On Metacriticism as Intervention
(A note on Susan R. Horton's *Interpreting Interpreting*)

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Horton denies the possibility of studying "conditions under which meaning is possible" (Culler, Jameson) without a practical study of meaning (1979, 10). But this project becomes harder and harder for the mind with a theoretical bent: her metacritical activity makes Horton skeptical about her own status as an interpreter (1979, 10), and she is tempted by Stanley Fish's noncompetitive hermeneutics. Her position is contained in the uneasy triangular space between three attracting polarities:

1) An attempt at describing current interpretive activity from a purely metatheoretical position.

2) A necessary justification of any interpretation, since her metatheoretical analysis leads her to critical agnosticism.

3) A desire to privilege the "fullest" interpretation (e.g. 1979, 55).

My own situation (as a meta-metacritic) is very much the same, with some qualifications:

1) I regard metatheory as a part of theory at large, and theory as a part of practice at large. Therefore, my theoretical views are a way of privileging my practice using the tools of a specific area of discourse.

2) Theory must help us justify the nature of other interpretations, the reasons for their existence and our attitude towards them. Accepting their existence as cultural phenomena is not the same as endorsing them. Endorsing all interpretations is equal to renouncing to interpret—something which is certainly possible in academic discourse, but which is ultimately self-defeating.
3) Consequently, we always have our own interpretation to endorse (though our interpretation of a given work may change under different circumstances). This does not mean that each critic thinks he is cleverer than the others; it means that he has a more or less unique cultural position vis à vis the work. And, of course, every critic may endorse another critic's interpretation, make it his own. I may understand an interpretation which is different from mine taking into account the critic's circumstances. However, if I endorsed it wholeheartedly and without further qualifications I would no longer be advocating intellectual tolerance, since the interpretation would be my own.

Horton's metacritical principles may be summarised as follows:

- The possible interpretations of a text are finite and predictable, because they respond to a limited number of interpretive principles.

- Different interpretations result mostly from "differing conceptions of what constitutes the 'part' or the unit of interpretation that contribute to the whole during the hermeneutical process" (1979, 17).

- The concepts of "part" and "whole" which are related during the interpretive activity are both eminently variable.

- Each element may, moreover, be caught in different logics and perform different functions.

- The interpretive disagreements extend also to the status and aims of hermeneutical inquiry.

- "The intention of the writer is one other element considered during the hermeneutical process, but intention, too, is a shifting concept, as theorists such as Dilthey, Schleiermacher, and Greimas, among others, understood" (1979, 18). Horton conceives of interpretation as the Gadamerian Horizontverschmelzung fusing the intentions of the author and the different readers.

- The interpreter himself, therefore, is a variable in the interpretive process.

- In all theories there is a distinction between potential and actual elements.

- The meaning of the term "meaning" may be very different for each interpreter.

- Interpretations have a thrust towards totalization and the reduction of all elements to a single logic.

- Symbolization, the major resource used by an interpreter to build a pattern in the work, is usually possible at the expense of ignoring the role of the interpreted element in the sequence of the work (43).

- In spite of this, many elements are always left unaccounted for, and their role is silenced (1979, 40).
Horton concludes that the "structure of determinations" of a text which for the New Critics would secure the objectivity of interpretation does exist, but only for one particular reader at one given moment (1979, 19).

Horton's account is more than a description of current interpretive assumptions. It is also an attempt at transcending them, although Horton does not see a clear way to do so. She discourages a mere attempt at coherence at one level of interpretation (say, the symbolic) and recommends a "vertical" alternative that is, watching how a given element works according to the different levels in which a work may be considered (1979, 33). Her main levels of consideration are the historico-biographical, structural stylistics, poetics and semiotics. In each level a particular detail may have a different significance: it will be a trace of the writer's activity, a sign directed to a competent reader, a symbol in a thematic structure, an index of the genre the work belongs to, etc. (1979, 68-71). The different levels of analysis make a particular detail appear as the embodiment of one or another of the six factors of linguistic communication as described by Jakobson: sender, message, receiver, context, contact and code. Usually, Horton says, critics tend to specialize in one or two of these levels of analysis, and neglect the role that the unit of analysis fulfils in the rest.

Horton seems to think that she is advocating a kind of reader-response relativism. She does, of course, but the very scope of her analysis seems to point to other conclusions. For instance, she asserts that "the structure of the text . . . is determined by the structure of an interpreter's inquiry" (1979, 74). On the other hand, she asserts that no critical inquiry ever goes beyond the limits of the interpretive ladder which she has just described. That is, an examination of the performance of other critics has led to a wider, more comprehensive explanation of the procedures of structuration and interpretation. We cannot aim at understanding critical principles of different critics at work if we do not posit that their principles can be comprehended by a wider theory. Unless we are prepared to assert that our own theoretical framework is more comprehensive than those of the critics we examine, the whole enterprise of metacriticism is self-defeating. Metacritical activity must aim at transcending the assumptions of practical criticism, which are closely tied to their immediate objective.

Horton's conclusion is that we must "temper the authority with which we offer an interpretation" (1979, 140). This is a call for modesty in the practice of some kinds of literary criticism. But as far as a general theory of interpretation is concerned, it can never be more than a stylistic recommendation: as long as there are signs and interpreting is still an issue, interpretations are bound to assert themselves one against the other. Competing interpretations have always tempered each other's claims in a most satisfactory way.
Works cited


