

Anthologies, Literary Theory and the Teaching of Literature: An Exchange

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Symploke

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Di Leo:

You've thought a great deal about the institutionalization and professionalization of literary studies in America. What role have anthologies played in the institutionalization and professionalization of literary studies?

Graff:

The roles and effects are obviously multiple and over-determined, but let me start, being the curmudgeon I am, with one of the worst pedagogical results of literature anthologies: legitimating the primacy of literary texts and their supposed transparency, and obscuring the importance of criticism and interpretation (not even to mention theory) for the literature classroom.

Di Leo:

Why does foregrounding the significance of criticism and interpretation make you a curmudgeon? I would say just the opposite. I don't think that teachers have really thought enough about how to incorporate theory into the teaching of literary texts. The result is either a misappropriation of theory and criticism in their classroom, or an avoidance of theory and criticism in the classroom. The worst instance of the former is what I call the "cookie cutter approach" to theory which works something like this: apply literary theory "A" to literary text "B". Result: a valid interpretation of literary text "B" (and a successful use of literary theory "A"). On this strategy, students think that criticism and theory is some kind of game wherein points are scored for the production of valid interpretations. Textbooks like many of the volumes in the Bedford series in Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism that have primary texts along with selections like "What is Deconstruction?" and "What is Feminism?" promote this type of trivial use of theory, albeit I think unwittingly. In other cases, theory and criticism is entirely

avoided in the classroom either because it is perceived by the teacher to be beyond the ken of the students, or because the teacher wants to promote the illusion that literary studies just involves a close reading of the primary literary text at hand.

Graff:

I agree. Students and teachers who pick up an anthology get the illusion that studying literature is a matter of closely reading a bunch of primary texts and letting those texts in themselves somehow tell them what to *say* about the texts in class and in student writing. This obscures, conceals, and mystifies the fact that what we say about a literary text, though certainly *accountable* to the text itself—and this is important in ways I hope we can pursue—is generated not by the text but by the critical questions we ask about it. These questions come from the secondary conversation of readers and critics rather than from the text itself.

Di Leo:

I like this as a general way of approaching the teaching of literature, but worry about placing the onus of criticism on the asking of the right critical questions. For me, questions can both lead us to find new aspects of the text at hand as well as delimit our discovery of the text. I'd put the emphasis on the "conversation" part of your comment, rather than the "critical question" part. We should encourage our students to enter a conversation about a text. Specifically, the members of this conversation are the people who have written and commented on this text. The student can gain entry into this conversation only by acknowledging the scholarship of its members. His or her questions should concern the terms of the discussion, its assumptions and its conclusions. The arbiter in the conversion should be the literary text in question. In this context, the approach to literary texts is one of entering a discourse community or discussion of the text. Students should recognize that the questions they ask about the text are determined by the terms, assumptions and conclusions of the discourse community concerning the text. These questions are "critical questions" because they are meaningful within a particular critical context, not because they are questions in an anthology or what are perceived to be perennial questions.

Graff:

Anthologies tend to efface the mediating intervention of criticism in literary study by reducing criticism to its dullest common denominator—informational headnotes and footnotes, arbitrary questions for study, etc.—thereby propping up the illusion that responding vividly to a literary work is fundamentally a stripped down encounter of the student up close to the text, with the critical conversation about the text factored out or even seen as an unwelcome form of professional interference.

Di Leo:

I never thought about this before, but I think that you are right. A strong case can also be made that headnotes and footnotes short-circuit entry into a critical discourse community. One way that they can do this is by leading the student to believe that these headnotes and footnotes are sufficient conditions of entering this community. If I read the headnote, then I have the necessary

background information to enter into a critical dialogue with the text. Perhaps even more dangerously though they can lead the student to believe that this is all that is worthwhile to say about the text. Students have little understanding of the process of editing a textbook, and tend to believe that if it is in the textbook, then it is all that they need to know to read it. There is a myth then about the sufficiency of editorial marginalia that cuts against the inclination to either supplement the anthology marginalia with more secondary materials or that there are other important things to say about this text.

Graff:

Anthologies thereby help produce the transparency illusion that I'm talking about—that what teachers and students try to do in their classroom responses to literature is produce how the primary literary works would speak for themselves if they could speak criticism.

