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Is There a Text in This Class?

The Authority of Interpretive Communities

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What Is Stylistics and Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?

[THIS ESSAY was written for a session of the English Institute chaired by Seymour Chatman. The other panelists were Richard Ohmann, Frank Kermode, and Tzvetan Todorov. In the format of the institute, questions follow the presentation of each paper and the first question was put to me by Ohmann, who announced “My name is Louis Milic.” The arguments of the paper were worked out in the graduate seminar on literary theory that I began to teach in 1970. I did not teach that seminar in the usual way, by choosing a text (Hamlet, “Lycidas”) and then submitting it to a succession of methodologies in order to see if they would work, that is, in order to answer the question “Does it illuminate the text?” This question troubled me because of what it assumes and, by assuming, predates. First of all, it assumes that texts are independent of theories, an assumption that is, at the least, arguable, and one I was in the process of challenging. Second, it assumes that theory is justified only in its relation to practice, whereas it seemed to me that theory is a form of thinking with its own goals and rules, and therefore that theories should be evaluated in terms of the coherence of their claims. Third, it assumes that it would be possible for a theory to not illuminate a text, whereas it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that the relationship between theory and practice is a secure one. That is, theories always work and they will always produce exactly the results they predict, results that will be immediately compelling to those for whom the theory’s assumptions and enabling principles are self-evident. Indeed, the trick would be to find a theory that didn’t work.

In my seminar, therefore, we did not concentrate on what theories can do (since they will always generate the texts demanded by their assumptions) but instead concentrated on the claims made for them as pieces of thinking. In the case of the stylisticians those claims included the elimination or control of interpretation by identifying a set of context-free elements or primes and building up from them to the determination of meaning. I found invariably that interpretation “infected” the procedure at every point, either because a meaning was preselected and (silently) guided the specification of formal features, or because it was imposed on formal features that had no necessary relationship to it at all. The impressionism or subjectivity of which the stylisticians characteristically complained was given free reign by an elaborate machinery that hid from them and from their readers what they were in fact doing. What they were doing, I asserted, was cutting the data off from the source of their value—the activity of readers who, rather than extracting significances, confer them. I counsel then, not the end of stylistics but a new or “affective” stylistics “in which the focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of a page and its observable regularities to the temporal context of a mind and its experience.” I now believe that this shift is illusory, at least insofar as it involves (supposedly) a transfer of power from the text to the reader. Although the argument is mounted against the supremacy of the text and the assertion of Martin Joos that “text signals its own structure,” it really extends that supremacy by adding the performance of the reader to what the text signals and, by signaling, controls.

In terms of the future shape of my work, the most significant thing about this article is the appearance in it of the names of Hubert Dreyfus and John Searle, two colleagues at the University of California. It was Searle who introduced me to speech-act theory, a theory of language first developed by J. L. Austin in which the unit of analysis is not the free-standing sentence but an utterance produced in a situation by and for intentional beings. It is therefore a theory that poses a direct challenge to the autonomy of the text and to the formalistic assumptions of stylistics. The same challenge is implicit in Dreyfus’s argument that facts are the product of situations and cannot be independently specified. Although I cited this argument with approval, I did not see that it went much further than my own, for I did not yet understand Dreyfus’s provocative characterization of human behavior as “orderly, but not rule governed.”]

THE FIRST OF the questions in my title—what is stylistics?—has already been answered by the practitioners of the art. Stylistics was born of a reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary studies. For the appreciative raptures of the impressionistic critic, styl-
istoricians purport to substitute precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions and to proceed from these descriptions to interpretations for which they can claim a measure of objectivity. Stylistics, in short, is an attempt to put criticism on a scientific basis. Answering my second question—why are they saying such terrible things about it?—will be the business of this essay, and I would like to begin (somewhat obliquely, I admit) by quoting from the *New York Times Book Review* of April 23, 1972. On pages 18 and 19 of that issue we find the publishing firm of Peter Wyden, Inc., proclaiming the merits of a new book by Tom Chetwynd. The book is entitled *How To Interpret Your Own Dreams (in One Minute or Less)*. The title appears on a reproduction of the book jacket and beneath it are the following descriptive claims: “Your key to 583 Dream Subjects with 1442 Interpretations,” “An Encyclopedic Dictionary.” These claims are supported and extended by a report of the author’s researches and by a portion of the index. “What do you dream about?” the reader is asked, “Angels (see page 171), Babies (page 150), Bells (page 40), Cars, Collisions, Cooking, Death, Dogs, Doors, Exams, Falling, Hands, Hats, Illness, Monsters, Mother, Nudity, Sex, Teeth, Travel . . .” “And these,” the blurb continues, “are just a few of the 583 dream subjects covered.” “To compile this book,” we are told, “the author spent 10 years analyzing the works of Freud, Jung, Adler and other dream authorities. Carefully indexed and cross indexed, each dream subject is rated in four ways: what it most likely means; what it could well mean; what it might mean; and what it might possibly mean . . . This remarkable dream dictionary enables you to look up any dream instantly . . . find complete clues to its meaning.” Finally, and with typographic aids, the claims underlying these claims are put forward: in italics, *it really works*, and in large white letters against a black bar background, *BASED ON SOLID SCIENCE*.

However amusing one finds this advertisement, it would be a mistake to underestimate the desire to which it appeals: the desire for an instant and automatic interpretive procedure based on an inventory of fixed relationships between observable data and meanings, meanings which do not vary with context and which can be read out independently of the analyst or observer, who need only perform the operations specified by the “key.” It is a desire as new as information theory and as old as the impulse to escape from the flux and variability of the human situation to the security and stability of a timeless formalism. It is also, I think, the desire behind stylistics, and in the first part of this essay I should like to examine some representative attempts to achieve it.

