# SUBJECTIVITY AND BELIEF: WALTER BENN MICHAELS' RE-CIRCULATION OF CLASSICAL PRAGMATISM IN THE FIELD OF LITERARY STUDIES

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The sweeping influence of Europe-based literary theory upon a new generation of students has brought great pressure upon the American community of literary studies. Traditionally a steadfast stronghold of behaviorism and empiricism, the community finds its foundation seriously challenged by theory's tendency to strip the subject of any autonomous standing of its own and an epistemology that undermines the self-manifest actuality of empirical facts. The most immediate problem seems to be that of asserting its own American identity while absorbing the new influence. Rising to answer the call for assistance is none but the best-known branch of indigenous American philosophy—pragmatism. For pragmatism, like structuralism and deconstruction, puts into doubt the autonomous self as well as the givenness of facts; yet at the same time, pragmatism heralds the socially-conditioned actuality of the self and the community-ratified status of facts. Thus while echoing anti-foundationalist tendencies in European literary theory, pragmatism turns theory's accompanying skepticism and nihilism into new concerns for the social and the political. And in that sense, the recent vogue of pragmatic positioning functions as the American line of defense against the invasion of European tendencies.

To better understand the cooperation and tension between European literary theory and American pragmatism, we turn to the work of Walter Benn Michaels, who has consistently advocated the pragmatic position and shown its relevance for the generation after the baptism of Europe-based literary theory.[1] Michaels is better known for the collaborative work he has done with Steven Knapp on the controversial essay of "Against Theory," yet his two earlier essays have done a great deal in reviving some of the key topics in pragmatism. It is to these essays that I devote the following discussion.

Michaels' explication of the pragmatic stance centers around the issue of the subject and what the subject brings to any task of cognition and perception. This choice of focus has much to do with the historical moment of contemporary literary theory itself. In the United States since the seventies, the question of "subjectivity" has emerged to focus critical efforts, evidenced by the widening popularity of imported structuralist and deconstruction theories that put the concept of a unified self into question and by the gradual propagation, ironically at the same time, of an indigenous reader-oriented pedagogy that announces the arrival of the subjective paradigm.

The popularity of Europe-based theory began with the now legendary international symposium on The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man held in

1966 at Johns Hopkins University. The symposium and the two-year-long program of seminars and colloquia following it "[brought] into an active and not uncritical contact leading European proponents of structural studies in a variety of disciplines with a wide spectrum of American scholars" (Macksey & Donato xv). Then followed a period of mushrooming of related anthologies to make the transmission of theory complete for the younger generation of students.[2] Be it a subjectivity constituted by linguistic and structural codes in structuralism or a subjectivity that is dissipated by the differed and deferred nature of language in post-structuralism, the Cartesian concept of a centralized and emanating subjectivity is seriously challenged and, according to some, totally discredited.

The propagation, on the other hand, of a subjectivity-asserting and reader-oriented pedagogy was a more complicated and elongated process. Louise Rosenblatt's now classic work of *Literature as Exploration* (1938) came to be revised in 1967 so as to make her insights "available to yet another generation of teachers at a time when the profession is reexamining means and ends in literary instruction" (Squire vi). (Incidentally, this is also the year when Stanley Fish published his reader-oriented dissertation *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in* Paradise Lost.) This re-examination of pedagogy was necessitated by the crisis in the classroom that many teachers were facing. After the Russians launched Sputnik in 1957, America's newly-adopted policy of a government-subsidized and thus more accessible higher education and the consequent boom in enrollment brought students of widely different socio-economic backgrounds into institutions of higher education. Confronted with students who may not have been previously exposed to any cultivation of a common heritage, teachers were faced with the problem of finding out new ways of teaching that would approach and appeal to all students. Furthermore, the turmoil of the sixties gave momentum to a new air of rebellion against all established values and brought the needs and feelings of the individual to the forefront.[3] To deal with these newly arisen problems, transaction-based teaching theories gradually came into vogue because they gave all students a handle on the reading materials and allowed their personal feelings and emotions to be discussed as legitimate topics in the classroom. Such a trend culminates with the publication, certified by the National Council of Teachers of English, of David Bleich's *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (1975).