Di Leo:

It's funny that you should mention the transparency illusion because my experience seems to confirm what you say. During the course of my introductory course on theory and criticism, I generally have the students compare Jean-Paul Sartre's "What is Literature?" and Roland Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero*. Not because I have to, but because it allows me to discuss the relative transparency and opacity of literature. I tell the students that transparency is the belief that literature is like a window to the world, whereas opacity makes literature out to be more like a wall that we cannot see through. Most agree with Sartre that literature *should* be like a window, and consequently, they tend to both read it this way and value literature that they believe is more "transparent." Literature should reveal what it has to say. If not, it is in some way lacking. Reading otherwise is relatively unfamiliar to them. I think that this is more than anything else a consequence of the way that they have been trained to read and write about literature because with only marginal effort, I can help them to begin reading differently.

Graff:

The explicative papers most commonly assigned presumably represent what John Milton's "Lycidas" or John Keats' *Odes* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* would say if they could speak in critical talk—which is why students aren't expected in such papers to bring any critical conversation (it's assumed they are better off not knowing about such conversations, or aren't ready for them yet) to bear on the text and thereby to pose a problem about the text. Am I making any sense here?

Di Leo:

You are making a lot of sense here, and are perhaps speaking to at least one tacit belief shared by many practitioners of literary studies today which most would be rather embarrassed to acknowledge: namely, that the most widely used anthologies today are grounded in fundamental ways on New Critical ideologies of the text, or, more generally, in the tradition of explication of the text.

Graff:

Yes, especially the assumption that the best way to initiate inexperienced readers into literary study is through an ideally preconceptionless close reading of the text itself, with as little mediation by supposedly “external” factors as possible. This assumption is preposterous, but it remains foundational to literary pedagogy even for many otherwise cutting edge professors.

Di Leo:

Well, then they really aren't cutting edge then are they? It seems to me that their pedagogy has more in common with New Criticism than new frontiers in criticism.

Graff:

This thinking is New Critical, yes, but it predates New Criticism, and is found in anti-New Critics like Allan Bloom, i.e., the view that texts in themselves tell us what to say about them, so who needs criticism, theory, etc., and historical context can be covered in anthology headnotes and footnotes.

Di Leo:

I agree that this approach to texts predated New Criticism, and that there are positions coeval with New Criticism like Bloom's that support similar strategies. However, Bloom and others were not major forces in the shaping of the contemporary literary studies pedagogy. Both the traditions of New Criticism and explication of the text (à la Eric Auerbach) first and foremost asserted the primacy of the text. Literary studies begins (and in some sense ends) with the selection of the “right” set of texts according to these traditions. If one has the right text before them, then “criticism” and “interpretation” is simply a matter of paying close attention to what this text “says.” If the text has the “right stuff” (New Critics say that this would be things like irony, tension and paradox, whereas the more advanced contemporary critic would say that this would be things like race, class, gender and sexuality), then a successful interpretation of the text necessarily follows from its close reading.

Graff:

Exactly, though again I think New Criticism should not take the rap for a view that is older and more pervasive than any one school. If the text has “the right stuff,” as you say, it will in itself induce an appropriate critical response in the student brain, and if it doesn't, it's the student's fault for not reading carefully enough. That's why it's so important in this view to read texts that have the right stuff, ones that have passed the test of time, etc., though as I say canon revisionists hold versions of this view too.

Di Leo:

Yes, but their power in the formation of the English department curriculum, pedagogy and canon was not close to that of the New Critics. I would maintain that even though the progressive

contemporary critic of the text is concerned with implicating the text with cultural and political concerns, their pedagogical strategies of focusing on the close-reading of the right choice of primary texts does not move far beyond ideologies of the text that they would view as reactionary.

Graff:

In many cases, yes.

Di Leo:

Isn't it true that informational headnotes and footnotes direct the students (and teachers) toward what the text is "supposed" to be saying to them, and study questions make sure that the student does not drift far from this text as the locus of their critical attention? In other words, doesn't the editorial marginalia support this reactionary view of texts and textuality?

Graff:

Generally yes, though I think the headnotes and footnotes are seen not as directing the student toward what the text is supposed to be saying to them so much as they are the preliminary background information the student needs in order to make sense of the text *and therefore*, at the next stage, be able to emit in their critical response what the text wants him or her to say about it.

Di Leo:

Anthologies continue to legitimate and reinforce the primacy of literary texts even if the domain of what is a (literary) text has shifted and the range of things that texts (should) "say" has changed. The "new" progressive cultural studies canon of texts is anthologized as though it speaks to the student much the same way as the "old" reactionary great books canon did with the proviso that what it "says" is different. This, of course, is the message that is legitimated by anthologies that update their selection of the texts while failing to alter their presentation of these materials.

