

## The Text in This Class: Stanley Fish and the Leibnizian Mind

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Interpretation seems to be the technique by which human beings evaluate a given object. The interpretation of a literary object, then, would seem to entail a given understanding of this object. Put differently, the interpretation of a text would seem to entail a pre-interpretative understanding of this text: its description. However, such reasoning, which certain literary critics—namely, the formalists—presuppose, faces a serious refutation. In what follows, I formulate this refutation with the help of Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980) and relate it to a trajectory of early-modern philosophical thought, evident in the works of René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz. This enables me to specify the shortcomings of the formalists' reasoning, to complicate Fish's refutation of it, and to attempt to provide a preliminary ground for a consistent method by which to interpret texts.

Imagine that you are a student of literature. Your assignment is to read Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). You open the novel. The first line manifests itself: "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself."<sup>1</sup> For you to interpret this line, formalist critics would argue that the text must exemplify certain definite properties, such as, grammatical, syntactical, and semantic values.<sup>2</sup> For instance, "Mrs." is a title (a type of proper adjective), which describes proper nouns for humans (first and/or last names) as female and married. "Dalloway" is a proper noun. Given its relationship to the proper adjective "Mrs.," it must indicate the name of a married woman. Since "Dalloway" is not a common first name for women, it likely refers to

the last name of one. The non-linking verb “said” demonstrates the primary action of “Mrs. Dalloway”: speech. Moreover, it designates the time of this action: the simple past. The content clause, “she would buy the flowers herself,” then describes the topic of this action: a possible exploit or, more specifically, the alleged self-funded acquisition of a set of angiosperms. According to formalist critics, you, as a reader, must recognise and then reveal these definite properties of a text.

Other critics, however, against the formalists, suggest that this recognition depends on a reader’s particular social, moral, and/or psychological convictions insofar as such convictions immediately inform any experiences a reader has of a text. For instance, in *Is There a Text in This Class?* (1980), Stanley Fish argues: “an interpreting entity, endowed with purposes and concerns, is, by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed.”<sup>3</sup> Put differently, a reader, always and already adhering to certain public and personal beliefs, decides upon the definite properties of a text. A text thereby represents not the collection of elements, which exemplifies such definite properties, but rather the result of a subjective process, which encodes them. So Fish concludes: “the text is always a function of interpretation”—interpretation now being a reader’s conscious and unconscious intentional evaluation of some apparently literary material.<sup>4</sup> Against the formalists, then, Fish locates meaning (ranging from factual description to evaluative interpretation) in the reader as an effect of this reader’s disposition.

Two related observations about the process of reading encourage this conclusion. First, Fish censures the formalist’s exclusion of the way in which a text or texts produce sensory reactions in the reader. In his appended introduction to the book, he explains: “[with the first chapter,] I challenged the self-sufficiency of the text by pointing out that its (apparently) spatial form belied the temporal dimension in which its meanings were actualized, and I argued that it was the developing shape of that actualization, rather than the static shape of the printed page, that should be the object of critical description.”<sup>5</sup> For example, if the opening line of *Mrs. Dalloway* (“Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself”) implies one meaning to a reader (Mrs. Dalloway’s counterfeit independence), then this meaning, even if a different meaning later contradicts it (Mrs. Dalloway’s actual independent purchasing of flowers), nonetheless amounts to one of the text’s possible meanings, and a critic must not ignore its import.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Fish rejects any formal distinction between the text and the reader’s response in order to defend the views both that the experience of a text and the text itself are interchangeable and that thereby all possible experiences of a text count.

But this refocusing of the interpretative gaze from the text itself to the reader's response seems merely to expand the formalist's object—from texts alone to possible experiences of them. While classical formalist critics conclude their interpretations of texts at the level of grammatical, syntactical, and semantic values, more recent formalists (namely, structuralists and narratologists) do not, extending their interpretations to other structures—such as, plot, story, and/or themes. In "From Work to Text" (1971), Roland Barthes argues that, whereas the prior aspects are features of a work, only the latter are features of the text. He writes: "The difference is this: the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field. ... [T]he work can be held in the hand, the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse."<sup>7</sup> Barthes' notion of the text then amounts neither to the material thing (a book on a bookshelf), nor to the computable structures of language (such as, grammar, syntax, or semantics), but to the possible experiences readers have while reading. For him, unlike the concrete and definite work, the text is theoretical and dynamic.