My first example is taken from the work of Louis Milic, author of *A Quantitative Approach to the Style of Jonathan Swift* and other statistical and computer studies. In an article written for *The Computer and Literary Style*, Milic attempts to isolate the distinctive features of Swift’s style.¹ He is particularly interested in the Swiftian habit of piling up words in series and in Swift’s preference for certain kinds of connectives. His method is to compare Swift, in these and other respects, with Macauley, Addison, Gibbon, and Johnson, and the results of his researches are presented in the form of tables: “Word-Class Frequency Distribution of All the Whole Samples of Swift, with Computed Arithmetic Mean,” “Percentage of Initial Connectives in 2000-Sentence Samples of Addison, Johnson, Macauley and Swift,” “Total Introductory Connectives and Total Introductory Determiners as Percentages of All Introductory Elements,” “Frequency of Occurrences of the Most Common Single Three-Word Pattern as a Percentage of Total Patterns,” “Total Number of Different Patterns per Sample.” It will not be my concern here to scrutinize the data-gathering methods of Milic or the other stylisticians (although some of them are challengeable even on their own terms), for my interest is primarily in what is done with the data after they have been gathered. This is also Milic’s interest, and in the final paragraphs of his essay he poses the major question: “What interpretive inferences can be drawn from the material?” (p. 104). The answer comes in two parts and illustrates the two basic maneuvers executed by the stylisticians. The first is circular: “The low frequency of initial determiners, taken together with the high frequency of initial connectives, makes [Swift] a writer who likes transitions and made much of connectives” (p. 104). As the reader will no doubt have noticed,
the two halves of this sentence present the same information in slightly different terms, even though its rhetoric suggests that something has been explained. Here is an example of what makes some people impatient with stylistics and its baggage. The machinery of categorization and classification merely provides momentary pigeonholes for the constituents of a text, constituents which are then retrieved and reassembled into exactly the form they previously had. There is, in short, no gain in understanding; the procedure has been executed, but it hasn't gotten you anywhere. Stylisticians, however, are determined to get somewhere, and exactly where they are determined to get is indicated by Milic's next sentence, "[Swift's] use of series argues [that is, is a sign of or means] a fertile and well stocked mind." Here the procedure is not circular but arbitrary. The data are scrutinized and an interpretation is asserted for them, asserted rather than proven because there is nothing in the machinery Milic cranks up to authorize the leap (from the data to a specification of their value) he makes. What does authorize it is an unexamined and highly suspect assumption that one can read directly from the description of a text (however derived) to the shape or quality of its author's mind, in this case from the sheer quantity of verbal items to the largeness of the intelligence that produced them.

The counterargument to this assumption is not that it cannot be done (Milic, after all, has done it), but that it can be done all too easily, and in any direction one likes. One might conclude, for example, that Swift's use of series argues the presence of the contiguity disorder described by Roman Jakobson in The Fundamentals of Language; or that Swift's use of series argues an unwillingness to finish his sentences; or that Swift's use of series argues an anal-retentive personality; or that Swift's use of series argues a nominalist rather than a realist philosophy and is therefore evidence of a mind insufficiently stocked with abstract ideas. These conclusions are neither more nor less defensible than the conclusion Milic reaches, or reaches for (it is the enterprise and not any of its results that should be challenged), and their availability points to a serious defect in the procedures of stylistics, the absence of any constraint on the way in which one moves from description to interpretation, with the result that any interpretation one puts forward is arbitrary.

Milic, for his part, is not unaware of the problem. In a concluding paragraph, he admits that relating devices of style to personality is "risky" and "the chance of error . . . great" because "no personality syntax paradigm is available . . . neither syntactic stylistics nor personality theory is yet capable of making the leap" (p. 105). Once again Milic provides a clear example of one of the basic maneuvers in the stylistics game: he acknowledges the dependence of his procedures on an unwarranted assumption, but then salvages both the assumption and the procedures by declaring that time and more data will give substance to the one and authority to the other. It is a remarkable non sequitur in which the suspect nature of his enterprise becomes a reason for continuing in it: a syntax personality may be currently unavailable or available in too many directions, but this only means that if we persist in our efforts to establish it, it will surely emerge. The more reasonable inference would be that the difficulty lies not with the present state of the art but with the art itself: and this is precisely what I shall finally argue, that the establishment of a syntax-personality or any other kind of paradigm is an impossible goal, which, because it is also an assumption, invalidates the procedures of the stylisticians before they begin, dooming them to successes that are meaningless because they are so easy.

Milic affords a particularly good perspective on what stylisticians do because his assumptions, along with their difficulties, are displayed so nakedly. A sentence like "Swift's use of series argues a fertile and well stocked mind" does not come along very often. More typically, a stylistician will interpose a formidable apparatus between his descriptive and interpretive acts, thus obscuring the absence of any connection between them. For Richard Ohmann, that apparatus is transformational grammar and in "Generative Grammars and the Concept of Literary Style" he uses it to distinguish between the prose of Faulkner and Hemingway. Ohmann does this by demonstrating that Faulkner's style is no longer recognizable when "the effects of three
generalized transformations"—the relative clause transformation, the conjunction transformation, and the comparative transformation—are reversed. "Denatured" of these transformations, a passage from "The Bear," Ohmann says, retains "virtually no traces of... Faulkner's style" (p. 142). When the same denaturing is performed on Hemingway, however, "the reduced passage still sounds very much like Hemingway. Nothing has been changed that seems crucial" (p. 144). From this, Ohmann declares, follow two conclusions: (1) Faulkner "leans heavily upon a very small amount of grammatical apparatus" (p. 143), and (2) the "stylistic difference... between the Faulkner and Hemingway passages can be largely explained on the basis of [the]... apparatus" (p. 145). To the first of these I would reply that it depends on what is meant by "leans heavily upon." Is this a statement about the apparatus or about the actual predilection of the author? (The confusion between the two is a hallmark of stylistic criticism.) To the second conclusion I would object strenuously, if by "explained" Ohmann means anything more than made formalizable. That is, I am perfectly willing to admit that transformational grammar provides a better means of fingerprinting an author than would a measurement like the percentage of nouns or the mean length of sentences; for since the transformation model is able to deal not only with constituents but with their relationships, it can make distinctions at a structural, as opposed to a merely statistical, level. I am not willing, however, to give those distinctions an independent value, that is, to attach a fixed significance to the devices of the fingerprinting mechanism, any more than I would be willing to read from a man’s actual fingerprint to his character or personality.

