

Introduction

I

“WHAT DOES THE LITERARY INTERPRETER do? He tells us what a literary work means.” Thus says Monroe Beardsley,¹ who has written as thoughtfully and influentially on the subject as any philosopher in the past fifty years, and this is as good a place to start as any. Though there may well be ways of embodying interpretations that do not involve saying what something means (for example, reading a poem out loud), I shall follow Beardsley’s lead and concentrate on what interpreters *say*, on *interpretive remarks*. Consider some putative examples:

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “Henry Purcell” refers to a famous English composer.
2. The poem “Henry Purcell” expresses the wish that Purcell shall have had good fortune.
3. “Henry Purcell” is a Roman Catholic poem.

Though none of these remarks is explicitly framed in terms of the notion of *meaning*, there seems to be no difficulty in regarding them as making claims about different aspects of the meaning of the works they mention. Now some might object to the inclusion of (1) on this list, on the grounds that for there to be an interpretation, there must be a puzzle to solve or a difficulty to overcome, and this one is just too easy. Others, perhaps somewhat similarly motivated, might not even be all that happy with (2), thinking of interpretations as more global pronouncements about the ideology of the work as a whole, more on the lines of (3). Without trying to legislate the proper use of “interpret,” or claiming to analyze it, I want to focus attention primarily on remarks like (1) and (2), leaving remarks like (3) to take care of themselves. My reasons for this strategy are that the problems discussed in this book can, in general,

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be seen to arise most easily with simpler, more literal, more particularized and local cases, like (1) and (2), and, more important, that the discussion of these problems as they arise for examples more in the range of (3) is parasitic on discussion of the simpler cases. In general, questions about interpretation in the relatively banal sense suggested by Beardsley's characterization and exemplified by (1) and (2)—interpretation as, roughly, the attempt to understand reference and sense—will give us enough to be getting on with at first.

Interpretation, as exemplified by remarks like (1) and (2), is often usefully distinguished from *description* and from *evaluation*. Without necessarily endorsing this threefold distinction, and certainly without trying to explicate it or probe its boundaries, one might still provisionally suggest the extent of the domain of interpretation in this dimension by instancing clear cases of remarks about works of literature that fall outside that domain and in one of the others. A remark that seems to be paradigmatically descriptive, for example, is this:

4. The first line of "Henry Purcell" contains two occurrences of the word "have," two occurrences of the word "fallen," and three occurrences of the word "fair."

A remark that seems to be paradigmatically *evaluative* is this:

5. "Henry Purcell" is a great poem.

Much could be said about relations among these kinds of remarks. It seems plausible to suggest, for example, that description is logically prior to interpretation, which is, in turn, logically prior to evaluation. That is, what a literary work means is a function of £ among other things, what words it contains (but not vice versa), while its value is a function of £ among other things, what it means (but not vice versa). This is not to suggest that description is necessarily easy and unproblematic. Think of the difficulties of textual scholarship, which is just the attempt to establish what words occur how often and in what order in the work. Nor does the "order of knowing" necessarily replicate the logical order just suggested. It is not uncommon to conjecture that a text must go in a certain way on the grounds that it very likely had a certain meaning, and some have advocated making interpretive judgments on the grounds that a certain interpretation makes the work better. These issues deserve attention in themselves, but the focus of this book, insofar as possible, is mainly on the nature of interpretive remarks themselves, rather than on relations between them and other sorts of remarks.

II

We can get a further fix on our topic by observing that literature is, first, a *linguistic* phenomenon and, further, an artistic one—works of literature are linguistic works of art. The question of what it is to interpret a literary work may well be illuminated, then, by comparing that activity with others that come to the fore when one systematically varies the parameters of “linguisticity” and “artiness” in this description.

1. What can we learn about the interpretation of literary works by reflecting on the interpretation of nonlinguistic works of art, which comprises at least some of the activities of musical performers and conductors and the activities of critics of the visual arts. What, if anything, is special about interpreting works of *literary art*?
2. How is the interpretation of literary works of art to be compared with the interpretation of linguistic entities—texts or utterances—that make no claim to the status of art? How different is it in principle from the typically routine and everyday process of understanding what we read (newspapers, statutes, contracts, street signs, price tags) and hear (requests, greetings, promises, gossip)? What, if anything, is special about interpreting works of literary *art*?
3. What insights, if any, can we gain by reflecting on the interpretation of things that are neither works of art nor linguistic entities (diagrams, road signs, body language, dreams, clothing, cultural institutions and practices, archeological remains, geological formations)? Where does the interpretation of literary works of art fit into interpretation generally, even of nonlinguistic nonworks of art?