Graff:

Yes again.

Di Leo:

So, I tend to agree with what you say, but have two related sets of questions for you. First, what is the alternative to anthologies which, as you say, "obscure, conceal, and mystify the fact what we say about a literary text is generated not by the text, but by the critical questions we ask about it"?

Graff:

Anthologies and case-books that provide students with critical conversations about literary texts that the students can enter and see the point of entering. These are very hard to produce, since most academic criticism and even Sunday book-reviewing is not addressed to students, but presupposes an initiated audience.

Di Leo:

The Bedford volumes that I mentioned earlier don't seem to give the student a good reason to enter the conversation or even a good point of entry. For example, Ross Murfin's edition of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1996, 2nd ed.) for Bedford anthologizes five "perspectives" on the text: reader-response, feminist and gender criticism, deconstruction, New Historicist, and cultural criticism. Using this "cookie cutter approach" to theory in fact even seems to turn students off to theory and criticism. For them, it just amounts to a clever response to a text, and the point of making it is remote aside from the grade that one might gain from it. Part of the weakness of editions like Murfin's is not that they use theory, but that they give very little indication of why anyone would believe that this theory is important or significant, and from whence it came.

Graff:

The Bedford "critical controversy" texts of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1995) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (2000) that Jim Phelan and I have co-edited are an attempt to produce such texts that provide students with critical conversations about the text that they can enter along with the texts. My sense is that we've succeeded only unevenly at this goal, but we're still working on it.

Di Leo:

I think that the strengths of these two textbooks are quite obvious. I have used the *Huckleberry Finn* volume, and can tell you that students feel as though they have entered a critical conversation on *Huckleberry Finn*, and that they are thereby licenced to interpret, or at least ask critical questions. However, what are the weaknesses that you see in these two textbooks?

Graff:

I think they tend to be too difficult for students who don't already command the vocabulary and conventions needed for entering critical discussions and debates, especially ones who are uneasy about debates and arguments of any kind.

Di Leo:

I tend to agree with you concerning the difficulty, but also think that it is a good opportunity for the students to learn the vocabulary and conventions through critical practice. Too often the vocabulary of critical theory is presented in isolation from critical practice. The recent glut of "dictionaries" of modern literary and cultural criticism only further validates this practice, and encourages it. If one side errs on the side of the primacy of the text, the other errs on the side of the primacy of the theory—or at least, theoretical vocabulary. As observers of critical practice,

one of the ways in which students can gain entry into critical controversies is simply by asking questions about the vocabulary of the piece. What does s/he mean by “hegemony”? What is “patriarchy”? This allows the student, unwittingly, to enter the debate through their demand for clarity and understanding. From their growing understanding of the meaning of the terms, and their conventional use in critical practice, the students can then build up to more complex questions concerning the foundations of critical theory including its key assumptions. Good anthologies will present critical readings that allow this kind of entry by the student into the conversation. Another key here is the willingness of the instructor to entertain the same bemusement as the student with the vocabulary and conventions of the critical practice. There must be a willingness on the part of both the instructor and the student to actively engage the critical practice with the end of not only understanding its general position on the text at hand, but also in terms of the meaning of its vocabulary and the nature and assumptions of its mode of argumentation.

Graff:

The first time I assigned the Huck text, in a mid-level undergraduate course at the University of Chicago, I felt that for some of the students several of the critical essays were too long and complicated. Some also expressed the view that Twain had written the book to entertain, so it was therefore perverse to pick it apart and quibble over it in a solemn academic way. They invoked Twain’s opening warning that readers who find a moral in the story will be banished.

Di Leo:

I agree with you about the length of the critical essays. For various reasons, I think it is important for today’s student that the selections be as brief as possible. Of course this is no excuse for including trivial or shallow commentaries, but it is a mandate to select critical articles that conform to the temperament and reading capacities of today’s students. Nothing is worse than selecting a good article for your students only to have them come to class saying that it was too long and complicated, therefore they gave up on it. I always think that it is better to err on the side of a shorter piece, with a tighter argument, than a longer piece with a more profound but also looser argument. Providing students with successful engagements with critical theory encourages them to take on more complicated and longer pieces later in the course. Textbooks which are organized according to such principles are more useful in the classroom, and address some of the objections to critical theory at their source.