But this, as it turns out, is exactly what Ohmann wants to do. "The move from formal description of styles to... interpretation," he asserts, "should be the ultimate goal of stylistics," and in the case of Faulkner, "it seems reasonable to suppose that a writer whose style is so largely based on just these three semantically related transformations demonstrates in that style a certain conceptual orientation, a preferred way of organizing experience" (p. 143). But Faulkner’s style can be said to be "based on" these three transformations only in the sense that the submission of a Faulkner text to the transformational apparatus yields a description in which they dominate. In order to make anything more out of this, that is, in order to turn the description into a statement about Faulkner’s conceptual orientation, Ohmann would have to do what Noam Chomsky so pointedly refrains from doing, assign a semantic value to the devices of his descriptive mechanism, so that rather than being neutral between the processes of production and reception, they are made directly to reflect them. In the course of this and other essays, Ohmann does just that, finding, for example, that Lawrence’s heavy use of deletion transformations is responsible for the "driving insistence one feels in reading" him, and that Conrad’s structures of chaining reflect his tendency to "link one thing with another associatively," and that Dylan Thomas’s breaking of selectional rules serves his "vision of things" of the world as process, as interacting forces and repeating cycle; in short, "that these syntactic preferences correlate with habits of meaning."

The distance between all of this and "Swift’s use of series argues a fertile and well stocked mind” is a matter only of methodological sophistication, not of substance, for both critics operate with the same assumptions and nominate the same goal, the establishing of an inventory in which formal items will be linked in a fixed relationship to semantic and psychological values. Like Milic, Ohmann admits that at this point his interpretive conclusions are speculative and tentative; but again, like Milic, he believes that it is only a matter of time before he can proceed more securely on the basis of a firm correlation between syntax and "conceptual orientation," and the possibility of specifying such correlations, he declares, "is one of the main justifications for studying style." If this is so, then the enterprise is in trouble, not because it will fail, but because it will, in every case, succeed. Ohmann will always be able to assert (although not to prove) a plausible connection between the "conceptual orientation" he discerns in an author and the formal patterns his descriptive apparatus yields. But since there is no warrant for that connection in the grammar he appropri-
ates, there is no constraint on the manner in which he makes it, and therefore his interpretations will be as arbitrary and unverifiable as those of the most impressionistic of critics.

The point will be clearer, I think, if we turn for a moment to the work of J. P. Thorne, another linguist of the generative persuasion. While Ohmann and Milic are interested in reading from syntax to personality, Thorne would like to move in the other direction, from syntax to either content or effect, but his procedures are similarly illegitimate. Thorne begins in the obligatory way, by deploiring the presence in literary studies of “impressionistic terms.” Yet, he points out, these terms must be impressions of something, and what they are impressions of, he decides, “are types of grammatical structures.” It follows from this that the task of stylistics is to construct a typology that would match up grammatical structures with the effects they invariably produce: “If terms like ‘loose’, or ‘terse’ or ‘emphatic’ have any significance . . . —and surely they do—it must be because they relate to certain identifiable structural properties” (pp. 188–189). What follows is a series of analyses in which “identifiable structural properties” are correlated with impressions and impressionistic terms. Thorne discovers, for example, that in Donne’s “A Nocturnal upon St. Lucie’s Day” selectional rules are regularly broken. “The poem has sentences which have inanimate nouns where one would usually expect to find animate nouns, and animate nouns . . . where one would expect to find inanimate nouns.” “It seems likely,” he concludes, “that these linguistic facts underlie the sense of chaos and the breakdown of order which many literary critics have associated with the poem” (p. 103). This is at once arbitrary and purposeful. The “breakdown of order” exists only within his grammar’s system of rules (and strange rules they are, since there is no penalty for breaking them): it is a formal, not a semantic fact (even though the rules are semantic), and there is no warrant at all for equating it with the “sense” the poem supposedly conveys. That sense, however, has obviously been preselected by Thorne and the critics he cites and is, in effect, responsible for its own discovery. In other words, what Thorne has done is scrutinize his data until he discerns a “structural property” which can be made to fit his preconceptions. The exercise is successful, but it is also circular.10

It is not my intention flatly to deny any relationship between structure and sense, but to argue that if there is one, it is not to be explained by attributing an independent meaning to the linguistic facts, which will, in any case, mean differently in different circumstances. Indeed, these same facts—animate nouns where one expects inanimate and inanimate where one expects animate—characterize much of Wordsworth’s poetry, where the sense communicated is one of harmony rather than chaos. Of course, counterexamples of this kind do not prove that a critic is wrong (or right) in a particular case, but that the search for a paradigm of formal significances is a futile one. Those who are determined to pursue it, however, will find in transformational grammar the perfect vehicle; for since its formalisms operate independently of semantic and psychological processes (are neutral between production and reception) they can be assigned any semantic or psychological value one may wish them to carry. Thus Ohmann can determine that in one of Conrad’s sentences the deep structural subject “secret sharer” appears thirteen times and conclude that the reader who understands the sentence must “register” what is absent from its surface;11 while Roderick Jacobs and Peter Rosenbaum can, with equal plausibility, conclude that the presence of relative clause reduction transformations in a story by John Updike results “in a very careful suppression of any mention of individual beings” as agents.12 In one analysis the grammatical machinery is translated into an activity the reader must perform; in the other it prevents him from performing that same activity. This is a game that is just too easy to play.

It is possible, I suppose, to salvage the game, at least temporarily, by making it more sophisticated, by contextualizing it. One could simply write a rule that allows for the different valuations of the same pattern by taking into account the features which surround it in context. But this would only lead to the bringing forward of further counterexamples, and the continual and regressive rewriting of the rule. Eventually a point would be reached where a separate rule was required for each and
every occurrence; and at that point the assumption that formal features possess meaning would no longer be tenable, and the enterprise of the stylisticians—at least as they conceive it—will have been abandoned.¹³