If one pursues the first line, stressing the connections among notions of interpretation spanning the various arts, one may be inclined to emphasize those aspects of literary interpretation that go beyond the mere unfolding of verbal meaning; one will perhaps see interpretation as having essentially to do with works of art in their “artiness,” and so understanding a poem by Wordsworth, performing a concerto by Mozart, and “reading” a painting by Brueghel can come to seem to have more in common with one another than any of these, even the first, has in common with reading the morning newspaper.

Those who pursue the second comparison, in contrast, may be more in-

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clined to see the issues primarily as issues in the philosophy of language, issues that arise about the ways in which we understand in general what people mean by what they say. They will perhaps not be especially impressed by the “literariness” of literature as a key to grasping what fundamentally goes on when we try to understand a poem, which is not to say that they must deny any important distinction between “A slumber did my spirit seal” and the day’s report on hog futures.

Finally, to the extent that one stresses the connections between literary interpretation and the understanding of the nonlinguistic and nonartistic, one will see it as but a small corner of an endeavor with wider scope even than the philosophy of language or the philosophy of art—a general theory of symbol systems, perhaps, or of semiosis.

III

Although these wider frameworks within which reflections on the interpretation of literature may be set (whether profitably or not) concern many of the writers who have contributed to this volume, what I would like to do here is to consider another philosophical context for these questions, a context that is, so to speak, orthogonal to the frameworks just outlined. This is a context that can only be described as metaphysical, for the arguments and rejoinders in the essays that follow inevitably entail or presuppose answers to fundamental questions in “first philosophy,” not just in the philosophy of language or the philosophy of art. I pose these questions in such a way that in general each question presupposes an answer to its predecessor. In this way it is possible to see some of the ways in which the questions interact, but I do not undertake to defend the answers presupposed, nor do I mean to suggest that later questions could not be reformulated to take account of different answers to the earlier questions than the answers I shall presuppose. (Yet, some of the disputes between the authors represented in this book are precisely over whether a particular answer to one of these questions does or does not entail a particular answer to another one.)

As I proceed through the questions, I try to situate the views of the authors of the previously published essays reprinted in the first part of the book—Hirsch, Beardsley, Margolis, Knapp and Michaels, and Shusterman—in the “space” thus provided. In this way the stage is set for the ensuing new essays by me, Carroll, Lyas, Krausz, Shusterman, Nathan, and Hermeren, and for Levinson’s concluding essay, which responds to these new essays as well as advancing the argument in its own right.

Can there be good reasons for interpretive remarks like (1) and (2) at the start of this

essay? Not everything that people say is subject to assessment by the standards of rationality; sometimes to ask people what their *reason* is for making a remark, as opposed to what *caused* them to make it, is inept. (I shall let the reader supply his or her own favorite example.) But (1) and (2) do not seem to be in this sense irrational remarks; it is natural to imagine either one of them as part of a conversation in which someone, on being asked what reason he or she had for the remark, would feel obliged to make a serious reply. All of our primary authors seem to agree on this point.

Are interpretive remarks like (1) and (2) statements with "truth-values?" Standards of rationality, though doubtless most often conceived of in terms of the rationality of *believing* some statement or proposition to be true, need not only be so conceived. Actions, requests, projects, hopes—these and many more may all be judged rational or irrational. If one finds such a “nonpropositional” construal of interpretive remarks attractive, a plausible alternative might involve thinking of them as *recommendations*—“Try reading the poem *this way*,” rather than “This is what the poem in fact means.” So a yes answer to the first question still leaves this new question open.