However, while theoretical and dynamic, Fish worries that such a notion of the text only makes the formalist's object more universal. As he puts it, "the hegemony of formalism was confirmed and even extended by making the text responsible for the activities of its readers."<sup>8</sup> Barthes' text amounts not simply to an experience but to the collection of possible experiences of reading. Presumably, then, the critic of Barthes' text may access and assess experiences of reading which are not her/his own. The best critics would thus seem to be those most attuned to the total collection of possible experiences of reading—in other words, those most attuned to the text. Therefore, though addressing not the concrete and definite properties but the theoretical and dynamic effects of writing, Barthes' notion of the text, as Fish's argument suggests, preserves the authoritative status of the critic.

To avoid this implication, Fish distinguishes between the reader's reception of a text and the reader's already established social, psychological, and theological inclinations. He argues that such inclinations determine how readers may receive texts: "description can occur only within a stipulative understanding of what there is to be described, an understanding that will produce the object of its attention."<sup>9</sup> In other words, if the opening line of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* implies some meaning for a reader (Mrs. Dalloway's counterfeit independence), it does so because the reader brings certain social, psychological, and theological convictions to bear on the text. According to Fish, then, a reader, by way of her/his convictions, produces the meaning of a text.

With this conclusion, Fish relinquishes the descriptive aspect of literary criticism in favour of a rhetorical one. He writes: “The business of criticism ... [is] not to decide between interpretations by subjecting them to the test of disinterested evidence but to establish by political and persuasive means (they are the same thing) the set of interpretative assumptions from the vantage of which the evidence (and the facts and the intentions and everything else) will hereafter be specifiable.”<sup>10</sup> That is, critics, Fish claims, should not assess the truth or falsity of interpretations but rather the effectiveness of them. If a reader develops and supports some interpretation of the opening line of *Mrs. Dalloway* (for example, Mrs. Dalloway’s counterfeit independence), s/he does so only to convince others to adopt the method by which s/he came to ascertain this interpretation. In the last instance, then, Fish favours the rhetorical rather than descriptive side of literary criticism.

A trajectory of early-modern philosophy, evident in the works of Descartes and Leibniz, anticipates both the formalist method and Fish’s alternative and thereby helps to specify both methods and their shortcomings. Prefiguring the formalist theory of literature, René Descartes’ dualistic philosophy attempts to ground an interpretative method by which one may assess the distinct properties of the non-mental or physical world. As he writes in his aptly titled *Discourse on the method of rightly conducting reason and seeking the truth in the sciences* (1637), “the principles of these sciences [namely, any science with a theoretical basis in mathematics (such as, geometry, algebra, astronomy, music, and optics)] must all be derived from philosophy.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, any mathematical-based or formal system depends on philosophy. In order to establish the truth and value of such systems, Descartes therefore endeavours to determine the general philosophical foundations of them.

Like the formalists’ method, which presupposes an essential difference between texts and readers so as to ground reader-independent descriptions of texts, Descartes’ general philosophical foundations, for which he offers a “full[er] treatment” in his subsequent work *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), depend on a real distinction between the human mind and body.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the formalists’ method, however, Descartes’ philosophical foundations do not merely validate objective analyses of corporeal things (such as, texts). Rather, their purpose is broader: the philosophical rather than theological justification of “two topics—namely God and the soul.”<sup>13</sup> That is, the real distinction between the mind (also, for Descartes, soul) and body, in addition to establishing objective analyses of the material world, also helps rationalize the existence of God and the soul. For this distinction entails first the existence of the mind and second the mind’s disembodied

dependence on God. Unlike the formalists' method, then, Descartes' philosophy considers the unique properties of the mind—beyond its possibly intrusive effects on physical observations—and how this mind relates to God. Still, prefiguring their method, Descartes' philosophy, albeit with this broader aim, determines the means by which one may study the objectivity of the world.

The First Meditation prepares the subsequent Meditations' discussions of the real distinction between the mind and body and also the mind's dependence on God. It situates the method by which Descartes will explain the unique aspects of the mind and body: what he calls attributes and modes. In the Meditation, Descartes introduces three kinds of doubt—sensory, mental, and theological—which threaten the bases both of experience and of truth.<sup>14</sup> First, he observes: “the senses deceive.”<sup>15</sup> This (merely sensory) observation challenges the accuracy of past experiential knowledge (i.e., “falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood”).<sup>16</sup> Even so, it does not seem to affect present perceptions: “for example, that I am here sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on.”<sup>17</sup> In short, the first kind of doubt—sensory doubt—merely disputes the veracity of past experiences.