One can be certain, however, that it will not be abandoned, partly because the lure of "solid science" and the promise of an automatic interpretive procedure is so great, and partly because apparent successes are so easy to come by. For a final and spectacular example I turn to Michael Halliday and an article entitled "Linguistic Function and Literary Style."¹⁴ Halliday is the proprietor of what he calls a category-scale grammar, a grammar so complicated that a full explanation would take up more space than I have. Allow me, however, to introduce a few of the basic terms. The number of categories is four: unit, structure, class, and system. Two of these, unit and structure, are categories of chain: that is, they refer to the syntagmatic axis or axis of combination. The category of unit relates the linear constituents of discourse to one another as they combine; representative units are morpheme, word, group, clause, and sentence. The category of structure is concerned with the syntagmatic relationships within units: subject, complements, adjunct, and predicative elements of structure. The other two categories are categories of choice, of the paradigmatic axis or axis of selection. The category of class contains those items which can be substituted for one another at certain points in a unit: classes include nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The category of system refers to the systematic relationships between elements of structure, relationships of agreement and difference, such as singular and plural, active and passive. Together, these categories make it possible for the linguist to segment his text either horizontally or vertically: that is, they make possible an exhaustive taxonomy. This, however, is only part of the story. In addition, Halliday introduces three scales of abstraction which link the categories to each other and to the language data. They are rank, exponence, and delicacy. The scale of rank refers to the operation of units within the structure of another unit: a clause, for example, may operate in the structure of another clause, or of a group, or even of a word, and these would be first, second, and third degree

rank shifts, respectively. Exponence is the scale by which the abstractions of the system relate to the data: it allows you to trace your way back from any point in the descriptive act to the actual words of a text. And finally the scale of delicacy is the degree of depth at which the descriptive act is being performed. While in some instances one might be satisfied to specify at the level of a clause or a group, in a more delicate description one would want to describe the constituents and relationships within those units themselves.

If these were all, the apparatus would be formidable enough; but there is more. Halliday also adopts, with some modifications, Karl Bühler's tripartite division of language into three functions—the ideational function or the expression of content; the interpersonal function, the expression of the speaker's attitudes and evaluations, and of the relationships he sets up between himself and the listener; and the textual function, through which language makes links with itself and with the extralinguistic situation.¹⁵ Obviously these functions exist at a different level of abstraction from each other and from the taxonomic machinery of categories and scales, and just as obviously they create a whole new set of possible relationships between the items specified in that taxonomy; for as Halliday himself remarks, in a statement that boggles the mind with its mathematical implications, "each sentence embodies all functions . . . and most constituents of sentences also embody more than one function" (p. 334).

The result is that while the distinctions one can make with the grammar are minute and infinite, they are also meaningless, for they refer to nothing except the categories of the system that produced them, categories which are themselves unrelated to anything outside their circle except by an arbitrary act of assertion. It follows, then, that when this grammar is used to analyze a text, it can legitimately do nothing more than provide labels for its constituents, which is exactly what Halliday does to a sentence from Through the Looking Glass: "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." Here is the analysis:

The word poor is a "modifier," and thus expresses a subclass of its head word memory (ideational); while at the same time
it is an 'epithet' expressing the Queen's attitude (interpersonal), and the choice of this word in this environment (as opposed to, say, useful) indicates more specifically that the attitude is one of disapproval. The words it's... that have here no reference at all outside the sentence, but they structure the message in a particular way (textual), which represents the Queen's opinion as if it were an "attribute" (ideational), and defines one class of memory as exclusively possessing this undesirable quality (ideational). The lexical repetition in memory that only works backwards relates the Queen's remark (textual) to mine only works one way in which mine refers anaphorically, by ellipsis, to memory in the preceding sentence (textual) and also to I in Alice's expression of her own judgment I'm sure (interpersonal). Thus ideational content and personal interaction are woven together with, and by means of, the textual structure to form a coherent whole. (p. 337)

What, you might ask, is this coherent whole? The answer is, "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards." But that, you object, is what we had at the beginning. Exactly. When a text is run through Halliday's machine, its parts are first disassembled, then labeled, and finally recombined into their original form. The procedure is a complicated one, and it requires a great many operations, but the critic who performs them has finally done nothing at all.

Halliday, however, is determined to do something, and what he is determined to do is confer a value on the formal distinctions his machine reads out. His text is William Golding's The Inheritors, a story of two prehistoric tribes one of which supplants the other. The two tribes—the "people" and the "new people," respectively—are distinguished not only by their activities but by their respective languages, and these, in turn, are distinguishable from the language of the reader. Language A, the language of the "people," is, according to Halliday, dominant for more than nine-tenths of the novel. Here is a sample of it:

The man turned sideways in the bushes and looked at Lok along his shoulder. A stick rose upright and there was a lump of bone in the middle. Lok peered at the stick and the lump of bone and the small eyes in the bone things over the face. Suddenly Lok understood that the man was holding the stick out to him but neither he nor Lok could reach across the river. He would have laughed were it not for the echo of screaming in his head. The stick began to grow shorter at both ends. Then it shot out to full length again. The dead tree by Lok's ear acquired a voice. "Clop." His ears twitched and he turned to the tree. By his face there had grown a twig. (p. 360)

From this and other samples Halliday proceeds to a description of the people's language, using the full apparatus of his category-scale grammar; but what begins as a description turns very quickly into something else:

The clauses of passage A... are mainly clauses of action... location... or mental process... the remainder are attributive... Almost all of the action clauses... describe simple movements... and of these the majority... are intransitive... Even such normally transitive verbs as grab occur intransitively... Moreover a high proportion... of the subjects are not people... they are either parts of the body... or inanimate objects... and of the human subjects half again... are found in clauses which are not clauses of action. Even among the four transitive action clauses... one has an inanimate subject and one is reflexive. There is a stress set up, a kind of syntactic counterpoint, between verbs of movement in their most active and dynamic form... and the preference for non-human subjects and the almost total absence of transitive clauses. (pp. 349-350)

Here, of course, is where the sleight of hand begins. To label a verb "active" is simply to locate it in a system of formal differences and relationships within a grammar; to call it "dynamic" is to semanticize the label, and even, as we see when the description continues, to moralize it:

It is particularly the lack of transitive clauses of action with human subjects... that creates an atmosphere of inefficual activity; the scene is one of constant movement, but movement which is as much inanimate as human and in which only the mover is affected... The syntactic tension expresses this combination of activity and helplessness. No doubt this is a fair summary of the life of Neanderthal man. (pp. 349-350)
This paragraph is a progression of illegitimate inferences. Halliday first gives his descriptive terms a value, and then he makes an ideogram of the patterns they yield. Moreover, the content of that ideogram—the Neanderthal mentality—is quite literally a fiction (one wonders where he got his information), and it is therefore impossible that these or any other forms should express it.