Margolis denies that interpretive remarks are straightforwardly true or false, but he argues that “truth-like” values (e.g., plausibility) attach to them.² It remains for Shusterman to insist that Margolis concedes too much to the (as he thinks) bankrupt idea of “an essential core of fixed, determinate, descriptive properties that constitute the work of art and are to be represented (even if augmented or extended) by valid interpretation”³ and to stake out an austere nonpropositional position, rejecting Margolis’s contention that one should not infer from the fact that interpretive remarks are not straightforwardly true or false that they “lack a propositional form.”⁴

Are the truth-values of interpretive statements like (1) and (2) determined solely by the state of the literary work they are about, or are they determined by relations between the work and something else? Supposing that we do not take the nonpropositional line and thus *do* attribute truth-values to interpretive remarks, one might still ask whether the states of affairs that would make these remarks true are relational or not. It is, of course, not always evident when a statement expresses a “relational fact.” When we say that someone is intelligent (at first sight a property rather than a relation), for example, we may really be saying that she or he is more intelligent than most of her or his peers (a complex relation). Philosophers who have defended “ideal observer” theories (of ethical properties, say, or of perceptual qualities) argue, in effect, that what appear to be properties of objects are really relations between them and observers. Those who, like Hirsch, insist that the author’s intention is determinative of the meaning of a

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literary work may be seen as claiming that the “fact” of meaning is relational in this way. On their view, one might say, the meaning that the interpreter seeks to grasp is a function of two variables, a text and an author. At least that is how Beardsley seems to interpret Hirsch when, in rejecting Hirsch’s intentionalism, he invokes as one of his axioms what he calls the “Principle of Autonomy”: “literary works are self-sufficient entities, whose properties are decisive in checking interpretations.”⁵

Do interpretive statements like (1) and (2) have “bivalent” truth-values, that is, must they be either true or false? Is it so, for each one, that it is definitely true or false, whichever the case may be, and apart from how hard it may be for anyone to come to know which it is? Is it so that for any interpretive judgment and its direct denial (say, “‘Henry Purcell’ expresses the wish that Purcell shall have had good fortune” and “‘Henry Purcell’ does not express the wish that Purcell shall have had good fortune”), one of them is true and the other false?

One way in which the answer might be no would be if meaning were not only relational in the sense just considered but were “relative” in an *individualistic* (or cultural) sense. Not only is the “quality” of deliciousness, for example, evidently relational, but there seems in addition to be no “standard” relation (e.g., of the object to an ideal observer) that grounds it. Deliciousness is *neither* a quality of an “autonomous” object *nor* a relation between a (heteronomous?) object and an ideal observer; it is, to speak loosely, a relation between an object and a *varying* observer.⁶ If interpretive remarks fit *this* model, of course, there would be no question of their having bivalent truth-values *simpliciter*. A literary work might have a certain meaning for me and not for you; the remark that it has (or does not have) that meaning (like the remark that someone is taller) would be neither true nor false until the other term of the relation were specified.

It is Margolis among our primary authors who is most insistent that interpretive remarks do not have bivalent truth-values, but it is not clear that his reasons are of the sort just adumbrated. His “Robust Relativism” seems rather to involve the more interesting claim that works of literature are “ontologically peculiar” in that they are *of their very nature indeterminate*, and that is why interpretive remarks about them need be neither true nor false. He argues that, like persons, artworks, words and sentences, and actions, they are “culturally emergent” entities, a status implying that their interpretation supports a “tolerance of alternative and seemingly contrary hypotheses.” In defending his view, furthermore, he insists that the rationality of interpretation can be preserved without determinateness (“to be ‘indeterminate’ with respect to truth and falsity is not to be epistemically indeterminate”);⁷ a yes answer to

our first question need not force our hand here, any more than it did with respect to the second and third questions.

The question whether or not a literary work is a “determinate” entity in this sense is one of the central questions of this volume, for the determinacy of meaning is one of the crucial premises of the Hirschian argument around which it revolves. That meaning is determinate (perhaps even that the notion of an entity of *any* sort that is not determinate is incoherent)⁸ is supposed by Hirsch and Beardsley both, and it is the chief point at which Margolis parts company with them.⁹

Determinateness, though, means more for Hirsch than what has so far been suggested. “Verbal meaning, then, is what it is and not something else, and it is always the same. That is what I mean by determinacy”¹⁰ Beardsley is equally clear that texts have “determinate meanings,”¹¹ though the defense of the *changelessness* of meaning is no part of his project, for one of his arguments against Hirsch depends on the assumption that the meaning of a text can change, and it may well be that what *he* calls determinate would be stigmatized by Hirsch as really only an *indeterminate* set of “possibilities.”¹²