But the second kind of doubt—mental—threatens experience in general. Descartes assumes: if I were “insane” or “asleep,” then even present perceptions would be questionable.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this psychological indeterminacy seems to undermine the “general kinds of things—eyes, head, hands and the body as whole.”<sup>19</sup> All that remains, for Descartes, is possible reality of the simplest and most universal things—“the real colours from which we form all the images of things ... corporeal nature in general, and its extension; the shape of extended things; the quantity, or size number of these things; the place in which they may exist, [and] the time through which they may endure.”<sup>20</sup> In short, the possibility of one's being insane and/or dreaming undermines “physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things ... [but not] arithmetic, geometry ... which deal only with the simplest and most general things [namely, two plus two equals four and the sum of the angles of a triangle amounts to one-hundred and eighty degrees], regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not.”<sup>21</sup> Mental doubt thereby questions the reality of all concreteness, leaving over only abstract truths.

However, given theological doubt, abstract truths too become uncertain. Descartes explains: if “not God ... but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me,” then, as he puts it later in the Second Meditation, “[p]erhaps

just the one fact [remains true—] nothing is certain.”<sup>22</sup> In effect, for Descartes, the possible authority of some duplicitous spirit demolishes all degrees of truth—from the most concrete to the most abstract. In his view, theological doubt destabilises everything.

The Second Meditation, however, denies this conclusion. In it, Descartes argues: in spite of the uncertainty of the senses, the indeterminacy of reality (i.e., that waking life may be a dream), and the possible duplicity of an all-powerful demon, the proposition “*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived by my mind.”<sup>23</sup> In its more familiar form, (first from his *Discourse* and later from his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644)), the proposition reads: “I am thinking, therefore I exist.”<sup>24</sup> Descartes supposes that, should the prior not entail the latter, it would be “a contradiction.”<sup>25</sup> For him, then, thought and existence are co-dependent and to some extent identical.

From this node of truth, Descartes determines the nature of the mind. He writes: “thought; this alone is inseparable from me ... I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks ... a thinking thing.”<sup>26</sup> By this, he means something that “doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”<sup>27</sup> Even the lattermost, that is, having sensory perceptions, he concludes, is part of “the same ‘I’.”<sup>28</sup> The point here, which he clarifies in the Sixth Meditation, is that “the thinking thing” is indivisible: “[f]or when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the thinking thing or human mind is irreducible. Put philosophically, it is a simple and substantial unity.

By way of contrast, Descartes argues, bodies are “divisible.”<sup>30</sup> For instance, a piece of wax “is capable of countless changes [namely, in shape, size, and motion].”<sup>31</sup> At one time, the wax may appear hard, yellow. It may smell of flowers and taste of honey.<sup>32</sup> However, after a fire warms it, the wax appears soft, “the smell goes away, the colour changes.”<sup>33</sup> From this, Descartes contends that “bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses ... but by the intellect alone ... [so that] perception derives not from their [bodies] being touched or seen but from their being understood.”<sup>34</sup> The essence of wax thereby involves not one’s particular sensations of it but rather one’s understanding of its flexibility and changeability.<sup>35</sup> He calls this flexibility and changeability extension. Bodies, unlike the mind, are extended things, which one may explain with purely mathematical (for Descartes, geometrical and algebraic) truths.

In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes concludes that the real distinction between such extended things (bodies) and thinking things (minds) de-

depends on God, who, being necessarily all-good and -powerful (i.e., not lacking anything), is able to create “everything which I clearly and distinctly understand” and thereby this distinction.<sup>36</sup> In the *Principles*, he clarifies this point: the substantiality of the mind and body is “univocal” insofar as they “need only the concurrence of God in order to exist.”<sup>37</sup> That is, because of God’s “concurrence” or arbitration between the mind and body, the body represents itself in a “univocal” or single way to the mind. Put differently, since God makes possible the difference between the mind’s singularity and the body’s extendibility, the mind is able to assess representations of the body in an objective or mathematical way—without fear of these representations being fundamentally deceptive. In this way, Descartes’ philosophy, even with its theological aims, prefigures the formalists by determining a consistent, mind-independent method by which one may understand worldly things (such as, literature).

