intention through the work on the text, the construction may never reach the state of ahistorical stability and certainty. The intentions, as the interpreters construe them, might change, and Hirsch does not specify in what cases would those changes belong to the sphere of meaning and when to that of significance. Unfortunately, this attitude might also be called schizophrenic and his reasoning definitely lacks the ultimate anti-psychologicistic argument.

Not only does the meaning/significance distinction indicate Hirsch's schizophrenic attitude, but it poses serious threats to the very practice of literary study. George Wilson, responding to the radical intentionalist arguments from the perspective of analytical philosophy of language, quite correctly observed that if Hirsch's distinction into the sharable verbal meaning and its subsequently ascribed contexts is supposed to encompass the whole spectrum of phenomena relating to meaning and understanding of a literary text, "then a great deal of what we seek to interpret in a work will fall in neither of Hirsch's categories" (1992: 182). He further adds that:

a poem or work of literary fiction is more or less extended discourse, and the structures and strategies of a discourse have meanings that outrun the meanings of its component inscriptions.(...) I may know the linguistic meaning expressed by

each of the sentences 'All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; Socrates is mortal.' And I may know that each utterance has the force of an assertion. But if I do not grasp that this short discourse constitutes an argument from which the conclusion is supposed to follow, then I have missed a key aspect of the key of utterances taken as a whole (1992: 182).

Thus, Hirsch's model is not able to explain the emergence of meaning of larger structures in the interpreter's mind, relying solely on the idea of simple, dictionary-like verbal meaning. He does not seem to notice the more complex procedures of understanding that are impossible to grasp in terms of the semantics of words and sentences alone. Hirsch, therefore, by relying on the antiquated Saussurian linguistics (which at the same time endorsed a form of semantic autonomy that Hirsch attacked) and its vision of language as a dictionary commits the typical structuralist fallacies.

Hirsch is aware that his defence of the author and the objectivity of interpretation is hard to reconcile with his basic assumptions about language and meaning. The theory that he offers has problems fulfilling some of its aims; determinacy of meaning and the objective interpretation cannot be grounded in the text itself and Hirsch is forced to introduce elements of pragmatist foundation to support his views. Thus he frequently remarks about the need to constantly confront and compare different interpretations. This in fact indicates that the meaning has to be eventually accepted conventionally, by a community of scholars in the process of continuous dialogue of different interpretations, which brings him closer to neopragmatist ideas of Stanley Fish.

Taking into consideration some of the problems with Hirsch's hermeneutics raised above, it is crucial to determine how those issues affect Hirsch's position in the essentialist discourse, with which he is usually associated. Unfortunately, the ambivalence of his position becomes intensified. On the one hand, Hirsch's rhetoric defends the traditional quest for truth, reason and objectivity, along with the notion of stable, determinate textual meaning. On the other hand, he openly rejects essentialism, claiming that "the sign is mute." The rejection of ontology and the declaration that the text's meaning exists only in the mind of a reader, who creates it himself, does not bring him closer to essentialism, but to constructionism. Similarly, although Hirsch outlines literary genres as if they had fixed traits, determinate nature and boundaries, he denies them any deep structure, comparing them to Wittgensteinian non-essentialist word games that share vague family resemblance instead of strictly defined features. Elsewhere, Hirsch rejects any metaphysics as such, declaring, as if he were a militant logical positivist, that "Metaphysics is the night where all cows are black" (1976: 32). Taken at its face value, the statement is obviously absurd, as Hirsch makes in his work as many metaphysical assumptions as any other

theoreticians. It does show, however, his anti-theoretical, and anti-methodological bent.

Hirsch, thus, never fully breaks free from the textualist assumptions of the New Critics. Although, he redefines textual meaning so as to save its stability, in reality he smuggles the textualism back into his theory, in the guise of a meaning which is supposedly particular, determinate, and sharable, and at the same time construed solely according to the textual evidence. He still looks at literary texts from textualist perspective, and, as a result, the arguments against Hirsch's supposed essentialism stem from his inability to explicitly reject the most crucial newcritical assumptions about the text, that is the notion of an autonomous verbal icon. Paradoxically, the constructionists' argument against Hirsch is, in the end, an argument against the New Critics who eventually prove to represent essentialism themselves. There are certain reasons to suspect that Hirsch's hermeneutics must inevitably lead to a form of pragmatism. Some typically pragmatist ideas, like the shift of philosophical focus from ontology and metaphysics towards ethics, and the aversion towards essentialism, have already been mentioned. Hirsch is also willing to support Knapp's and Michaels' repudiation of theory in favour of practice, calling himself "anti-theoretical theorist" (1985: 48). His logic of interpretative validation contains an implicit acknowledgment of the importance of dialogue and the conventional, consensual establishment of literary interpretations which seem to gain more dynamic character. Moreover, he approves of Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities (1982: 240).