What happens next is predictable. The novel receives a Darwinian reading in which the grammatically impoverished “people” are deservedly supplanted by the “new people” whose fuller transitivity patterns are closer to our own: “The transitivity patterns...are the reflexion of the underlying theme...the inherent limitations of understanding of Lok and his people and their consequent inability to survive when confronted with beings at a higher stage of development” (p. 350). The remainder of the essay is full of statements like this; the verbal patterns “reflect” the subject matter, are “congruent” with it, “express” it, “embody” it, “encode” it, and at one point even “enshrine” it. The assumption is one we have met before—“syntactic preferences correlate with habits of meaning”—but here it is put into practice on a much grander scale: “The ‘people’s’ use of transitivity patterns argues a Neanderthal mind.”

In short, when Halliday does something with his apparatus, it is just as arbitrary as what Milic and Ohmann and Thorne do with theirs. But why, one might ask, is he arbitrary in this direction? Given the evidence, at least as he marshals it, the way seems equally open to an Edenic rather than a Darwinian reading of the novel, a reading in which the language of the “people” reflects (or embodies or enshrines) a lost harmony between man and an animate nature. The triumph of the “new people” would then be a disaster, the beginning of the end, of a decline into the taxonomic aridity of a mechanistic universe. There are two answers to this question, and the first should not surprise us. Halliday’s interpretation precedes his gathering and evaluating of the data, and it, rather than any ability of the syntax to embody a conceptual orientation, is responsible for the way in which the data are read. There is some evidence that the interpretation is not his own (he refers with approval to the

“penetrating critical study” of Mark Kinkead-Weakes and Ian Gregor), but whatever its source—and this is the second answer to my question—its attraction is the opportunity it provides him to make his apparatus the hero of the novel. For in the reading Halliday offers, the deficiencies of the “people” are measured by the inability of their language to fill out the categories of his grammar. Thus when he remarks that “in Lok’s understanding the complex taxonomic ordering of natural phenomena is implied by the use of defining modifiers is lacking, or...rudimentary” (p. 352), we see him sliding from an application of his system to a judgment on the descriptions it yields; and conversely, when the “new people” win out, they do so in large part because they speak a language that requires for its analysis the full machinery of that system. Not only does Halliday go directly from formal categories to interpretation, but he goes to an interpretation which proclaims the superiority of his formal categories. The survival of the fittest tribe is coincident with a step toward the emergence of the fittest grammar. Whether Golding knew it or not, it would seem that he was writing an allegory of the ultimate triumph of Neo-Firthian man.

Is there, then, no point to Halliday’s exercise? Are the patterns he uncovers without meaning? Not at all. It is just that the explanation for that meaning is not the capacity of a syntax to express it, but the ability of a reader to confer it. Golding, as Halliday notes, prefaces The Inheritors with an excerpt from H. G. Wells’s discussion of Neanderthal man. As a result, we enter the story expecting to encounter a people who differ from us in important respects, and we are predisposed to attach that difference to whatever in their behavior calls attention to itself. It is in this way that the language of the “people” becomes significant, not because it is symbolic but because it functions in a structure of expectations, and it is in the context of that structure that a reader is moved to assign it a value. The point is one that Halliday almost makes, but he throws it away, on two occasions, first when he remarks that the reader’s entrance into the novel requires a “considerable effort of interpretation” (p. 348), and later when he specifies the nature of that effort: “the difficulties of understanding are at the level of interpreta-
tion—or rather . . . of re-interpretation, as when we insist on translating 'the stick began to grow shorter at both ends' as 'the man drew the bow'” (p. 358). Here I would quarrel only with the phrase “we insist”; for the decision to reinterpret is not made freely; it is inseparable from the activity of reading (the text insists), and the effort expended in the course of that activity becomes the measure and sign of the distance between us and the characters in the novel. In other words, the link between the language and any sense we have of Neanderthal man is fashioned in response to the demands of the reading experience; it does not exist prior to that experience, and in the experience of another work it will not be fashioned, even if the work were to display the same formal features. In any number of contexts, the sentence “the stick grew shorter at both ends” would present no difficulty for a reader; it would require no effort of reinter- pretation, and therefore it would not take on the meaning which that effort creates in The Inheritors. Halliday’s mistake is not to assert a value for his data but to locate that value in a paradigm and so bypass the context in which it is actually acquired.

This goes to the heart of my quarrel with the stylisticians: in their rush to establish an inventory of fixed significances, they bypass the activity in the course of which significances are, if only momentarily, fixed. I have said before that their procedures are arbitrary, and that they acknowledge no constraint on their interpretations of the data. The shape of the reader’s experience is the constraint they decline to acknowledge. Were they to make that shape the focus of their analyses, it would lead them to the value conferred by its events. Instead they proceed in accordance with the rule laid down by Martin Joos, “Text signals its own structure,” treating the deposit of an activity as if it were the activity itself, as if meanings arose independently of human transactions. As a result, they are left with patterns and statistics that have been cut off from their animating source, banks of data that are unattached to anything but their own formal categories, and are therefore, quite literally, meaningless.