Whether there is agreement between Hirsch and Beardsley sufficient to allay the suspicion that the crucial differences between them are located here, then, is not easy to say. It is important to note, though, that they would agree that the sort of determinateness for which they both contend is fully compatible with the possibility of ambiguity. A literary work that is in fact ambiguous has determinately *both* meanings in question. The interpretive statement saying it has them both is true, and the interpretive statement denying that it has both is false. The interpretive statement saying it has only one is false; the interpretive statement denying that it has only one is true. The interpretive statement saying it has at least one is true; the interpretive statement denying that it has at least one is false. And so on.

Do the bivalent truth-values of interpretive statements like (1) and (2) depend at least in part on the truth-values of statements about the intentions of the authors of the works those statements are about? Suppose we accept the determinacy of works of literature, then Hirsch’s argument, summarized in the following passage, is that this determinacy entails intentionalism.

A determinate verbal meaning requires a determining will. Meaning is not made determinate simply by virtue of its being represented by a determinate sequence of words. Obviously, any brief word sequence could represent quite different complexes of verbal meaning, and the same is true of long word sequences, though it is less

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obvious. If that were not so, competent and intelligent speakers of a language would not disagree as they do about the meaning of texts. But if a determinate word sequence does not in itself necessarily represent one, particular, self-identical, unchanging complex of meaning, then the determinacy of its verbal meaning must be accounted for by some other discriminating force which causes the meaning to be *this* instead of *that* or *that* or *that*, all of which it could be. That discriminating force must involve an act of will, since unless one particular complex of meaning is *willed* (no matter how “rich” and “various” it might be), there would be no distinction between what an author does mean by a word sequence and what he could mean by it. Determinacy of verbal meaning requires an act of will.¹³

Beardsley, of course, committed to at least some part of Hirsch’s determinacy thesis but firmly opposed to intentionalism, must insist that at least that part of determinacy he accepts does *not* have the intentionalist consequences Hirsch claims to discern in it.

Supposing that the inference from determinateness to intentionalism is at all plausible, however, then anyone tempted by it has to be careful to recognize that a yes answer to our question is still compatible with the admission that there may well be fallacious appeals to intention in interpretation—for example, the supposition that the work should be judged according to what the author intended as opposed to what he or she achieved or that the author, being an authority on his or her own intentions, is therefore necessarily correct about the truth or falsity of any interpretive statements about his or her work.

Furthermore, the defender of intentionalism undertakes a responsibility to the vast recent philosophical literature on intention that finds inspiration in the work of Wittgenstein. If it often seems that some objections to the invocation of intention in criticism depend on views of intentions as private mental events that might not survive Wittgensteinian criticism, it may also seem that the Hirschian invocation of intention is equally susceptible to this kind of objection.

Do the truth-values of interpretive statements like (1) and (2) depend only on the truth-value of statements about the intentions of the authors of the works they are about? Hirsch’s intentionalism recognizes the constraining power of language with respect to intention. It does not suppose with Humpty-Dumpty that when an author uses a word it means whatever he or she wants it to mean, and it thus aims to evade the force of a negative answer to Wittgenstein’s rhetorical question

“Can I say ‘bububu’ and mean ‘If it doesn’t rain I shall go for a walk’?”¹⁴ It sees the meaning of a literary work as a function of (at least) the capacities of the language in which it is written and the intentions of the author, a blending of convention and intention. It remains to Knapp and Michaels to argue against there being in *any* sense “a moment of interpretation”¹⁵ prior to intention and thus to defend an intentionalist position with respect to the meaning of works of literature even more extreme than Hirsch’s. What they say, that “the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author’s intended meaning,”¹⁶ does not sound very much different from what Hirsch says, that “a text means what its author meant,” but they really *mean* it!

