

really—or, really means—A?” Sontag admonished, the critic of a work should “show it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than . . . show what it means.”” p10

*“Attention to surface as a practice of critical description.* This focus assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves; what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is already present in them. Description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful. The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself. Though we would not endorse Paul de Man’s insistence on the “void that separates” poetic intent from reality, we remain intrigued by his observation that poetry is the “foreknowledge” of criticism, and that the interpreter therefore “discloses poetry for what it is” and articulates “what was already there in full light.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Joel Fineman’s *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye* argued that the traditional questions for criticism of the sonnets are already questions in the sonnets themselves; there is no need for a critical metalanguage to explain the sonnets because, as Aaron Kunin has recently observed, “the poems provide the most accurate description of their own operations.”<sup>23</sup> Here, depth is not to be found outside the text or beneath its surface (as its context, horizon, unconscious, or history); rather, depth is continuous with surface and is thus an effect of immanence.” p11

“Surface as literal meaning. What Sharon Marcus has called “just reading” accounts for what is in the text “without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation.”<sup>26</sup>” p12

“If criticism is not the excavation of hidden truths, what can it add to our experience of texts? . . . These questions are especially urgent because many of our most powerful critical models see criticism as a practice of freedom by locating autonomy, self-reflexiveness, detachment, and liberatory potential either in the artwork itself or in the valiant labor of the critic.” p13

“To the extent that authors are associated with freedom, Jameson posits the critic as the real author; the critic does not literally produce the text but does produce whatever in it is related to truth. In this sense, Jameson is not only doing what E. D. Hirsch called usurping the place of the author (5); he is also more daringly associating the power of the critic with that of the God of biblical hermeneutics, who can transcend the blinkered point of view of humankind.” p15

“Where Augustine viewed God as the best author, Jameson sees the critic as the best author, and it is Jameson’s transcendent faith in his critical values that allows him to insist, contra the poststructuralist critics whom he debates in his first chapter, “On Interpretation,” that we must interpret texts and posit their meanings (58).” p15

“Surface reading, which strives to describe texts accurately, might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are. We want to reclaim from this tradition the accent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork as itself a kind of freedom.” p16

“As Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter” continues to teach us, what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it.” p18

“Latour reminds us that “the question was never to get away from facts but closer to them” (231) and notes that the critic “is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles” (246). We began this essay by asserting the distance we would like to take from the type of symptomatic reading we inherited from psychoanalysis and Marxism, but in concluding we note that the work of assembly and the desire for a more complete view of reality are also aims of both schools of thought, which is one reason they remain central to the critics whose works we have assembled here. We hope these reflections on the way we read now give us a clearer view of the past and open up fertile paths of inquiry in the future.” p19