In this connection it is useful to turn to a distinction, made by John Searle, between institutional facts—facts rooted in a recognition of human purposes, needs, and goals—and brute facts—facts that are merely quantifiable. “Imagine,” says Searle,

a group of highly trained observers describing a . . . football game in statements only of brute facts. What could they say by way of description? Well, within certain areas a good deal could be said, and using statistical techniques certain “laws” could even be formulated . . . we can imagine that after a time our observers would discover the law of periodic clustering: at regular intervals organisms in like colored shirts cluster together in roughly circular fashion . . . Furthermore, at equally regular intervals, circular clustering is followed by linear clustering . . . and linear clustering is followed by the phenomenon of linear interpenetration . . . But no matter how much data of this sort we imagine our observers to collect and no matter how many inductive generalizations we imagine them to make from the data, they still have not described football. What is missing from their description? What is missing are . . . concepts such as touchdown, offside, game, points, first down, time out, etc. . . . The missing statements are precisely what describes the phenomenon on the field as a game of football. The other descriptions, the description of the brute facts can [only] be explained in terms of the institutional facts.17

In my argument the institutional facts are the events that are constitutive of the specifically human activity of reading, while the brute facts are the observable formal patterns that can be discerned in the traces or residue of that activity. The stylisticians are thus in the position of trying to do what Searle says cannot be done: explain the brute facts without reference to the institutional facts which give them value. They would specify the meaning of the moves in the game without taking into account the game itself. Paradoxically, however, this gap in their procedures does not hamper but frees them; for while it is true, as Hubert Dreyfus has recently observed, that once the data have “been taken out of context and stripped of all significance, it is not so easy to give it back,” the corollary is that it is very easy to replace it with whatever significance you wish to bring forward. The result is interpretations that are simultaneously fixed and arbitrary, fixed because they are specified apart from
contexts, and arbitrary because they are fixed, because it is in contexts that meaning occurs.

The stylisticians, of course, have an alternative theory of meaning, and it is both the goal of, and the authorization for, their procedures. In that theory, meaning is located in the inventory of relationships they seek to specify, an inventory that exists independently of the activities of producers and consumers, who are reduced either to selecting items from its storehouse of significances or to recognizing the items that have been selected. As a theory, it is distinguished by what it does away with, and what it does away with are human beings, at least insofar as they are responsible for creating rather than simply exchanging meanings. This is why the stylisticians almost to a man identify meaning with either logic or message or information, because these entities are “pure” and remain uninfluenced by the needs and purposes of those who traffic in them. I have been arguing all along that the goal of the stylisticians is impossible, but my larger objection is that it is unworthy, for it would deny to man the most remarkable of his abilities, the ability to give the world meaning rather than to extract a meaning that is already there.

This, however, is precisely what the stylisticians want to avoid, the protean and various significances which are attached, in context and by human beings, to any number of formal configurations. Behind their theory, which is reflected in their goal which authorizes their procedures, is a desire and a fear: the desire to be relieved of the burden of interpretation by handing it over to an algorithm, and the fear of being left alone with the self-renewing and unquantifiable power of human signifying. So strong is this fear that it rules their procedures even when they appear to be taking into account what I accuse them of ignoring. Michael Riffaterre is a case in point. In every way Riffaterre seems to be on the right side. He criticizes descriptive techniques that fail to distinguish between merely linguistic patterns and patterns a reader could be expected to actualize.  He rejects the attempts of other critics to endow “formal . . . categories . . . with esthetic and . . . ethical values.”  He insists that the proper object of analysis is not the poem or message but the “whole act of communication” (p. 202). He argues for the necessity of “following exactly the normal reading process” (p. 203), and it is that process he seeks to describe when he asks readers, or as he calls them, informants, to report on their experiences. Once the process is described, however, Riffaterre does something very curious: he empties it of its content.  That is, he discounts everything his readers tell him about what they were doing and retains only the points at which they were compelled to do it. That pattern that emerges, a pattern of contentless stresses and emphases, is then fleshed out by the interpretation he proceeds to educe.

Riffaterre does exactly what the other stylisticians do, but he does it later: he cuts his data off from the source of value and is then free to confer any value he pleases. The explanation for this curious maneuver is to be found in his equation of meaning with message or information; for if the message is the meaning, a reader’s activities can only be valued insofar as they contribute to its clear and firm reception; anything else is simply evidence of an unwanted subjectivity and must be discarded. While the reader is admitted into Riffaterre’s procedures, there is no real place for him in the theory and he is sent away after he has performed the mechanical task of locating the field of analysis. In the end, Riffaterre is distinguished only by the nature of his diversionary machinery. Like the other stylisticians, he introduces a bulky apparatus which obscures the absence of any connection between his descriptive and interpretive acts; the difference is that his is precisely the apparatus that would supply the connection (it is not taxonomic but explanatory); but after introducing it, he eviscerates it.

Richard Ohmann performs somewhat the same operation on an entire school of philosophy. In his most recent work, Ohmann has proposed literary applications to the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin (How To Do Things with Words) and John Searle, a theory that turns traditional philosophy around by denying the primacy and even the existence of pure or context-free statements. All utterances, argue Austin and Searle, are to be understood as instances of purposeful human actions which happen to require language for their performance. Some of these are prom-
is ordering, commanding, requesting, questioning, warning, stating, praising, greeting, and so on. Even this abbreviated list should be enough to suggest the main contention of this school, which is captured in Searle's declaration that propositional acts do not occur alone. What this means is that every utterance possesses an illocutionary force, an indication of the way it is to be taken (as a promise, threat, warning, or whatever) and that no utterance is ever taken purely, without reference to an intention in a context. Thus, for example, the string of words "I will come" may, in different circumstances, be a promise, a threat, a warning, a prediction; but it will always be one of these, and it will never be just a meaning unattached to a situation.

What an older theory would have called the pure semantic value of the utterance is in this theory merely an abstraction, which, although it can be separated out for the sake of analysis, has no separate and independent status. The various illocutionary lives led by "I will come" are not different handlings of the same meaning, they are different meanings. In speech-act theory, there is only one semantic level, not two; detached from its illocutionary force, a sentence is just a series of noises. Illocutionary force is meaning. (This is obvious in the paradigm instances where the illocutionary force marker is explicit, that is, a part of the utterance, which certainly cannot be detached from itself.)

It is not my intention here to embrace this theory (although I am attracted to it) but to explain some of its terms, terms which Ohmann appropriates. He also distorts them, in two predictable directions. First of all, he takes the slice of the speech act that Searle insists cannot stand alone and gives it an independent status. He calls it the locutionary act—a designation he borrows from Austin—and endows it with a force of its own, the semantic force of logical and grammatical structures. This locutionary act then becomes the basic level of a two-level system of significations. The second, and subsidiary, level is occupied by the inventory of illocutionary forces, which function more or less as a rhetoric of social conventions and intentions. Illocutionary force is thus dislodged from its primary position and reduced to a kind of emphasis, something that is added to a content which is detachable from it and survives its influence. Ohmann turns the major insight of the speech-act philosophers on its head, precisely undoing what they have so carefully done. It is in a way a remarkable feat: he manages to take a theory rooted in the recognition of human meaning and make it assert the primacy of a meaning that is specifiable apart from human activities. He succeeds, in the face of great odds, in preserving the context-free propositional core that is necessary if there is to be a rationale for the procedures of stylistics, and it is only a measure of his success that he is then able to define literature impossibly as "discourse without illocutionary force."