Even his insistence on the ethical foundation of the practice of interpretation is pragmatic. Since there is no ontologically motivated, objective principle that compels the readers in their choices of interpretive method, such choices must be made according to values, purposes and practical consequences. Hirsch's idea of the primacy of values goes as far as to say that even truth is a matter of politics, a kind of ideology (1982: 235–236). Thus, Hirsch starts as a confident defender of determinacy and objectivity only to arrive at a final, neopragmatist conclusion that the choice of the interpretive method is arbitrary and political. Objectivity and determinacy become, as a result, only two of the infinite number of personal and subjective aims of interpretation that one sets for oneself.

Some scholars (Hermeren 1977: 364–365) noted that Hirsch's argument in *Validity in Interpretation*, which started as a heroic and firm defence of the author, gets weakened throughout the book, and his attack on relativism and "cognitive atheism" (Hirsch 1976: 3) is gradually halted. Indeed, the schizophrenic problems resulting from the meaning/significance distinction become intensified in his description of the process of validation. Moreover, instead of defending the traditional methods of interpretation, his emerging

anti-theoretical bent, along with his ethical foundation of interpretation, and the rejection of ontology, invokes the spectre of relativism, which is constantly haunting his work, and which leads to a gradual decomposition of his early hermeneutic program.

3. Stanley Fish

An example of a theorist who in his dispute with the New Critics assumed a position on the other side of the barricade than Hirsch, namely, in the trenches of what Wimsatt and Beardsley called “The Affective Fallacy”, is the American neopragmatist Stanley Fish. He started his intellectual career from a standpoint of a reader-oriented theory hostile towards the New Critics, and although his ideas evolved over time, one notion always remained central to Fish’s theory, namely, the anti-essential concept of textual meaning, which he considered not being enclosed in the text and then discovered by the reader, but actually being produced by him in the process of interpretation. Indeed, most of his work in this field is marked with a desire to defend the idea of meaning as constructed by the reader, in opposition both to the essentialism of the formalists and to the Hirschian type of intentionalism. As Fish himself wrote in the introduction to his collection of essays entitled *Is there a text in this class?*, “in 1970 I was asking the question ‘Is the reader or the text the source of meaning?’ and the entities presupposed by the question *were* the text and the reader whose independence and stability were thus assumed” (1980: 1). Not only did he acknowledge the influence of Wimsatt and Beardsley on the final shape of the problem he considered, but at the same time he rejected the Hirschian notion of authorial intention as the goal of interpretation. As a result, much of his early work on textual meaning was devoted to the renunciation of the textual authority in favour of the enthronement of the reader in the hermeneutic domain.

The tension between the reader-oriented and the presumably formalist elements of his work produced a couple of problems that Fish found impossible to solve solely on the grounds of his reader-response assumptions. The first problem appeared with Fish’s account of the overcoming of the subjective and idiosyncratic in the reader experience. Arguing in favor of a more objective, shared reading, he was unwillingly confronted with the formalist notion of the text which is itself responsible for producing similar, shared responses. The other problem was that his own theoretical assumptions turned against him, as he realized that if every theory produces its own results, its own meanings, then there really is no reason why his reader-response approach might be deemed superior or less fallacious than the formalist one that he opposed.

The first step taken by Fish was to claim that the meaning of a supposedly fixed text appears only in the process of reading and only within the reader's experience. The static, formal elements of the text gain meaning only in the context of the reader's activities. One might call it a classical constructionist stance, resembling, in different and more self-conscious words, Hirsch's slogan "the sign is mute" mentioned in the first chapter.