Amidst the fierce battle between these two opposing forces and a then dominant New Critical pedagogy that denies the relevance of any talk of the reading subject, Michaels is not slow to put in his own theoretical intervention through explications of classical pragmatic concepts. Thus, in place of the post-structuralist dissipated self, the reader-response unreflected self, and the new Critical effaced self, Michaels proposes a socially constructed self which acknowledges yet thrives upon its own prejudices and limitations.

Michaels' first move in reviving pragmatism is of course an effort to make the more-than-half-a-century old intellectual movement relevant again for contemporary theoretical discussion. Michaels notices that the New Critics' fierce attack on the Con-

tinental movement revolves around the issue of the latter's implicit subjectivism. For, as the New Critics interpret the claims of the deconstructionists, if objective meaning (or knowledge) is an impossibility, then all that is left is subjectivism and relativism, which the New Critics have always feared.[4] Such a "suspicion of the self," Michaels hastens to point out, is not unprecedented in American thoughts ("The Interpreter's Self" 187). As a matter of fact, Peirce's work has always emphasized the prejudiced nature of the self, the self that is always constituted by the community into which it is born. Yet Michaels prefers Peirce because the latter shares the New Critics' mistrust of the self but at the same time rejects the alleged alternatives of subjectivism and relativism by associating any degree of determination with the community of which the individual self is only a function and a member.

In a typically deconstructive move, which pays more attention to marginal notes and rhetorical strategies than anything else, Michaels embarks on an explanation of the pragmatic theory of the self through his explication of Peirce's readings of none other than the great champion of the self, Rene Descartes. Peirce's readings of Descartes are relevant for the issue of subjectivity because (1) Peirce's 1868 critique of Descartes repudiates the concept of an unprejudiced self, and (2) his 1877-78 reading of Descartes carries the interesting pragmatic implication that Descartes himself may have eventually adopted the concept of a prejudiced self.

To take the first point first: In Michaels's reading, Peirce's 1868 challenge to Cartesianism brings forth a theory of the self that carries significant consequences. Peirce's essay is read as a direct encounter between two concepts of the self: while Descartes privileges an autonomous self whose source of certainty is to be found in the individual consciousness through a centralized and rigid process of inference that excludes numerous phenomena as inexplicable, Peirce argues that the individual should not be entrusted to act as the absolute judge of truth and that trust should be given over to the multitude and variety of its arguments rather than to the conclusiveness of a single person or a single line of argument. That is to say, while Descartes affirms the absolute certainty and autonomy of the self, Peirce is deeply suspicious of the Cartesian self, divorced from its own prejudices and blind of its own limitations. Furthermore, against the philosophical vacuum Descartes prescribes for the beginning point of any philosophical inquiries, Peirce voices his strongest objection: "We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices that we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy" (quoted in Michaels, "The Interpreter's Self" 192). In this objection Michaels reads something very significant: Peirce is doing nothing less than "putting forward an alternative account of philosophy and of the philosophical self, one which poses *an explicit challenge to the related values of autonomy and neutrality*" (192, my emphasis).

Such views on the self provide significant insights for the concerns of the moment. Michaels' is a moment when the self is being eradicated again from any theorizing of the meaning-production activities of man: while the New Critics have asserted that the self has nothing to do with the text and its meaning, the deconstruc-

tionists are saying that the self is incapable of participating in, not to mention initiating, the production of meaning. In both cases, Michaels locates an intention to pursue neutrality and objectivity by eliminating the role of the self. To re-insert the self into the meaning-production process, to make the self and its prejudices the indispensable elements in any acts of cognition, Michaels' decision to re-introduce Peirce's pragmatism is a timely one. At the same time, Peirce's is not a theory of meaning that treats the cogito as some transparent mirror that, if purged through systematic doubt, can truthfully reflect on the world- which the New Critics assume; nor is it a theory of the self that takes any subjectivity for granted as a given and starts all inquiries from that basis- as the reader-response critics have done. As Michaels rightly points out, Peirce's theory of the self highlights the "reciprocally constitutive" relationship between the socially constituted self and the reified world ("The Interpreter's Self" 200).