Like Fish’s initial critique of the formalists (that the text and its reader are inseparable), Gottfried Leibniz’s monadic philosophy challenges Descartes’ real distinction between the mind and body and gives priority to the mind over and against the body. In a mid-career essay “Reflections on the Advancement of True Metaphysics” (1694), Leibniz writes with regard to the *Meditations*: “He [Descartes] had a mistaken idea of the nature of body, which he saw, without proof, as being pure extension, and he couldn’t see any way of explaining the union of the soul with the body.”<sup>38</sup> Because of Descartes’ lack of proof for it, Leibniz rejects the argument for the substantiality or mind-independent existence of extension. In a way, he exaggerates Descartes’ claim in the *Meditations*’ “Synopsis”: “in the Sixth Meditation ... there is a presentation of all the arguments which enable the existence of material things to be inferred ... [I]n considering these arguments we come to realize that they are not as solid or as transparent as the arguments which lead us to knowledge of our own minds and of God.”<sup>39</sup> Here Descartes alludes to a possible hierarchy of knowledge: knowledge of the body implies knowledge of the mind and of God. Leibniz, in his work, considers this hierarchy paramount and thereby insists that it is not only epistemological but also metaphysical: we do not merely know the mind and God better than the body; the mind and God are more essential beings.

In consequence, contra Descartes, Leibniz holds that only unities are true substances. Since extension, by definition, is divisible, only the mind, being indivisible, qualifies as a unity and thereby a true substance. In his “Correspondence” with Antoine Arnauld (1687), Leibniz famously posits: “Something that isn’t truly *one* entity isn’t truly an *entity* either.”<sup>40</sup> Being thereby entails unity; “the plural presupposes the singular.”<sup>41</sup> The existence of the body, a plurality, thereby depends on the existence of the mind, a

singularity. In the same letter, Leibniz writes: “in my opinion our body in itself ... isn’t properly a substance ... the soul is truly the substantial form of our body.”<sup>42</sup> Instead, the body, according to Leibniz, is an aggregate entity, the relationship between it and the mind being “like that as there is between a man and a community, a people—an army—a society.”<sup>43</sup> For him, then, minds qua unified substances ground and indeed compose extended physical reality.<sup>44</sup>

However, like Fish, Leibniz is not content with isolated minds. That is, Leibniz refuses to admit the mind’s self-sufficiency. Therefore, anticipating Fish’s distinction between the reader’s reception of a text and the reader’s already established social, psychological, and/or theological convictions, Leibniz differentiates the finite mind or substance from the infinite substance (God). In his “Comments on [Pierre] Bayle’s Note L [on Leibniz’s philosophy from Bayle’s *Dictionary*]” (1705?), he writes: “each monad is the universe in concentrated form, and each mind is an imitation of the divinity. In God the universe is not only concentrated, but perfectly expressed; but in each created monad there is distinctly expressed only one part, which is larger or smaller according as the soul is more or less excellent, and all the infinite remainder is expressed only confusedly.”<sup>45</sup> For our purpose, the terms “monad” and “mind” are interchangeable—the only (here negligible) difference being that the monad denotes both human and non-human units of mental functioning.<sup>46</sup> To reiterate Leibniz’s point, then, we might say that any given mind expresses some part of the universe; God expresses it in its totality. So, just as Fish’s reader assumes only a portion of the many possible social, psychological, and/or theological convictions, Leibniz’s mind/monad represents only a partial expression of the universe.

A question follows: what is the relationship between this partial expression and the total or God’s expression of the universe? Put philosophically, what is the modality of a mind/monad vis-à-vis God? For Fish, a reader’s social, psychological, and/or theological convictions are contingent. That is, they are possible but not necessary. They can and do change in time. In consequence of both this and his claim that such convictions are central to interpretation, his theory tends toward subjectivism—the belief that any interpretation is possible and that no one interpretation is more or less true than any other. However, unlike this theory, Leibniz’s account of the relationship between partial expressions and the total expression of the universe—that is, between minds/monads and God—is by no means unambiguous. Due to this ambiguity, his philosophy complicates Fish’s argument that, if social, psychological, and/or theological convictions affect one’s reading experience, then the literary critic can only persuade others of but never prove to them the truth of her/his interpretative method. While



this complication in many respects repeats Fish's subjectivist conclusion, it also reveals a fallacy endemic to it.

