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**When Not Communicating. The Critical Potential of the Literary Text and the Limits of Interpretation  
(Abstract)**

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Today, as announced by this special issue, the contest of interpretation against aesthetic experience appears urgent and timely. For surely a critical profession should clarify its sense of how to proceed before actually engaging to do so. But how are we to have any such sense in advance of an encounter with the literary text, ostensible object of the discipline? I argue that it is only within the limits of critique, as met with in the objectivity of the artwork, that we might be confident of our interpretations.

To paraphrase Hegel, literary interpretation misses an advantage enjoyed by the natural sciences (Hegel 1959, 33). Although recourse may be made to individual works of formal writing in »evidence« of a theory, still, no literary interpretation can presume its methods to be already accepted. Moreover, purely »systematic or theoretical« discussions of interpretation ring hollow when and, indeed, because they are empty of perceptible content. For the honest reader, the literary artwork remains sensibly resilient or resistant to, not to say frustrating of, systematic discussions – and this must be taken into account. As readers (rather than philosophers) of literature we are in luck, for even (or especially) without determining the meaning of a given work, we have before us something that remains »outside« of us. In sustaining his or her attention to this external object (and in coming to regard it as an »artwork«), and thus compelled to see the qualitative distance within and structuring experience, the reader finds that the text is more than just some thing or technical device to conceal meaning. It is what Adorno calls »the objectivity« of the artwork produced by the »movement of the mind« of the subject that, I argue, critiques the apparent choice of independent meaning or independent sensuousness as alternative bases for interpretive practice (Adorno 1983, 19). The literary work, as it becomes objective for its reader, becomes too a limit upon how that reader interprets it, that is, a limit upon the merely subjective.

The trouble with the question of whether to privilege the sensuousness or the meaning of art, is that it is framed as though this were still a choice to be made, as if the one could be isolated from, and be taken without concern for the other. Perhaps we cannot be reminded too often, as Claudia Brodsky reminds us, that not since the »first modern redefinition« of the »aesthetic« in Kant's Third Critique could »specific content« be »considered in isolation from form«. No more can the critical project be put back into the bottle, than the »dynamism« of form articulated through Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment be reduced once more to either static form or content. The consideration of »meaning« isolated from form must remain, alas, the advantage of the natural sciences. If, as Brodsky continues with Kant's definition, »dynamic, ›purposive‹ form causes our pleasure in the aesthetic«, then the consideration of sensory experience isolated from form »remains tied to [the] original, ancient meaning« of »aesthetic«, »that of pertaining to any sensory experience at all« (Brodsky 1997, 376). If subsequently it has come to seem as though the (external) »uncovering of meaning« and (internal) »aesthetic pleasure« are at incommunicable odds, we must recall that these two cannot be separated out from one another in the analysis of a perceptible object without the aesthetic disappearing entirely from view – for, by modern definition, the appearance of their mutual implication is what we mean when

we call something an »aesthetic« object. The clean, absolute break between subject and object implicit in the ancient definition is irreparably complicated by Kant's radical analysis of aesthetic perception and its implication that subjectivity and formal objecthood cannot be insulated, one from the other. Even when the ancient meaning of »aesthetic« is taken up in order to speak again of sensation as bracketed off from form, such considerations are not to our advantage as interpreters and critics of literature, but rather lead into other, more positive disciplines, having no purchase upon that doubling movement of the formal object and perceiving subject. The consequences of this critical redefinition for the practice of literary interpretation are still not settled, or even if theoretically settled, not yet absorbed into practice.

The editors of this special issue have proposed an impasse in, or crisis between aesthetics and interpretation as our subject today. Within the tradition of aesthetics as dynamic form or double movement sketched here between Kant and Adorno, I locate another radical tradition of interpretation, that of black aesthetic critique. With the particular sensory availability of visual art in mind, this essay considers not only James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), but also a work in another medium and separated by a long century in the political arc of black subjects in the United States, an untitled etching by the artist Glenn Ligon. With reference to discussions by Darby English (2005), Marie de Brugerolle (1995) and Andrea Miller-Keller (1992), this essay analyzes the ways in which Ligon's etching is irreducible to his political identity. For one of the most powerful effects of the visibly differentiated presence of Ligon's work is its ability to make us »see« that the intentional structure of an artwork, i.e. the interrelating of parts internal to itself, much like the fictively »autobiographical« structure of *ECM*, does not so much »communicate« or teach us about race in the United States, as use patterned abstraction to critique the impulse to turn to aesthetic objects to explicate social conditions, extract recognizable meanings, or ground political decisions. These works do not allow themselves to be read unproblematically as about black lives or as representative of black situations. Their »difficulty« inhibits any reading (whether called phenomenological or ontological) in which the difference of material and representation, or the difference of the representational and the representative is collapsed in an attempt to enjoy a clearer, less troubled (less literary) view *through* the perspective ostensibly afforded by the (black authored) work, as though it were a transparent »window« either onto the world or »into« the (black) subject. Furthermore, because each of these works self-consciously situate themselves within the troubled socio-history of black autobiography, black literacy, and presupposing racist ontologies, what I will describe as their *objectivity* upsets not only ontological accounts, but also those social fictions of race that, among other more lethal consequences, have interpreted and continue to interpret works such as these to be »representative« of black experience. Considering the canon of African American literature by closely examining selected texts containing critiques of that very category, I propose, as it were, a third way, one that heeds the artwork's own critique of interpretation and so helps us to move beyond the impasse suggested by the editors. The potential of the art object is critical. The aim of the analytic work in this current study is to restore to our encounter with these works the capacities for aesthetic attention and judgement occasioned by all »authentic« artworks, that is, works that do *not* conform to their audiences' expectations.

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