This socially constituted self, which is by nature prejudiced, is only the oppositional side of Peirce's theory of the self as he argues his case against Descartes. Peirce's own positive theory of the self also proves itself relevant for contemporary discussion. For this aspect of Peirce, Michaels turns to Peirce's 1868 essay "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," which most of Peirce's commentators read as an attack on the doctrine of intuition. Michaels, on the other hand, finds interesting elements in this essay that would prove quite compatible with contemporary literary theory. As Peirce observes the growth of self-consciousness in children, he notices that children acquire a sense of self-consciousness only through the intervention of language, by way of the frustration experienced by children when their verbal hypotheses about things in the world are forced to be modified by their actual experience with the things. In other words, it is only through the frustration accompanying ignorance that a child becomes aware of the existence of a self in which this ignorance can inhere. Not only does this observation confirm Peirce's notion of a self whose sense of autonomy and certainty is constantly challenged, it also demonstrates that a sense of the self is born out of error and ignorance in the context of signs/language. That is, any knowledge of the self is acquired only through the use of signs, or as Peirce puts it, "the word of sign that man uses is the man himself." This emphasis of the constitutive role that signs play in the formation of the self corresponds nicely with structuralist and post-structuralist concepts of subjectivity, yet without the sense of helplessness and uncertainty that accompany contemporary views toward subjectivity. As a matter of fact, the implication is that this constitutedness is the exact site where power struggles are fought.

So far we have seen that the first reason Michaels turns to Peirce for inspiration is a theory of the self that would address contemporary concerns. This theory not only asserts the constitutive role the self and its prejudices play in meaning-production but also highlights the constituted nature of the self through the use of signs within the context of community life. As such, it not only speaks a language similar to that of the contemporary theory in its efforts to de-centralize the "naturally given" subject,

but also reinserts any discussion of self, meaning, and language back into the process of social interaction.

The second reason Michaels turns to Peirce has to do with the further consolidation of this new concept of the self that Peirce finds in a deconstructive reading of Descartes' *Meditation III*, a concept that promises to dispel American critics' fear of the inherent subjectivism in deconstruction theory.

Peirce detects two distinct concepts of the self in Descartes' *Meditations*. In the first two *Meditations*, doubt establishes the primacy of the cogito. It is in doubt that I think. Since I am the one who is doing the doubting, I must exist—"I think therefore I am." Such a view of doubt affirms the self-sufficiency and unprejudiced character of the self. This is the Descartes that is usually known. But in demonstrating God's existence in *Meditation III*, Descartes presents a very different view of doubt. The logic goes like this. Since I doubt, that means something is lacking. But I must have some clear idea of the perfect one in order to know that something is lacking, and that idea can not come from me who is imperfect. Thus the perfect one must exist. Here doubt is used to show that "something is lacking to me, and that I am not quite perfect" (quoted in Michaels, "The Interpreter's Self" 196). Such a reading by Peirce presents the later Descartes in a new light: instead of promoting a self that is neutral or context-free, self-sufficient or unprejudiced, Descartes in his later years is advocating a self that is in every way contingent and constrained, fraught with error and inadequacy.

Michaels sees an important implication for literary criticism in this theory of the self: it shows that "the problem of the reader's subjectivity is, at least from Peirce's standpoint, a false problem" ("The Interpreter's Self" 198). What the proponents of determinate meaning fear is the autonomous, self-willing readers treating their own unconstrained responses as the meaning of the text. But Michaels points out: that is a false picture. As Peirce and the later Descartes have already stated, the self is always constrained, embedded, derived. The fear that readers can wield their own will in creating or imposing meaning is really based on a false model of the self. In this one move, Michaels collapses the number one complaint of American critics when they encounter deconstructionist theory.