The pursuit of these questions leads inevitably to some of the most difficult and disputed territory in philosophy. While avoiding the temptation to declare intellectual bankruptcy, we do well to remember William Gass’s remark that “in philosophy, you settle one bill only by neglecting another, a strategy which must eventually be seen to fail since all of them fall due at the same time.”¹⁷

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NOTES

1. See Chapter 2, pp. 24-25.
2. See Chapter 3, p. 44.
3. See Chapter 5, p. 72.
4. See Chapter 5, p. 69.
5. See Chapter 2, p. 24.
6. I am reminded of Bertrand Russell’s claim that the phrase “a man” denotes not many meri, but an ambiguous man.” See Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting,” in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1949), p. 103.
7. See Chapter 3, p. 48.
8. For an argument to this effect, see Gareth Evans, “Can There Be Vague Objects?” *Analysis* 38 (1978).
9. Interestingly enough, Margolis, while certainly not endorsing this point, recognizes the force of something very much like it. “The idea that something is both actual *and* indeterminate in structurally important respects (not concerned with vague boundaries or the like) verges on the incoherent or the ontologically monstrous.” See Joseph Margolis, “Aesthetic Interests and Aesthetic Qualities,”

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introduction to pt. I of *Philosophy Looks at the Arts: Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 9.

10. See Chapter 1, p. 16.

11. See Chapter 2, pp. 31-32.

12. See Chapter 1, p. 15.

13. See Chapter 1, p. 16.

14. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p.18.

15. See Chapter 4, p. 53.

16. See Chapter 4, p. 51.

17. William Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Boston:Godine, 1976), p.65.

E. D. HIRSCH, JR.

I

IT IS A TASK FOR the historian of culture to explain why there has been in the past four decades a heavy and largely victorious assault on the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant. In the earliest and most decisive wave of the attack (launched by Eliot, Pound, and their associates) the battleground was literary: the proposition that textual meaning is independent of the author's control was associated with the literary doctrine that the best poetry is impersonal, objective, and autonomous; that it leads an afterlife of its own, totally cut off from the life of its author.¹ This programmatic notion of what poetry should be became subtly identified with a notion of what all poetry and indeed all forms of literature necessarily must be. It was not simply desirable that literature should detach itself from the subjective realm of the author's personal thoughts and feelings; it was, rather, an indubitable fact that all written language remains independent of that subjective realm. At a slightly later period, and for different reasons, this same notion of semantic autonomy was advanced by Heidegger and his followers.² The idea also has been advocated by writers who believe with Jung that individual expressions may quite unwittingly express archetypal, communal meanings. In some branches of linguistics, particularly in so-called information theory, the semantic autonomy of language has been a working assumption. The theory has found another home in the work of non-Jungians who have interested themselves (as Eliot did earlier) in symbolism,

E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 1-6, 44-48, 224-30. Copyright © 1967 by Yale University. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

though Cassirer, whose name is sometimes invoked by such writers, did not believe in the semantic autonomy of language.³ As I said, it is the job of the cultural historian to explain why this doctrine should have gained currency in recent times, but it is the theorist's job to determine how far the theory of semantic autonomy deserves acceptance.

Literary scholars have often contended that the theory of authorial irrelevance was entirely beneficial to literary criticism and scholarship because it shifted the focus of discussion from the author to his work. Made confident by the theory, the modern critic has faithfully and closely examined the text to ferret out its independent meaning instead of its supposed significance to the author's life. That this shift toward exegesis has been desirable most critics would agree, whether or not they adhere to the theory of semantic autonomy. But the theory accompanied the exegetical movement for historical not logical reasons, since no logical necessity compels a critic to banish an author in order to analyze his text. Nevertheless, through its historical association with close exegesis, the theory has liberated much subtlety and intelligence. Unfortunately, it has also frequently encouraged willful arbitrariness and extravagance in academic criticism and has been one very important cause of the prevailing skepticism which calls into doubt the possibility of objectively valid interpretation. These disadvantages would be tolerable, of course, if the theory were true. In intellectual affairs skepticism is preferable to illusion.

The disadvantages of the theory could not have been easily predicted in the exciting days when the old order of academic criticism was being overthrown. At that time such naivetés as the positivistic biases of literary history, the casting about for influences and other causal patterns, and the post-romantic fascination with the habits, feelings, and experiences surrounding the act of composition were very justly brought under attack. It became increasingly obvious that the theoretical foundations of the old criticism were weak and inadequate. It cannot be said, therefore, that the theory of authorial irrelevance was inferior to the theories or quasi-theories it replaced, nor can it be doubted that the immediate effect of banishing the author was wholly beneficial and invigorating. Now, at a distance of several decades, the difficulties that attend the theory of semantic autonomy have clearly emerged and are responsible for that uneasiness which persists in the academies, although the theory has long been victorious.