Graff:

As it happens, Phelan and I “empowered” such objections in our introduction to students when we noted that Twain might seem to agree with some disaffected literature students that literature is to be read for fun and not for the “hidden meanings” you can get out of it. Some of my students found that so convincing a position that I had to spend considerable time in class making a case for finding serious issues like racism in the book, as well as for debating how they are handled. I ended up feeling that for students who aren’t already insiders to lit-crit discourse, something more basic is needed, a text that would present criticism, critical debate, and their justifications with fewer assumptions taken for granted.

Di Leo:

But can't this be done by closely studying the criticism? In other words, perhaps it is the case that the criticism presumes things that do not hold in the primary text. If this is so, then shouldn't we be obligated to pursue this with the students even if it risks derailing a "contemporary controversy" like racism or the homo-eroticism of *Huckleberry Finn*? This opens the door for more serious general questions as to how and why we validate readings of the Twain classic. Should we respect them just because they are anthologized? Or do they need to "prove" themselves irrespective of their position in the contemporary critical landscape. Sometimes the naiveté of students with regard to these questions can turn the teacher into the student: what we take to be the topoi of critical practice regarding texts like *Huckleberry Finn* becomes empty and unsubstantiated academic talk. It also brings us to even more important questions: Why do we read? What is it to read with understanding? What is the role of the critical community in answering these questions? Entering a discussion of contemporary debates on *Huckleberry Finn* need not be an exercise in validation of the debate. However, it need not also be an opportunity for the students to exercise their penchant for emotive and subjective responses to the text. In any event, isn't it the case that anthologies are still being published with headnotes and arbitrary questions because teachers use them and even demand them?

Graff:

Yes, but then it's also the case that many of the same teachers have cut back on their expectations for what most students will be able to do—i.e., it's generally not assumed that more than a minority of A-students will really enter the critical conversation about literature, that is, that it's okay if the rest get turned on by some books and respond vividly. If they can't produce a literate version of critical discourse, then, well, that's only to be expected.

Di Leo:

But entering the critical conversation is not the same as producing a literate version of it. A student can read a bunch of articles on *Huckleberry Finn*, and ask some questions that they never would have asked without reading them, but at the same time, most all of them would be hard pressed to produce a version of the conversation.

Graff:

Right, which is what I was trying to get at above—if it's a "literate version" of the conversation that we want from students, and I don't think we're doing them justice if we settle for less, then it's a problem if the gap between the critical debate and the level at which students appropriate and respond to it remains large. I think that simplifying the debate helps to close that gap and eventually helps students become more sophisticated down the road.

Di Leo:

My other question from above is why do you think that there is still such a strong at least tacit belief among teachers of literature today in the primacy of the text? Why is this still the case

despite the belief by many of these same teachers that we are in the age of cultural and critical studies with its concomitant devotion to the gendering, socialization, racialization, and sexualizing of the literary text?

Graff:

In a way I'm a believer in "the primacy of the text," in the sense that my reading of any text—your questions here, say—has to be guided by or accountable to the text I'm reading. But I don't confuse this kind of primacy—accountability to the text—with sufficiency. I think there's a lot of confusion about this issue, which we don't after all discuss very much, plus a lot of residual Platonism, plus the fact that if we committed ourselves to teaching criticism, i.e., seeing that that's what "teaching literature" entails, teaching students how to speak and write criticism, we'd have to do some work to figure out how to clarify the culture of criticism for students, and of course we're already overworked.

Di Leo:

Well if New Critics are not entirely to blame, then neither are the Platonists! What do you mean by "accountability to the text" and how is it disassociable from the idea of the "primacy of the text"? It seems to me that the former assumes the latter.

Graff:

I'm glad you ask—a key question. By accountability to the text I meant the responsibility we have as readers to read the text on its own terms, or to put ourselves in the author's shoes; by the primacy of the text (perhaps not the most precise phrase) I meant the fallacy that the text tells us what to say about it. These notions are often confused, so that if you deny, as I do, that a text tells us what to say about it you may be accused of (or praised for) denying that we can or should read a text on its own terms. Traditionalists make this mistake from the right, accusing you of relativism if you argue that texts don't tell us what to say about them; theory people make this mistake from the left, accusing you of retrograde objectivism if you argue that readers can or should read texts on their own terms.