Leibniz establishes this complication by delimiting certain universal characteristics of God—namely, God's antecedent and consequent wills. In the *Theodicy* (1710), he explains: "[God's will] is called *antecedent* when it is detached, and considers each good separately in the capacity of a good ... Success entire and infallible belongs only to the *consequent* will ... final and decisive, [which] results from the conflict of all the antecedent wills, of those which tend towards good, even as of those which repel evil."<sup>47</sup> In other words, while the antecedent will introduces a multiplicity of possible universes, the consequent will actuates one of these possible universes insofar as it provides the best configuration of events.

The question is: do minds participate in the possible universes, which, Leibniz argues, manifest themselves in God's antecedent wills, or do they participate only in the actual universe, which manifests itself in God's consequent will? Since, as Leibniz claims in his "New System of the Nature of Substances and their Communication" (1695), "[e]very mind is like a world apart, sufficient to itself, independent of every other created thing, involves the infinite, and expresses the universe," we might restate the question: does the universe, which each mind/monad expresses, include the possible universes of God's antecedent willings?<sup>48</sup> In one respect, the answer must be no. The actual universe amounts to a predetermined configuration of substances (i.e., minds/monads). The universe, which each mind/monad expresses, must be this actual one—not any of the possible ones. In this sense, God is determinate. If each mind/monad expresses a part of such a determinate whole, then this part, for Leibniz, is necessary—not contingent.

However, Leibniz further complicates his notion of the actual universe by introducing two types of necessity—namely, a metaphysical and moral one. In the *Theodicy*, he defines these as follows: "metaphysical necessity ... admits of no choice, presenting only one single object as possible, and moral necessity ... constrains the wisest to choose the best."<sup>49</sup> "[M]etaphysical necessity" depends on the principle of noncontradiction: a thing cannot be itself and not itself at the same time. "[M]oral necessity," as Leibniz writes earlier, depends on the "principle of the best": "the fitness of things ... [which issues from] the wise one's choice which is worthy of his wisdom."<sup>50</sup> While the principle of noncontradiction admits "only one single object as possible," the principle of the best seems to admit many. Like God's antecedent wills then, moral necessity (via the principle of the best), which, importantly, involves both ethical and "physical" laws, ostensibly makes manifest contingent futurities.<sup>51</sup> If, when Leibniz claims that the monad/mind expresses the universe in part, he means that it participates in

morally necessary events, then the monad/mind for Leibniz—like a reader's convictions for Fish—is contingent and therefore can and does change.

But this would seem to imply that two minds'/monads' expressions of the universe can contradict each other. In Fish's terms, it would mean that two opposing interpretations of a text could both be true. For instance, as Leibniz suggests in his "Correspondence" with Arnauld (1686), one mind/monad might express the universe in such a way that Adam be the first man and another mind/monad at the same time might express the universe in such a way that Adam not be the first man.<sup>52</sup> Leibniz rejects this possibility on account of the fact that Adam's being the first man is not "necessary" but "certain."<sup>53</sup> Here, the indisputability of biblical history seems to justify his certainty. As he writes: "if the least thing had happened differently from how it actually did, the whole universe with all its parts would have been different—it would have been another universe right from the outset."<sup>54</sup> Put differently, if history were different, then minds'/monads' expressions of the universe today would be different too. Considered abstractly, this claim seems correct. But considered with regard to particular versions of history (such as, pagan, Judeo-Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and scientific versions), this claim becomes problematic. Adam represents the first man for some of these versions, but not all of them. Does that mean that a mind/monad, which expresses a version of history in which Adam is not the first man, is therefore false?

Leibniz's Christian sensibilities compel him to answer yes to this question. In Fish's terms, Leibniz's belief in biblical history forces him to interpret the text of the universe as a Christian text. But if we understand this belief as one possible expression of the universe, that is, as a morally but not logically necessary expression of it, then Leibniz's philosophy, like Fish's literary theory, would allow for the truth of a mind's'/monad's expression of a universe in which Adam was not the first man. That is, his philosophy would allow for contradictory (both Christian and non-Christian) expressions of the universe. In this respect, Leibniz's philosophy prefigures Fish's subjectivist conclusions about literary interpretation. Just as Fish's ideal critic would persuade rather than describe, Leibniz's mind/monad would express belief rather than truth.