I do not mean to suggest conscious intention on Ohmann's part, any more than I would argue that the stylisticians consciously perform illegitimate acts of interpretation which they then deliberately disguise. Indeed, I take the performance of these acts as evidence of the extent to which they are unaware of their assumptions; for if they were true to their covert principles (as are, for example, the structuralists) they would be content with the description of formal patterns and admit that the value-free operation of those patterns has always been their goal. But they are not so content and insist on leaping from those patterns to the human concerns their procedures exclude. The dehumanization of meaning may be the implication, as well as the result, of what they do; but it is not, I think, what they consciously want to do.

What we have, then, is a confusion between methodology and intention, and it is a confusion that is difficult to discern in the midst of the pseudo-scientific paraphernalia the stylisticians bring to bear. I return to my opening paragraph and to a final paradox. While it is the program of stylistics to replace the subjectivity of literary studies with objective techniques of description and interpretation, its practitioners ignore what is objectively true—that meaning is not the property of a timeless formalism but something acquired in the context of an activity—and therefore they are finally more subjective than the critics they would replace. For an open impressionism, they substitute the covert impressionism of anchorless statistics and self-referring categories. In the name of responsible procedures, they offer a methodized irresponsibility, and as a result, they produce
interpretations which are either circular—mechanical reshufflings of the data—or arbitrary—readings of the data that are unconstrained by anything in their machinery.

What makes this picture particularly disturbing is the unlikeliness of its changing; for among the favorite pronouncements of the stylisticians are two that protect them from confronting or even acknowledging the deficiencies of their operations. The first is: "Stylistic studies are essentially comparative." Properly understood, this article of faith is a covert admission of the charges I have been making. What the stylisticians compare are the statistics derived from applying their categories to a variety of texts; but since those categories are unattached to anything (are without meaning) the differences revealed by the statistics are purely formal, and the only thing one can legitimately do with them is compare them with each other. The weakness of the exercise is that it is without content, but this is also its strength, since it can be endlessly and satisfyingly repeated without hazarding assertions about meaning or value.

It is when such assertions are hazarded that the stylisticians get into trouble, but at this point they are ready with a second article of faith: the apparent unreliability of our procedures is a condition of insufficient data. Thus while Lúboim Doležel (to cite just one example) is forced to admit that "there are surprising contradictions in the various interpretations of style characteristics," he manages to escape the implications of his admission by hanging everything on a future hope: "All conclusions about the properties and nature of style characteristics, about the speaker type, and about stylistic differences, are to be considered hypotheses that will be confirmed or refuted by the accumulation of vast empirical material." But the accumulation of empirical material will make a difference only if the ability of human beings to confer meaning is finite and circumscribable within a statistical formula; if it is not, then the resulting data will do nothing more than trace out more fully the past performance of that ability, rather than, as Doležel and others hope, make its future performances predictable. In other words, the statistics will never catch up with the phenomenon they seek to circumscribe. But one can avoid this realization simply by forever ad-

vancing the date when the availability of more data will make everything all right. The failure of the basic assumption to prove itself is also the mechanism which assures its continuing life, and assures too that stylisticians will never come to terms with the theoretical difficulties of their enterprise.

If the enterprise is so troubled, if the things people say about stylistics are not terrible enough, what is the remedy? What is the critic who is interested in verbal analysis to do? The answer to this question would be the substance of another essay, but it has been more than anticipated here, especially in my counteranalysis of The Inheritors. I do not, the reader will recall, deny that the formal distinctions Halliday uncovers are meaningful; but where he assumes that they possess meaning (as a consequence of a built-in relationship between formal features and cognitive capacities), I would argue that they acquire it, and that they acquire it by virtue of their position in a structure of experience. The structure with which the stylisticians are concerned is a structure of observable formal patterns, and while such patterns do exist they are themselves part of a larger pattern the description of which is necessary for a determination of their value. Thus, for example, while it is certainly possible (as Halliday demonstrates) to specify the properties of the languages spoken by the tribes in The Inheritors, the significance of those properties is a function of their reception and negotiation by a reader who comes upon them already oriented in the direction of specific concerns and possessed of (or by) certain expectations. These concerns and expectations themselves arise in the course of a consecutive activity engaged in by a finite consciousness; and it is my contention that a characterization of that activity must precede, and by preceding control, the characterization of the formal features which become part of its structure. In short, I am calling not for the end of stylistics but for a new stylistics, what I have termed elsewhere an "affective" stylistics, in which the focus of attention is shifted from the spatial context of a page and its observable regularities to the temporal context of a mind and its experiences.

Does this mean a return to the dreaded impressionism? Quite the reverse. The demand for precision will be even greater
because the object of analysis is a process whose shape is continually changing. In order to describe that shape, it will be necessary to make use of all the information that formal characterizations of language can provide, although that information will be viewed from a different perspective. Rather than regarding it as directly translatable into what a word or a pattern means, it will be used more exactly to specify what a reader, as he comes upon that word or pattern, is doing, what assumptions he is making, what conclusions he is reaching, what expectations he is forming, what attitudes he is entertaining, what acts he is being moved to perform. When Milic observes that in Swift’s prose connectives are often redundant and even contradictory—concessives check by jowl with causals31—we can proceed from what he tells us to an account of what happens when a reader is alternately invited to anticipate a conclusion and asked to qualify it before it appears. When Ohmann declares that the syntactical deviance of Dylan Thomas’s “A Winter’s Tale,” breaks down categorical boundaries and converts juxtaposition into action,”32 the boundaries, if they exist, take the form of a reader’s expectations and their breaking down is an action he performs, thereby fashioning for himself the “vision of things” which the critic would attribute to the language. And when Halliday demonstrates that in the language of the “people” in Golding’s The Inheritors, agency is given not to human but to inanimate subjects (“the stick grew shorter at both ends”), we can extrapolate from his evidence to the interpretive effort demanded of the reader who must negotiate it. In each case, a statement about the shape of the data is reformulated as a statement about the (necessary) shape of response, and in the kind of analysis I propose, a succession of such shapes would itself be given shape by the needs and concerns and abilities of a consciousness moving and working in time.