Di Leo:

Let me see if I understand you correctly: asserting accountability to the text means that we are obligated to interpret the text with an eye towards the cultural, biographical, and societal forces inscribed in the text though not necessarily openly revealed by the text, whereas asserting the primacy of the text means that we are obligated to interpret the text with the knowledge that everything that we can know about the text will be told to the active reader by the text. The difference is that the former does not tell you how you should read the text, whereas the latter does. Both positions focus on the text as the center of critical understanding of the text, but one emphasizes the text as the be all and end all of criticism (the primacy view) by telling us the method of interpreting it as well as its meaning, whereas the accountability view says that while a text says what it means, it cannot tell us how to determine what it says (the method of interpreting it). Have I got it right?

Graff:

Let me give a primitive example: someone who read a restaurant menu as an epic poem would be refusing accountability to the text, i.e., misreading it. One could even say that the menu says to its readers, “read me as menu, not as a poem.” But it doesn’t follow that the menu tells anyone how to describe it in a given situation, which depends on the context and involves selection from the infinite number of possible things that can be said about any object. If my audience already knows the text is a menu, or if the question I’m asked is “what color is that text?” it would make no sense for me to answer—“it’s a menu.” The point has relevance to the selection of what to pick out to notice and talk about when we teach and study literature. Teachers who think texts tell us what to say about them have trouble seeing why their students fail to see what they see in those texts: here the text is signalling the students what to say about it and the student is mute or confused or says the wrong things, so the problem presumably is in the student. In fact, having a sense of what to say about a text, what aspects or problems to pick out, requires familiarity with the critical conversation about the text. When we expect students to make statements about literature without reading criticism (the anthology-effect), we’re asking students to enter a critical conversation that’s withheld from them, or to produce criticism without reading any.

Di Leo:

But isn’t it also true that according to the accountability view of texts, it is very well the case that some “contemporary critical debates” concerning them are inconsistent with reading the text on its own terms? While issues of gender might be on the forefront of our critical attention, and have generated a lot of critical controversy, still they might not have crossed Twain’s mind? It seems to me that this is one of the implications of your position.

Graff:

Yes, quite so. In saying that we have to read the text on *its* terms I didn’t mean to suggest that we can’t or shouldn’t also read it on *our* terms, or in the light of contexts and issues that weren’t of concern to the author at all. In fact, this doubleness structures reading: when we read a text we’re concerned with its or its author’s questions (I’m eliding that distinction for the moment) and with our questions that stem from our own interests and biases or from problems that have arisen after the text was written (how does the glorification of war in the *Iliad* look in the wake of 20th century carnage?). In saying that texts don’t tell us what to say about them, I was trying to say that the text in itself doesn’t tell us which of the author’s questions we should talk about, much less which of our own questions.

Di Leo:

But even though a critical controversy may be a hot one today, it is also possible that this controversy is not accountable to the text. Maybe this is what your students were getting at when they doubted a “controversy” about race and racism in *Huckleberry Finn*?

Graff:

This in fact is exactly what they thought: since racism is more of a hot issue for us today than it was for Twain (doubtful, but let's concede them that premise), we're misreading his text if we read it as being centrally about racial issues. Their skepticism was even more pronounced toward our section on gender issues: since feminist issues are of interest to us now more than they were to Twain, we're misreading his text if we ask how it deals with gender. I tried to convince them that one is not necessarily misreading a text—failing to be accountable to it—when one raises questions about it that weren't on its or its author's radar screen: there may have been no feminism in Shakespeare's day, but there were men and women and socially defined gender roles that his plays reflect, problematize, or whatever. So it's possible to be "accountable" to a text while going beyond its horizon of intentions and assumptions.

Di Leo:

You know, this doubleness that structures reading that you are talking about sounds a lot like the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Reading, for Gadamer, involves this interplay and dialogue between the past and the present. Reading a text like Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* prompts us to ask questions about our own interests and biases. We, in turn, bring these questions and biases to bear on the text of *Huckleberry Finn*. Understanding this text involves our ability to reconstruct the question to which it was an answer. For Gadamer—and it sounds like for you as well—understanding is productive, and meaning is never exhausted by the author's intentions. This view is both consonant with your position on accountability to the text as well as with your rejection of the primacy of the text. On this Gadamerian model, it would make sense to anthologize readings of *Huckleberry Finn* that were firmly identifiable with our own interests and concerns, and to use them to dialogue with Twain's text. The understanding here would be that we are not trying to understand in any absolute sense what Twain meant in *Huckleberry Finn*, but rather are trying to understand what Twain meant in *Huckleberry Finn* relative to our own interests and biases. Better anthologies will contain materials that allow for us to do this, whereas worse anthologies will present Twain's book as though the absolute meaning of it were possible or as though it could speak for itself. What do you think? How much of a Gadamerian at you at heart?