This approach to the self also provides an important check to any possible overemphasis of the power of the subject as implied by Peirce's oppositional notion of the self. That is to say, "The rhetoric of the community of interpretation emphasizes the role readers play in constituting texts, while the rhetoric of the self as sign in a system of signs emphasizes the role texts play in constituting consciousness" (Michaels, "The Interpreter's Self" 199). Michaels' point is then: "we are neither as data-bound nor as fancy-free as the neo-Cartesian models suggest" (199). By thus foregrounding at the same time the reciprocally constituting and constituted nature of the self, Michaels collapses the distinction between the interpreter and what he interprets, subjectivity and objectivity, the reader and the text.

It needs to be mentioned here that as relevant as Peirce's readings are for the issue

of the self, Michaels' interest in the issue spans to cover another specific purpose, a purpose that is profession-oriented.[5] As literary critics often feel embarrassed by the attacks issued from the hard sciences that the taxonomies and descriptions in literary studies are "mythologies" or "value-laden," that the literary critics are not "objective" or "neutral" enough in dealing with their objects of research, Michaels rises to the defense of the literary critics by way of Peirce. Being true to the pragmatic spirit, Michaels hopes to make the point that a stance of neutrality is not only unnecessary but impossible for anyone, including and especially for the literary critic ("The Interpreter's Self" 200). Michaels believes that if he can demonstrate that the subject/self is always already constituted and constantly constituting, then it no longer makes sense to demand that we wipe our minds clean of our prejudices and beliefs. Our "interested" stance, far from being an obstacle, is actually what makes cognition at all possible. The direct consequence of this move is that it not only subverts the claims of the hard sciences of being neutral and objective but also justifies the work of the literary critics as the only one possible.

If writing about "the interpreter's self" carries the danger of over-emphasizing the active and constitutive power of the subject, then one remedy would be to put more emphasis upon the forces that constitute the individual's constitution of meaning. That is why Michaels brings up in a later essay the central concern of another of the great pragmatists, William James—namely, the question of belief.

Michaels is not unaware of the fact that to raise the issue of belief in literary studies may be anachronistic in the wake of literary theories such as phenomenology, structuralism, and deconstruction ("Saving the Text" 771). After all, in an age that questions the centrality of subjectivity while insisting on the non-referentiality of language, it is hard to justify any serious discussion of something as subjective and as marginal as belief. Yet as Michaels sees it, discussions of belief are desperately needed if we hope to see through the seemingly fierce debates between the New Critics and the deconstructionists and to recognize the same basis from which they built their edifices.

As Michaels sees it, 20th century discussions of the relation of belief to literature was first conceived along two different lines of argument which share a common assumption. The anti-propositionalists, Cleanth Brooks and T. S. Eliot, hold that the language of poetry is emotive and non-referential. That is to say, as poetry only expresses the *feeling* of holding a belief rather than stating the belief, the truth or falsehood of its claim is irrelevant to its meaning or to our enjoyment of it. For these critics, beliefs only come into play when we make evaluations about poetry. The propositionalists, which include Crow Ransom and Ivor Winters, maintain on the other hand that poetry does make true or false assertions about the real world, and the reader's agreement or disagreement with poetry's assertions about the world is central to the experience of reading and interpretation. If a reader does not share the values and beliefs in a work of art, he/she will not be able to read or interpret the work fully. The propositionalists quickly run into problem with the difficult question of what to do with those poems which often make what seem to us false statements. I. A.

Richards comes to the rescue of the propositionalists by proposing the compromise that there need be no conflict between poetry and science. Poetry is made up of what he calls "pseudo-statements," which are justified not by their truthfulness but by their capability to organize our impulses and attitudes. The question of belief, consequently, is again brushed aside from our understanding of poetry.