But what happens to truth? What happens to description? We have seen that, for Fish, "the text is always a function of interpretation."<sup>55</sup> It is something derived rather than given. Therefore, the description of a text too is derived. It is an effect of a given reader's disposition. As for Leibniz, minds'/monads provide expressions of the universe. If these expressions are dependent on a definite history of the universe (for instance, biblical history), then there would be a limited number of possible expressions of

this universe, and the law of noncontradiction could apply to them. However, if these expressions are not dependent on a definite history, that is, if all versions of the history of the universe (religious and non-religious, scientific and non-scientific, logical and illogical alike) were equally true, then there would be an unlimited number of possible expressions of the universe to which the law of noncontradiction would not apply. That is, by relinquishing his certainty in some version of history, Leibniz would at the same time relegate the principle of noncontradiction to an empty abstraction. In this way, his philosophy reveals how Fish's subjectivist conclusion does the same.

This cannot be. For without the principle of noncontradiction, one would admit the truth of absurdities. Because such a truth is unthinkable, something about Leibniz's philosophy and Fish's literary theory must be wrong. While both imagine contradictions (for Leibniz, contradictions of expressions of the universe and, for Fish, contradictions between interpretations), this imagining does not take place out of time. However, both Leibniz's non-extended mind/monad and Fish's reader without a given text ostensibly exist in such an extra-temporal domain. The reason for this is that both implicitly admit Descartes' and the formalist's original presupposition—that the world or texts and the mind or readers are substantially distinct. Though Leibniz argues that the world qua universe is not substantial and Fish argues that the text is not existent, these predicates must be metaphysically necessary. That is to say, even though all other predicates of the universe or of texts are contingent or changeable (such as, Adam is the first man or Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy flowers), the predicates not substantial and not existent must be eternal or permanent. Because of this, Leibniz's claim makes manifest the basic contradiction of both his and Fish's positions: the substance or essence of the universe is being not a substance, not having an essence.<sup>56</sup>

To ground a consistent method by which to interpret either the universe or texts, we must avoid this contradiction. The following summation and evaluation of this paper's points helps us to do so. Descartes, Leibniz, the formalists, and Fish all presuppose a difference between the universe or the text and thought or the reader. While Descartes and the formalists assume that this difference is metaphysical, which a transcendent third term (God or the neutral reader) mediates, Leibniz and Fish assume that the difference is epistemological, which an immanent rule (such as, the difference between moral and metaphysical necessity or that between a reader and her/his convictions) conditions. Put differently, Descartes and the formalists consider the world/universe or text to be something real and distinct from the mind; Leibniz and Fish assume that it is a product of it (i.e., a collection of minds/monads or an effect of one's particular social, psycho-

logical, and/or theological convictions). But Descartes and the formalists fail to account for the substantiality of the world/universe or text—since it in effect depends on the mind or reader. And Leibniz and Fish admit a contradictory ground: a God who is both singular and not singular; a text which is never itself.

To avoid both consequences, we must suppose three things. First, with Descartes and the formalists, we must suppose that the world qua universe or text is a logical or consistent multiplicity—that it, albeit manifold and multifaceted, signifies itself in some uniform and universal way. Second, contra Descartes and the formalists, we must reject the dualist assumption of a metaphysically distinct mind and body or of an autonomous reader and text. Third, against Leibniz and Fish, we must deny the autonomy of the mind or reader over and against the world/universe or text and suppose instead that the mind or reader is subject to the world/universe or text. Put differently, we must suppose that in the last instance interpretation is a function of the object of interpretation, not vice versa. This however does not mean that the mind is reducible to the world/universe, that the reader is reducible to a text. Rather, it means that, just as there would be no mind without a world/universe, there would be no reader without a text. Still, without a reader, there would be a text; and without minds, there would be a world/universe.

Perhaps at this point we should submit a further distinction, which will complicate our foregoing analysis of the relationship between philosophy and literary theory. This is the distinction between the text and the world/universe. While, as our above-stated suppositions reveal, the world/universe is primary, the text is derivative—so that, unlike the world/universe, the text, though it may be without readers, cannot be without minds. The consequences of this point are significant. First, if inconsistency appears in the world/universe, then, given our first supposition above, this inconsistency must appear because of the mind. In order to avoid contradiction, we must suppose that this inconsistency is merely apparent—virtual or imaginary. Being a mixture of mind and world/universe, then, a text may exemplify inconsistency. However, this is not to say that a text qua worldly object is itself inconsistent. Rather, it means that a text may be consistently inconsistent. For, in the last instance, a text signifies one thing and not its opposite. And while this thing may be false, it must be consistently so.