Graff:

Not much of one, I'm afraid. My impression is that Gadamer's notion of horizon-fusion fogs over rather than usefully problematizes the distinctions between past and present and subject and object. My own view is that it's constitutive of making sense of reading that we assume the distinctions between past and present and subject and object. My own view is that it's constitutive of making sense of reading that we assume the possibility of distinguishing between what Twain meant (though I'd say that's a matter of probable inference, not of absolute certainty) and how we view that meaning in the light of our own interests and biases. That is, it seems to me that we need to be able to distinguish between the author's and his culture's questions and our own questions in order to bring these things together fruitfully. In other words, a degree of objectification, of the otherness of the author, has to be assumed. I don't think Gadamer and other Heideggerians allow this objectification—the past for them is always already inseparable from the present, i.e., there's no getting at what Twain inferrably meant as a subject independent of us. I think this confuses an already vastly confused issue which we evade rather

than confront in teaching (mea culpa too), leaving students grasping at cliches like “we can’t know the author’s intention,” “literature’s always ambiguous,” etc. But maybe I’ve misread Gadamer and Heidegger on this point. I’ve always found their writings murky.

Di Leo:

Well it is probably best not to get into a debate at this point as to what Gadamer did nor did not mean in *Truth and Method* or the relative “murkiness” of Gadamer and Heidegger on this subject, but it would be interesting to hear who you view as your predecessors in terms of pedagogical method? Or should I say say, “anthological method”? If not Gadamer, whose work most strongly has influenced your own take on the shape and directions anthologies should assume to be most effective in the classroom? What did you take from their work? Do you view your own position to be more novel than derivative? Or more derivative than novel?

Graff:

Tough questions. I sided with E. D. Hirsch against Gadamer/ Heidegger back in the fun old days when the current fault lines were opening up around questions of the objectivity and/or historicity (and subsequently the politicality) of interpretation. Hirsch unfortunately has since then compromised himself with his questionable arguments about cultural literacy and education, and in retrospect I think there were problems with his theories of interpretation, but I still agree with him that to think of reading in a coherent way there needs to be some kind of distinction between what Hirsch calls “meaning” and “significance” (or what the author can be inferred to intend), and how the reader recontextualizes that intention in the light of his or her or a different period’s interests, which may involve reading it against the grain. This argument amounts to a reassertion (a sophisticated one, I hope) of the old subject-object distinction that I gather Gadamer and Heidegger would dissolve into historicity or Being or what have you. The whole argument is fascinating, and remains unresolved.

Di Leo:

But Hirsch as well was not immune from the “fogging of the issue” that you ascribe to Gadamer and Heidegger. His distinction between “meaning” and “significance” heavily draws on Husserl’s notion of an “intentional object.” Meaning for Hirsch is not reducible to the psychological acts of Twain, nor is it independent of the mental processes of the author of *Huckleberry Finn*. Hirsch’s “meaning” is some type of ideal object that can be expressed in a number of different ways, and still “mean” the same thing. For me, this is just as foggy a notion as the fusion of horizons thesis of Gadamer. However, regardless of the relative fuzziness of these ideas, why keep the allegiance to the “meaning” side of Hirsch’s equation? Why not regard language and literature as purely social matters? Or, leave them on the side of “significance” if “meaning” is destined to be a perennially fuzzy object/topic?

Graff:

It’s always good to find another fan of the Hirsch/Gadamer debate, a diminishing breed, I suspect. I have always found Hirsch’s Husserlian take on meaning as an “intentional object” a bit

hard to grasp, but I don't have a problem with meaning being in principle self-identical even when expressed in different ways. Hirsch has an essay on synonymy in [*The Aims of Interpretation*\(1976\)](#) that seems to me a good defense of this idea—a no-no for New Critics and Gadamerians, to be sure—of the separability of meaning from how it's expressed. I would like to think, though, that this Hirschean argument about synonymy is not incompatible with Derrida's concept of "iterability," or repetition with a difference, in "Signature Event Context." (In [*Limited Inc.* \(1988\)](#), edited by me, Derrida's response to me in an interview, especially pp. 142–153, makes me think this convergence may not be as improbable as it sounds). That is, for a meaning to be a meaning it has to be both itself (self-identical in Hirsch's sense) and to differ from itself.