Information about language can be turned into information about response even when the formalizations are unattached to specific texts. Searle’s analyses of questions, commands, promises, and so on, in terms of the roles they involve, the obligations they institute, and the needs they presuppose, allow us, indeed oblige us, to include these things in any account of what a reader of a question or command or promise understands. Thus when Joan Didion begins Play It As It Lays with the sentence “What makes Iago evil?,” simply by taking the question in, the reader casts himself in the role of its answerer. Moreover, he is directed by the tense, aspect (frequentative), and semantic content of “makes” to play that role in the context of a continuing and public literary debate about causality and motivation (how different would it be were the question “Why is Iago evil?”); and he will respond, or so Didion assumes, with one or more of the many explanations that have been offered for Iago’s behavior.33 That same reader, however, will be made a little less comfortable in his role by the second sentence: “Some people ask.” The effect of “some” is to divide the world into two groups, those who seek after reasons and causes and those who do not. The reader, of course, has already accepted the invitation extended by the prose to become a member of the first group, and moreover, he has accepted it in assumed fellowship with the first-person voice. That fellowship is upset by the third sentence—“I never ask”—which is also a judgment on what the reader has been (involuntarily) doing. Reader and narrator are now on different sides of the question originally introduced by the latter, and the tension between them gives point and direction to the experience of what follows.

Little of what I have said about this paragraph would emerge from a formal characterization of its components, but in my description of its experience I have been able to make use of formal characterizations—of a speech-act analysis of a question, of a logician’s analysis of the properties of “some,” of a philosopher’s analysis of making something happen—by regarding their content as cues for the reader to engage in activities. What is significant about these activities is that they are interpretive; for this means that a procedure in which their characterization is the first order of business avoids the chief theoretical deficiency of stylistics as it is now practiced. I have repeatedly objected to the absence in the work of the stylisticians of any connection between their descriptive and interpretive acts. In the kind of stylistics I propose, interpretive acts are what is being described; they, rather than verbal patterns arranging themselves in space,
are the content of the analysis. This is more than a procedural distinction; for at its heart are different notions of what it is to read which are finally different notions of what it is to be human. Implicit in what the stylisticians do is the assumption that to read is to put together discrete bits of meaning until they form what a traditional grammar would call a complete thought. In this view, the world, or the world of the text, is already ordered and filled with significances and what the reader is required to do is get them out (hence the question, "What did you get out of that?"). In short, the reader's job is to extract the meanings that formal patterns possess prior to, and independently of, his activities. In my view, these same activities are constitutive of a structure of concerns which is necessarily prior to any examination of meaningful patterns because it is itself the occasion of their coming into being. The stylisticians proceed as if there were observable facts that could first be described and then interpreted. What I am suggesting is that an interpreting entity, endowed with purposes and concerns, is, by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed; and, moreover, that since this determining is not a neutral marking out of a valueless area, but the extension of an already existing field of interests, it is an interpretation.

The difference in the two views is enormous, for it amounts to no less than the difference between regarding human beings as passive and disinterested comprehenders of a knowledge external to them (that is, of an objective knowledge) and regarding human beings as at every moment creating the experiential spaces into which a personal knowledge flows. It is a difference in methodological responsibility and rigor, between a procedure which is from the very beginning organizing itself in terms of what is significant and a procedure which has no obligatory point of origin or rest. That is, if one sets out to describe in the absence of that which marks out the field of description, there is no way of deciding either where to begin or where to stop, because there is no way of deciding what counts. In such a situation, one either goes on at random and forever (here we might cite the monumental aridity of Jakobson's analyses of Baudelaire and Shakespeare) or one stops when the accumulated
data can be made to fit a preconceived interpretive thesis. It has seemed to many that these are the only alternatives, and that, as Roger Fowler has declared, the choice is between "mere description" or description performed at the direction of a preformulated literary hunch. I have been arguing for a third way, one which neither begs the question of meaning nor predecides it arbitrarily but takes as its point of departure the interpretive activity (experience) by virtue of which meanings occur.

This, then, is the way to repair the ruins of stylistics, not by linking the descriptive and interpretive acts but by making them one. It is hardly necessary to say that this kind of analysis is not without problems, and the problems are for the most part a direct consequence of its assumptions about what it means to be human. It can have no rules in the sense of discovery procedures, since the contextualizing ability that characterizes being human is not circumscribed by its previous performances, performances which, while they constitute the history of that ability, do not constitute its limits. Thus the value a formal feature may acquire in the context of a reader's concerns and expectations is local and temporary: and there is no guarantee that the value-formal feature correlation that obtains once will obtain again (although an awareness that it has obtained once is not without interest or usefulness). All you have when you begin is a sense of this finite but infinitely flexible ability and a personal knowledge of what it means to have it. You then attempt to project the course that ability would take in its interaction with a specific text, using as the basis of your projection what you know, and at the same time adding to what you know by the very effort to make analytical use of it. There are other things that can help. Formal linguistic characterizations can help, if, as I have said, one views their content as potential cues for the performing acts. Literary history can help, if one views its conventions in the same way: a description of a genre, for example, can and should be seen as a prediction of the shape of response. Other minds can help, because they know what you know, but with the same lack of distance between themselves and their knowledge which makes the effort so difficult. Anal-
yses of perceptual strategy can help, because they acquaint us with the past performances of the ability we are trying to know. (Our trying is itself just such a performance.) Finally, however, you are left only with yourself and with the impossible enterprise of understanding understanding: impossible because it is endless, endless because to have reached an end is to have performed an operation that once again extends it beyond your reach. In short, this way lacks the satisfaction of a closed system of demonstration and is unable ever to prove anything, although, paradoxically, this makes rigor and precision more, not less, necessary; but these very deficiencies are the reverse side of its greatest virtue (in both the modern and Renaissance sense): the recognition that meaning is human.