Take the opening line of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." If the second line were, "Mrs. Dalloway did not say she would buy the flowers herself," a reader could interpret these lines as contradicting each other. This does not imply that readers

ought to determine which line is true and which is false. Rather, a correct interpretation of the text—as the two lines together—would be simply that it contains a contradiction. For while an interpretation of a text can be that this text contains a contradiction, this does not mean that two contradictory interpretations of this text can both be true.<sup>57</sup>

The point is the following: unlike the world/universe, a text need not be internally consistent. Yet a text is still something in the world/universe, a function of this consistent multiplicity, and therefore subject to its defining principle—the principle of noncontradiction. Indeed, a chief function of literary interpretation is to apply this principle to texts so as to discover the manner in which such texts operate. This manner of operation is the text's description, which is always and already fixed and coherent. Once a critic has discovered this description, s/he may ask supplementary questions—such as, why is this the text's description, from where did this description come, and to what end will it go? In this way, the suppositions and implications, which I have here introduced, provide a preliminary ground for a consistent method by which to interpret text.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1925), 3.

<sup>2</sup> There are at least two schools of formalist literary criticism: the Russian and the American ones. The Russian school (known as Russian Formalism) includes critics such as Roman Jakobson and Boris Eichenbaum. The American school (known as New Criticism) includes critics such as Cleanth Brooks, William Wimsatt, and Monroe Beardsley. Generally speaking, the difference between them has to do with their focus: whereas the Russians examine literature in general, the Americans tend to study individual texts. For the Russian school, see Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) Eichenbaum, "The Theory of the 'Formal Method,'" *Russian Formalist Criticism*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (United States: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 99–140. For the American New Critical school, see Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no.3 (1946): 468–88 and Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (Orlando: The Macmillan Company, 1947).

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard College, 1980), 94. Other than Fish, most historical and/or ideological types of literary criticism resist and contradict the formalist understanding of the text in some way. See, for instance, works by critics other than

Fish from the reader-response school—such as, Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benzinger, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” *New Literary History* 2, no.1 (1970): 7–37 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)—works by critics from the new historical school, such as, Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)—and also works by gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 3, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 157.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, vol. I (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 121–22; *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, vol. VI (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76), 21–22.

<sup>12</sup> René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, vol. II. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 6; *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, vol. VII (revised edition, Paris: Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–76), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, *Writings*, vol. II, 3; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Most major scholars of Descartes refer to the latter two types of doubt as dream and/or hyperbolic rather than as mental and theological. See, for instance, Margaret Dauley Wilson, “The Dreaming Argument: a reconstruction” and “Real Doubts,” *Descartes* (New York: Routledge, 1978), 17–30, 42–50, Janet Broughton, “Chapter 3: Reasons for Suspending Judgments,” *Descartes’s Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 42–61, and John Carriero, “The First Meditation,” *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes Meditations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 27–64. The reason for this is that Descartes himself calls them “exaggerated doubts” (CSM II 61) or “hyperbolic and ridiculous [ones]” (AT VII 89 qtd. in Wilson 19). But even if Descartes used the term hyperbolic, he used it to refer mainly to the doubt, which “the inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake” evoked (CSM II 61; AT VII 89). Contemporary scholars, who use it to refer to the doubt, which the possible evil genius provoked, thereby commit an equivocation. In any case, I think that both titles “dream doubt” and “hyperbolic doubt” neglect the properly psychological dimension of Descartes’ argument—namely, that the doubt depends both on the possibility of life being a dream and also of one’s being insane. Given that he mentions the latter possibility first, I think that its role is crucial (even if only nominally). I agree that the second kind of doubt—insofar as it applies to all of reality (both concrete and

abstract)—is hyperbolic. However, given the doubt’s relationship to God (even if not God per se but a surrogate God—the evil demon), I think calling it theological is more informative, since it invokes Descartes’ founding motivations. I am less concerned with whether these alternate names respect Descartes’ proprieties than with the fact that they respect the literal implication of his argument.

