

ect is its ability to upgrade its theoretical framework. The theoretical assertions devised by, for example, the Russian formalists or the American New Critics are not to be inherited on faith; instead they must be tested against more recent developments. This is the essence of a self-correcting scientific theory of literature.

Scientific criticism has also learned, I believe, that it cannot eliminate textual significance from its data and findings. Recognition of this fact was certainly the blind spot of various earlier structural and linguistic approaches, whose epistemologies stopped short of revealing meaning. But contrary to what Seamon claims, textual significance as set forth in (for instance) a semiotic analysis is part of the research findings and not merely a fall into the “temptation” to interpret.

LOUIS A. MORRA
Columbia University

To the Editor:

In the key statement of his essay “Poetics against Itself,” Roger Seamon says that “the shift from the literary system to the system of the work marks the point at which the scientific enterprise transforms itself into another source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science” (300). I would like to test this statement against a series of statements about recognized sciences:

1. When an astronomer looks at a particular quasar for the purpose of understanding the structure of that particular object, astronomy becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

2. When Watson and Crick looked at the particular DNA molecule for the purpose of deciphering the structure of that particular molecule, chemistry became a source of interpretation and thereby lost its identity as science.

3. When a geneticist looks at a particular gene sequence for the purpose of understanding how to alter it to produce artificial human insulin, genetics becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

4. When a medical doctor looks at an individual patient for the purpose of recommending interventions to cure that individual patient, medicine becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

5. When a geologist looks at an individual rock formation to recommend for or against mining or drilling operations, geology becomes a source of interpretation and thereby loses its identity as science.

6. When physicists looked at a specific ball of plutonium for the purpose of determining whether they could make it into a bomb that could kill 200,000 people, physics became a source of interpretation and thereby lost its identity as science.

These statements all seem false to me, and by analogy they seem to discredit Seamon’s thesis.

Suppose that we grant that the Oppenheimer team was

doing applied and not pure science—or even that the medical doctor and the oil-company geologist are not doing science at all? The existence of such practitioners—who use existing insights of a science without generating new basic insights—does not imply that the respective sciences as practiced by others, or by Oppenheimer before and after the bomb project, have ceased to exist, or even that they no longer exist *as science*. Further, we can distinguish in the abstract between scientifically founded practitioners and impostors who use the jargon of medicine or geology although ignorant of the respective scientific principles, even though it may be difficult in practice to identify such impostors.

A reason exists for a theorist to say, “I am not trying to interpret this object in isolation; rather, I am using this object in a project aimed at understanding the principles of the entire class to which the object belongs.” Seamon repeatedly quotes variations of this statement in his essay. The reason for such statements is not that theory must be kept perpetually separated from interpretation in order to be scientific. The reason is that some start must be made toward an understanding of underlying principles before that understanding can be made useful in interpretation.

The scandal is not that some interpretations have been based on theory; it is that for too long the assumptions on which interpretations have been based were unexamined or even unconscious.

RAYMOND J. WILSON III
Loras College

Reply:

Louis Morra thinks that we can tell a literary work from other sorts of discourse by certain features of the text. W. C. Williams, among many others, deliberately wrote poems which were (lineation aside) meant to be, and are, linguistically indistinguishable from prose. That convention became the mark of one sort of modernist poetry; indeed it is the poetic diction of our time. And are Wittgenstein and Hegel deficient in “textual complexity”? In *The Tangled Bank* Stanley Hyman found plenty of tropes in Darwin, Marx, Fraser, and Freud; and Hayden White did the same turn for historians in *Metahistory*. This procedure has become a major form of deconstruction. If it is claimed that what this shows is that all these works are “really” poems we would be stuck with the oddity that many canonical literary works are “really” less literary (less tropical) than allegedly nonliterary ones. Or we must conclude that all discourse is literary, which is fine—but we thereby end the effort to discover the underlying structure of poetry, since writing and poetry would be identical and poetics would collapse into pragmatics generally. The effort to distinguish the “literary work of art” from other forms of discourse *by linguistic features* simply won’t work, so I will stick with Frye and modern aestheticians, among whom there is a consensus on this matter. This does