Michaels' contribution lies in his demonstration that despite their varying claims, the propositionalists and the anti-propositionalists are unified in their effort to keep beliefs out of the picture when it comes to reading activities. As a matter of fact, they share the same view toward the process of reading: reading is a "two-step procedure ... in which we first apprehend the meaning of a text and then decide where or whether to locate that meaning in relation to what we believe" (Michaels, "Saving the Text" 781). Beliefs come into play only at the much later moment of evaluation. This "epistemological realism," as Michaels calls it, implies that

> ... at the heart of every text is a core of stable and determinate meaning and that the primary goal of every interpreter should be to minimize the role that his own beliefs (or, as they are more likely to be called, "prejudices") play in the activity of interpretation ("Saving the Text" 779).

In other words, for propositionalists and anti-propositionalists alike, disinterested reading is not only possible but also highly desirable. The only reason it is difficult to achieve disinterested reading is because of "the more-or-less inevitable distortions in our individual interpretations of texts," which result from the activation of our beliefs ("Saving the Text" 779).

What Michaels insists is that instead of being obstacles (distortions) between us and meaning, these beliefs of ours are what makes meaning possible in the first place. It is the prior existence of these beliefs that focuses our attention upon certain verbal patterns as meaning-bearing. Or as Michaels puts it succinctly, "Meaning is not filtered through what we believe, it is constituted by what we believe" ("Saving the Text" 780). Furthermore, "We have no choice about whether or not to invoke these beliefs: to read is already to have invoked them" (782). In a rather deconstructive move, then, Michaels declares objective determinate meaning an impossibility and turns the long excluded and marginalized beliefs into the actual ingredients that make any cognition possible.

Michaels is fully aware of the consequences of such a drastic proposal. For one thing, in asserting that interpretation is an activity constitutive of its object, Michaels directly challenges any notion of an objective and autonomous text. Falling right in the middle of the path is the neutrality of Rene Wellek and Austin Warren's long-established taxonomic distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic methods of literary criticism.[6] For Wellek and Warren, the issue is which is the best method of study, or which method is the closest to the heart of the matter (closest to the "truth" of the text). Thus the distinction is an evaluative one over how best to observe and study the

object—the text. But in Michaels' view of interpretation, the object itself is exactly what is at issue. Different interpretations are not different readings of the same text but different conceptions of "what the text's own terms are" ("Saving the Text" 785). Instead of deciding on the best interpretation which is the closest to the real meaning of the text, Michaels wants to call our attention to the terms of possibility for our perception of what a text is. As a result, the problem of interpretation no longer revolves around (the meaning of) the text but shifts toward the subject's perception of what the text is, which falls right into the domain of the subject's beliefs.

A more serious consequence that follows Michaels' formulation of the relation between belief and meaning has to do with the question of subjectivity. For, as argued by many critics, if a text is constituted by what we the readers believe, then it follows that there could be as many meanings as there are readers. Such rampant subjectivity would lead to interpretive chaos. Michaels' answer to this charge is a comforting "not so." While some degree of subjectivity is possible, Michaels also insists that absolute subjectivity is an impossibility. "For the judgment that something is unconvincing, or good or bad, is not an expression of merely personal taste or preference but an invocation of shared values and public beliefs..." ("Saving the Text" 787). These shared conventions of reading will always insure that rampant subjectivity never becomes a possibility. In case these shared conventions become reified into stable foundations of interpretations, Michaels' is quick to add that these shared conventions of reading "are themselves already interpretations" ("Saving the Text" 788). As interpretations are born of community consensus, interpretive chaos becomes an impossibility.

Such fears of total subjectivism and relativism, according to Michaels, are what the old Yale critics (the New Critics) and the new Yale critics (such as Paul De Man) have in common, despite their seeming opposition to each other. The New Critics' distrust of the self is well-known; yet that of the new Yale critics is less obvious. Michaels points out that deconstruction's suspicion of subjectivity leads De Man to the skeptical conclusion that all interpretations are finally false or fictional. The question that Michaels poses to such an assertion is: "False as opposed to what?" ("Saving the Text" 789). Thus Michaels concludes:

> Yet De Man wants to maintain the force of this false [sic] and he can do so only by insisting ultimately on an idealized (impossible) account of the true. And this account involves finally not a break with the epistemological Realism of the Anglo-American tradition but a disguised return to it ("Saving the Text" 789).