Di Leo:

I'm familiar with Hirsch's essay which also appeared in the first volume of *Critical Inquiry*. Hirsch's argument in "Stylistics and Synonymy" concludes that style depends on there being alternative ways of saying the same thing as well as a notion of synonymy. I think that a number of people have provided very good arguments against Hirsch's notion of synonymy. The main thrust of these arguments is to free the theory of style from the constraints of synonymy, and misleading oppositions like style and subject, form and content, what and how, and intrinsic and extrinsic. I tend to believe that Hirsch's notion of synonymy is too strict, as are the views of those such as Nelson Goodman who reject the notion of synonymy *in toto*. I would suggest that we take up a weaker sense of synonymy. Instead of "strict identity" and "sameness" that we weaken our notion of synonymy to account for the fact that while no two terms have exactly the same meaning, that some terms are closer to the meaning of others so that a choice between the two terms in a discourse situation would provide subtle shifts in meaning. This notion of synonymy would be closer to what I think Derrida finds agreeable, if anything, in Hirsch's notion. It captures the "sameness with a difference" that you spoke of regarding Derrida's concept of iterability. So, I can see a link between Hirsch (albeit modified) and Derrida (albeit loosely conceived).

Graff:

I like the idea of "weakening" Hirschean self-identity to make it compatible with the Derridean idea that "self-identity" itself is always already constituted by difference. That's in fact what I was trying to say myself. For an example of what we're talking about, look at what I just did—I said the *same* thing as you said—we need to weaken Hirsch's notion of self-identity—by *changing it*, putting it in other words, summarizing, it paraphrasing it. If I'd simply replicated your words, quoted you without restatement, what I would have produced would be not the same meaning but no meaning: summaries reproduce the same meaning by changing them, putting them into other words, but words that, in order to qualify as a summary, have to be recognizable *as* synonymous with the original. This seems to me a vindication of Hirsch's argument that some notion of self-identity must be presupposed to make sense of communication, but amended by Derrida's argument that self-identity is always constituted by difference, iteration, spin, or what have you.

Di Leo:

So what does all this have to do with literature anthologies?

Graff:

Well, when I said at the outset that they tend to assume that great texts tell students and others what to say about them (i.e., they isolate the texts from the critical discourse that students are asked to produce about the texts), this was another way of saying that conventional anthologies rest on an inert notion of self-identity in which the student is somehow to reproduce the sameness of the text without the intervention of criticism, much less theory. Phelan and my “critical controversies” editions assume that the self-identity of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Tempest* can be replicated only in interpretive controversies.

Di Leo:

So, great books are only great from within the context of interpretive controversies? If these books cannot contribute in the critical conversations of our day, then should they be overlooked? This is a recipe for a continuously shifting canon determined by a set of contingent conditions: conditions that are more times than not politically determined. How do you feel about resting literary studies and the contents of anthologies on politics?

Graff:

It doesn't follow for me that books are great only if they contribute to critical conversations and should be overlooked if they don't. If *Moby Dick* is a great novel, as I think it is, it was as great when it was overlooked and ignored by the critical conversation as it was and has been seen as since its revival after World War I. There's a sense in which a book is what it is independent of what readers and critics see in it—the flower in the forest can still be beautiful even if never seen by a human eye. Here's where I want to preserve some notion of the objectivity of the text independent of its contextualization. The best theorist I know on this question, by the way, is John Reichert in [Making Sense of Literature \(1977\)](#), an unfortunately overlooked *Moby Dick* of literary theory. Reichert argues cogently that there's a sense in which, if we agree that a text says or does something, then presumably it always said and did it and doesn't stop saying and doing it from one historical period to the next. The same would follow for whether it's good or not. Although (a big although) Reichert acknowledges that there's also an important sense in which goodness and badness are purpose and context-relative—nothing is just good in itself but has to be good *for* some purpose. Whatever makes a text good or bad, then, is an objective property of the text, but the standards by which we judge it as good or bad change historically and culturally. I'm afraid I'm running over this too quickly, but Reichert lays it out well in Chapter 4 (esp. pp. 121–28).

Di Leo:

Well, I think that we should probably stop here before your comments on Reichert draw us into a long discussion on the metaphysics of literary value and related matters.

Graff:

I agree.