According to Fish, meaning emerges from the reader's predictions and expectations, rather than from the process of discovering the actual content of the text on the page. As he claims, the text is not a "container of meaning" (1980: 1), but precisely the opposite: "the reader's response is not *to* the meaning; it is the meaning" (1980: 3). Humans are "significance fabricating beings" (1980: 145) and they hypothesize about intentions, look for references, build up coherent meanings, disentangle ambiguities, etc. all the time during the process of reading. They do not begin to ascribe meanings and interpret after the reading is finished, dealing with finite, larger fragments, exclusively. At this point one might raise a very obvious objection, which was also mentioned by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. in his attack on the reader authority, namely, that if the textual meaning is only a construction of reader's subjective responses and expectations, then the meanings are absolutely arbitrary and there exists no demarcation between valid and invalid interpretations, and consequently, the study of literature becomes impossible. Fish is aware of this difficulty, and, interestingly, pleads for abandoning such a subjectivist attitude. In his own words "the proper practice of literary criticism demanded the suppressing of what is subjective and idiosyncratic in favour of the level of response that everyone shares" (1980: 5). Unfortunately, the simplistic solution where readers having the literary competence would share similar responses (whether they know it or not) (1980: 6) leads back to the formalist stance, as in order to argue for a shared reading experience or response one presupposes "an object in relation to which readers' activities could be declared uniform, and that object was the text" (1980: 17). As a result, the integral, determinate, formalist idea of the text paradoxically returns in this description of the interpretive process as a stable object to which the readers respond.

Fish approached this early problem by radicalising the reader-oriented aspect of his theory even more. In an essay entitled "What is Stylistics" he, again, emphatically rejects the essentialist idea of the text as a repository of meanings which are discovered and studied by the interpreter, in favour of the claim that the very interpretive activities constitute the entities that are to be interpreted, that is to say, that interpretation begins as soon as the reader decides that what he is looking at should count as a text and not just as a random doodle (1980: 94). Such claims may, however, lead to self-confirmability of interpretations. Hirsch was aware of that and thought the

problem needed to be resolved through comparative method, dialogue among the members of the scientific community and the use of a probabilistic criteria in judging the textual content. In a somewhat opposite manner, Fish did not recognize it as a problem to be resolved, but as a fact that cannot be undone. It is impossible, he claims, to step outside the theory, beliefs, presuppositions that one holds and attempt to disconfirm them. As he says "Theories always work, and they will always produce exactly the results they predict" (1980: 68). Interpretations, or theories, are self-confirmable, but they are not simply random, as individual readers, according to Fish, do not have competence to actually produce and establish valid interpretations. Although the ability to interpret is "constitutive of being human" (1980: 172), individuals never interpret freely and independently of some assumptions. These assumptions, in turn, precede the very process of interpretation and determine its final shape and product. Interpretive entities are, thus, always already situated within a context of certain community-established assumptions that provide interpretive strategies and constrain the hermeneutic activity of individuals. In other words, the idea of interpretation being irrevocably determined by the pre-established assumptions and strategies is defended here by introducing a higher-order restrictive entity. At the same time, it is precisely the concept of interpretive communities that is supposed to save the practice of literary studies from "the pit of psychologism" (Drong 2007: 110), by severely limiting the number of possible interpretations. Fish's definition of interpretive communities has changed over the years, but initially they were meant to be

made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions (1980: 171).

Another aspect of Fish's hermeneutics rooted in New Critical assumptions was his understanding of intentionalism. Fish holds any autonomist theory that considers literature a deviation from the ordinary, formal features of the language to be fundamentally wrong. Neither is it possible to locate the deviational, formal features of literature and the standard, stable, context-free features of ordinary language. Thus, for Fish literature is not something that can be defined in terms of its formal features. It is rather a matter of human, collectively made decision as to what shall be identified as literature. This decision, in turn, is purely a matter of choice which is not driven by anything else but the goals established by human activity.