- <sup>15</sup> Descartes, *Writings*, vol. II, 12; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 18.
- <sup>16</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 12; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 17.
- <sup>17</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 13; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 18.
- <sup>18</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 13; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 19.
- <sup>19</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 13; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 19–20.
- <sup>20</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 13–14; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 20.
- <sup>21</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 14; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 20.
- <sup>22</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 15–16; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 22, 24.
- <sup>23</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 17; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 25.
- <sup>24</sup> *Writings*, vol. I, 127 and 195; *Oeuvres*, vol. VI and VIII, 32, 7.
- <sup>25</sup> *Writings*, vol. I, 195; *Oeuvres*, vol. VIII, 7.
- <sup>26</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 18; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 27.
- <sup>27</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 19; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 29.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 59; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 86.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 21; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 31.
- <sup>32</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 20; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 30.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 22; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 34.
- <sup>35</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 20; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 31.
- <sup>36</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 54; *Oeuvres*, vol. VII, 78.
- <sup>37</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 201; *Oeuvres*, vol. VIII, 25.
- <sup>38</sup> R.S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks, trans. and eds., *Leibniz’s ‘New System’ and Associated Contemporary Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 23.
- <sup>39</sup> *Writings*, vol. II, 11; vol. VII, 15–16.
- <sup>40</sup> Jonathan Bennett, trans., “The Correspondence between Leibniz and Arnauld,” *Early Modern Texts* (2009): 60, [www.earlymoderntexts.com](http://www.earlymoderntexts.com).
- <sup>41</sup> Bennett, “Correspondence,” 60.
- <sup>42</sup> Bennett, “Correspondence,” 46–47.
- <sup>43</sup> Bennett, “Correspondence,” 47.
- <sup>44</sup> Some scholars of Leibniz provide similar readings of his philosophy’s underlying concerns with the mind-body relation. See, in particular, Donald Rutherford, “Mon-

ads, Matter, and Organisms” and “Corporeal Substance and the Union of Soul and Body,” *Leibniz and the Rational Order of Nature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 212–36, 265–88. Other critics, however, reject the idea that Leibniz’s philosophy is reducible to mind-body relations. See, for instance, Brandon Look, “On Monadic Domination in Leibniz’s Metaphysics,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10 no.3 (2002): 379–99. Look’s essay, however, while complicating Leibniz’s notion of the nature of the relationship between the mind and body—namely, by highlighting the distinction he makes in his later work between dominant and subordinate monads—still maintains that the mind’s ideality is the simplest and thereby, in Leibniz’s view, truest ground.

<sup>45</sup> Woolhouse and Francks, *New System*, 63.

<sup>46</sup> As we mentioned, in the “New System,” Leibniz supposes that “Every mind ... expresses the universe” (Woolhouse and Francks, *New System*, 15). Later, in his response to Bayle, he argues that “each monad is the universe in concentrated form” (Woolhouse and Francks, *New System*, 63). Indeed, the term “monad” takes the place of the term “mind.” The reason for this has to do with the anthropocentric connotations of the latter, which, according to Leibniz, the Cartesians wrongly presupposed. In the posthumously published *Monadology* (1710), Leibniz explains: “the Cartesian view is extremely defective, for it treats as non-existent those perceptions of which we are not consciously aware. This has also led them to believe that minds [*esprits*] alone are Monads” (Robert Latta, trans., *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings* (London: Oxford University Press, 1898), 224). Leibniz rejects this view in order to expand the domain of mental activity from the human mind to other creatures. The monad is the term he uses to indicate this expansion.

<sup>47</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E.M. Huggard (Illinois: Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1951), 136–37.

<sup>48</sup> Woolhouse and Francks, *New System*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 345.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 68, 74.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> Bennett, “Correspondence,” 20.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, 342.

<sup>56</sup> Donald Rutherford, “Leibniz and the Problem of Monadic Aggregation,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 76 (1994), 63–90 offers a wonderful explanation of this contradiction, its implications, and how contemporary scholars have either dismissed it (by insisting on Leibniz’s dismissal of the aggregate thesis (that everything is reducible to monads)) or resolved it (by stressing the properly phenomenological aspects of the aggregate thesis).

<sup>57</sup> An obvious example of a text which contradicts itself is one which features unreliable narration. Effective criticism entails that scholars be able both to recognise



such a type of narration and to declare consistently that it is such a type. If criticism were a mere matter of persuasion, then scholars would always be uncertain whether a narration was unreliable or not. Such uncertainty would then manifest itself in the form of endless debates, which, in the last instance, would be wholly without import.