Not only does Michaels expose the deconstructionists and the New Critics as sharing a similar belief in an autonomous objective text, he also aims to change our conception of the nature of inquiries into literary studies. Toward the end of the essay, Michaels makes the dramatic announcement that "if, as I [Michaels] have argued, meaning is not independent of belief but bound by it, then our construction of

texts becomes a matter of practical and even political interest" ("Saving the Text" 791). After all, when we remove our attention from the text itself and tend to the process in which our beliefs are constituted and instilled, the self-circumvention of literary studies is broken and reading is no longer the innocent activity that is usually assumed. More attention will be paid to the process through which we come to acquire the reading habits we now possess, and such inquiries into the formation of individuals will surely have practical and even political consequences.

With the efforts of Michaels and other pragmatists to revive pragmatic concerns in literary studies, certain key concepts in classical pragmatism have come back into circulation again: self, prejudices, belief, community, etc.. Discussions of meaning production along these lines carry the consequence that inserts reading activities back into the social fabric and highlights the political nature of efforts to guide (control) such activities. Such an emphasis on the embeddedness of reading activities may be the real American line of defense against the foreign-instilled tendency toward nihilism and skepticism. Whether the defense works or not will depend on further intervention by pragmatic-minded students in the field of literary studies.

## Endnotes

1. The three best-known and most ardent advocates of pragmatism in the field of literary studies seem to be Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, and Richard Rorty. Fish arrives at the pragmatic position by way of the speech-act theory of the quite pragmatic-minded John Searle. (Looming in the background is of course the thoughts of Ludwig Wittgenstein.) With his deep concern for pedagogy, Fish's pragmatism is down-to-earth and straight-forward, making little reference to classical pragmatism. Writing from a philosophical background, Rorty, on the other hand, is more concerned with the ailments in that field. So his pragmatism is more abstract than practical, addressing mainly the concerns of philosophy. Michaels differs from both of them in that he is writing from a literary background but directly about the thoughts of classical pragmatists. In that sense, he not only is an advocate of pragmatism but also has done substantial work in reintroducing classical pragmatism.
2. Besides Macksey and Donato's volume of the symposium papers, other outstanding anthologies include John K. Simon, ed., *Modern French Criticism: From Proust to Valery* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972); Vernon W. Gras, ed., *European Literary Theory and Practice: From Existential Phenomenology to Structuralism* (N.Y.: Dell, 1973); Gregory Polleta, ed., *Issues in Contemporary Literary Criticism* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); and Richard Macksey, ed., *Velocities of Change: Essays from MLN* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974). Among these, the last one is most significant because it marks the formal acknowledgement of Europe-based critical methods as acceptable and official agenda by the

American literary institution. Then followed the startling awarding of the James Russell Lowell Prize for 1975 to Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*. The award was especially surprising for the community of literary scholars because Culler's book is, in the insightful words of Frank Lentricchia, about "an intellectual moment which (in the language of the structuralists) denied special privilege to literary discourse." For a discussion and critique of Culler's award, see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: the U of Chicago P, 1980) chapter 4.

3. For a wide-ranging discussion of the scene of literary education in the late 1960s, see Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter, eds., *The Politics of Literature: Dissenting Essays on the Teaching of English* (New York: Random House, 1970, 1972).
4. New Criticism's suspicion of subjectivism and relativism is best presented in Monroe C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt, Jr.'s seminal essays entitled "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy." See W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Louisville: UP of Kentucky, 1954) 3-39.
5. Michaels' essay on "The Interpreter's Self" is collected in Jane Tompkins' anthology of reader-oriented criticism, yet I am arguing that, although his views on the self can certainly apply to all readers, Michaels' concern here lies mainly with the literary critic. As a matter of fact, Michaels' concern, as evidenced in his other writings, has always been limited to the critical profession itself.
6. See Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, revised ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970).

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