The idea that texts cannot have autonomous, context-free meanings leads Fish to embrace a form of intentionalism. For him, words cannot have on their own any basic or normal, ordinary meanings as they can only acquire meanings which intentional beings construct on specific occasions, in various

contexts. Thus, meanings cannot be derived from any formal structures or conventional categories. They always require intentional action to attribute one (or more), context-determined, temporal sense from the infinite repository of possible meanings. This leads him to an assertion that intention is necessary for the practice of interpretation. It is only through assuming that meaning is uttered by an intentional being in a specific context that one can try to determine any temporarily fixed meanings. But Fish is not an intentionalist in the traditional sense of a theorist who sets the intention of the empirical author as the source of meaning that needs to be discovered in an arduous process of interpretation. His point is that the reader, in the process of constructing the meaning of a text, postulates about the possible intentions. The content of authorial intention is, thus, in Fish's account, not a normative principle that one should follow but a construct of the interpretive entity which is necessary in order to produce sense out of a piece of language at all. The posited intention does not have to agree with the actual intention of the author. In fact, the reader needs not to be interested in pursuing it. Neither does it constrain, as a force located outside the actual interpretation, the interpretive practice. It is simply a guess, a posit that a reader creates, ascribing the text's origin to some intentional being, regardless of the facts about the actual author.

A possible problem with Fish's hermeneutics might be his attachment to radical Cartesian assumptions which underlie his reader-response hermeneutics. Fish's early claims that theories and interpretations are always entirely produced by an individual, self-contained subject was leading him straight into the impressionist relativism, and, to overcome this, he introduced the notion of interpretive communities to his theory. Some scholars (Dasenbrock 1993: 19) insist that there are remarkable similarities, in certain aspects, between his idea of interpretive communities and Thomas Kuhn's concept of scientific communities. For Kuhn individual scientific theories are only parts of broader paradigms that have to be shifted as a whole, in a turbulent and gradual process, in order to bring about some real change of perspective. These paradigms set limits, the basic framework, in which scientists, in a given social and cultural context, operate and devise new theories. Kuhn claims that the aforementioned paradigms are incommensurable, that is, one paradigm is impossible to understand within a conceptual framework of another paradigm. In this view, scientists working within different paradigms "work in a different world" (1962: 135). As Dasenbrock observed, according to Kuhn, communication can only exist within a given paradigm. Therefore, it is never possible to simply step outside the assumptions one holds and the conceptual framework within which one operates. This means that it is not a serious mistake to say that Kuhn's scientific communities are in many ways equivalent to Fish's interpretive communities (Dasenbrock 1993: 21).

Dasenbrock proposes that, since certain similarities have been noticed, it might be useful to apply Donald Davidson's criticism of Kuhn's conceptual relativism to the work of Stanley Fish (1993: 21). In Davidson's words:

Conceptual schemes, we are told, are ways of organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view from which individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another (1973: 5).

Davidson continues to say that the examples of differences between such supposedly incommensurable conceptual schemes are what usually supports this view and comments that:

But examples like these, impressive as they occasionally are, are not so extreme but that the changes and the contrasts can be explained and described using the equipment of a single language. Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, "be calibrated", uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using -what else? -our post- revolutionary idiom (1973:6).

One might add that Fish is brilliant at describing the incommensurable theoretical stances of other literary scholars, or the contents of disparate interpretations or programmes of rival interpretive communities, using his own body of theory. His immediate, Cartesian reply would probably be that he can never know the actual contents of the other person's mind/theory and is just projecting his own ideas. But the truth seems to be quite the opposite; saying that the contents of the other person's mind are unknowably different already presupposes knowledge of those contents to such an extent as to claim the difference. According to Davidson's persuasive account, accepting such form of incommensurability would not only render it impossible to talk about similarities and differences between paradigms or interpretive communities, but would also make the contents of one's own mind inaccessible.

Another problematic question is Fish's stance on the relation between meaning and intention. To say that words can only acquire meaning as a result of human activity and in a context is a truism. As a matter of fact, it is hard to imagine any modern philosopher of language who would hold a caricature, opposing position that Fish ascribes to him or her. What he calls essentialist, abstract meanings are in fact contextualized meanings in a given language. This is the point of George Wilson's reply to a similar, radically intentional account of meaning provided by Fish's fellow neopragmatists Knapp and Michaels (1985: 11-31):

Suppose that one plausibly holds that the word *slumber* means (roughly) “sleep” in English. In holding this, one supposes that there is an established practice among speakers of the language of using the relevant sound sequence and/or inscription with certain intentions, that is, with the intention that the given token count as an instance of the word *slumber* and with the further intention that the word be understood as applying, in the particular utterance, only to cases of sleep. No doubt this supposition presupposes that the relevant sound and inscription types are employed with some considerable regularity by English speakers who have the indicated intentions. But none of this entail that *each instance* of the sound or inscription types connected with the word *slumber* must itself be an instance of the word *slumber* nor that it must mean “sleep.” [...] It is simply false that the idea that words or sentences mean something in a language is in any way incompatible with the intentionality theses that Knapp and Michaels emphasize so much (1992: 182).

Hence, one may say that those “literal”, dictionary meanings which Fish attacks, are not literal in the sense of possessing certain abstract essences, but their literalness is simply a matter of regularity of language use, and thus, expectations. They obviously can acquire absolutely any meaning, depending on the context, but one can start to identify those less frequent, idiosyncratic meanings only if one knows the literal meanings in the first place (Davidson 1993: 300).

The other fallacy that Fish ascribes to the formalists, or essentialists, is their rejection of the reader experience in the very process of reading. As was indicated earlier, he assumes that it is a mistake to think of interpretation as a process of pondering upon the meaning of a whole text, or a whole passage after reading it. For him, interpretation begins in the process of reading and not after it is finished. But when Fish was forced, in a reply to John Reichert (1980: 296), to elaborate on that point, he admitted that interpretation is a multi-level process, where human beings operate on many layers of assumptions, some of them remain deeper and more intact in specific contexts, some are more superficial and volatile. One might compare it to Hirsch’s distinction into understanding, that is, recognizing, the semantic, verbal units and structures, and interpretation, or the interpretive guesses about particular meaning, both of which are, in the end, elements, or levels, of the same process. The very existence of those levels, or layers, and their interrelatedness seems to be, for Fish, a strong argument against determinacy and essentialism, proving the superiority of the subjective-constructionist model of his Cartesian relativism. But he seems to forget that those layers do not form an amorphous, indistinguishable muddle, but are distinct from each other, as he, in fact, himself admitted earlier, and that communication occurs between specific layers and on the condition that they are not confused. In Fish’s words “assumptions are not all held at the same level and that

a challenge to one proceeds from within the precinct of others that are, at least for the time being, exempt from challenge” (1980: 296). The very fact that Reichert and Fish can debate, agree or disagree, criticize and exchange opinions is a case in point.

Therefore, Fish acknowledges that the process of interpretations is not only gradual but multi-level, with different layers of assumptions and degrees of activity being simultaneously put into operation when necessary. This remarkable insight indeed confirms that the process of interpretation begins when the interpreter decides to call something a piece of language, but it also follows that such a decision brings about certain ontological commitments. The act of naming something a language already contains deeper layers of suppositions about the rational beings that uttered it, its intentional content, its formal structures and the social and historical contexts of the utterance, all of which are later developed and adjusted relying on the influx of new data. It follows that Fish’s argument against formalists is rather far-fetched as both sides seem to be overlooking the forest for the trees, by artificially abstracting one element (the text, or the reader’s response) of the larger process of interpretation and calling it the interpretive process itself. Fish’s insight implicitly indicates that both the simplistic reader-oriented and formalist approaches must, in fact, be only levels of a more complex hermeneutic process.

4. Conclusion

The interesting fact is that both the development of Fish’s and Hirsch’s theory might be easily understood as struggle to overcome some problems posed by the formalist theory of the New Critics. Fish, on the one hand, rejects the autonomist assumptions about the text, but on the other, he is unable to develop a totally alternative programme for literature. He recognizes the failure of the formalist project and tries to defend reader-response theory, but seems to be defending precisely the version of reader-response described and condemned by the New Critics. He seems to have embraced the radical constructionist approach to literary meaning, which, in turn, compelled him to struggle with the problems of relativism and impressionism. Hirsch tries to reconcile the traditional 19th century hermeneutics with some of the anti-psychological assumptions of the New Critics, but it only produces some more theoretical problems, such as the ambivalent attitude towards the text, and leads him eventually close to the neopragmatist camp. Both theorists seem to be unable to move beyond the assumptions and the general framework set by the New Critics. As a result, they not only pose similar theoretical questions and share some (neoprag-

matist) assumptions and aspects of their programs, but also encounter parallel problems.

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