That this state of academic skepticism and disarray results largely from the theory of authorial irrelevance is, I think, a fact of our recent intellectual history. For, once the author had been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text's meaning, it very gradually appeared that no adequate principle

existed for judging the validity of an interpretation. By an inner necessity the study of “what a text says” became the study of what it says to an individual critic. It became fashionable to talk about a critic’s “reading” of a text, and this word began to appear in the titles of scholarly works. The word seemed to imply that if the author had been banished, the critic still remained, and his new, original, urbane, ingenious, or relevant “reading” carried its own interest.

What had not been noticed in the earliest enthusiasm for going back to “what the text says” was that the text had to represent *somebody’s* meaning—if not the author’s, then the critic’s. It is true that a theory was erected under which the meaning of the text was equated with everything it could plausibly be taken to mean. (I have described in Appendix I the fallacies of this and other descriptions of meaning that were contrived to escape the difficulties of authorial irrelevance.)⁴ The theory of semantic autonomy forced itself into such unsatisfactory, ad hoc formulations because in its zeal to banish the author it ignored the fact that meaning is an affair of consciousness not of words. Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language, legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning.⁵ A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness. Whenever meaning is connected to words, a person is making the connection, and the particular meanings he lends to them are never the only legitimate ones under the norms and conventions of his language.

One proof that the conventions of language can sponsor different meanings from the same sequence of words resides in the fact that interpreters can and do disagree. When these disagreements occur, how are they to be resolved? Under the theory of semantic autonomy they cannot be resolved, since the meaning is not what the author meant, but “what the poem means to different sensitive readers.”⁶ One interpretation is as valid as another, so long as it is “sensitive” or “plausible.” Yet the teacher of literature who adheres to Eliot’s theory is also by profession the preserver of a heritage and the conveyor of knowledge. On what ground does he claim that his “reading” is more valid than that of any pupil? On no very firm ground. This impasse is a principal cause of the loss of bearings sometimes felt though not often confessed by academic critics.

One ad hoc theory that has been advanced to circumvent this chaotic democracy of “readings” deserves special mention here because it involves the problem of value, a problem that preoccupies some modern literary theo-

rists. The most valid reading of a text is the “best” reading.⁷ But even if we assumed that a critic did have access to the divine criteria by which he could determine the best reading, he would still be left with two equally compelling normative ideals—the best meaning and the author’s meaning. Moreover, if the best meaning were not the author’s, then it would have to be the critic’s—in which case the critic would be the author of the best meaning. Whenever meaning is attached to a sequence of words it is impossible to escape an author.

Thus, when critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place, and this led unerringly to some of our present-day theoretical confusions. Where before there had been but one author, there now arose a multiplicity of them, each carrying as much authority as the next. To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation. On the other hand, it might be the case that there does not really exist a viable normative ideal that governs the interpretation of texts. This would follow if any of the various arguments brought against the author were to hold. For if the meaning of a text is not the author’s, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to *the* meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning. My demonstration of this point will be found [in the following section].

II

Reproducibility is a quality of verbal meaning that makes interpretation possible: if meaning were not reproducible, it could not be actualized by someone else and therefore could not be understood or interpreted. Determinacy, on the other hand, is a quality of meaning required in order that there *be* something to reproduce. Determinacy is a necessary attribute of any sharable meaning, since an indeterminacy cannot be shared: if a meaning were indeterminate, it would have no boundaries, no self-identity and therefore could have no identity with a meaning entertained by someone else. But determinacy does not mean definiteness or precision. Undoubtedly, most verbal meanings are imprecise and ambiguous, and to call them such is to acknowledge their determinacy: they are what they are—namely, ambiguous and imprecise—and they are not univocal and precise. This is another way of saying that an ambiguous meaning has a boundary like any other verbal meaning, and that one of the frontiers on this boundary is that between ambiguity and univocality. Some parts of the boundary might, of course, be thick; that is, there might at some points be a good many submeanings that belonged

equally to the meaning and not to it-borderline meanings. However, such ambiguities would, on another level, simply serve to define the character of the meaning so that any overly imprecise construing of it would constitute a misunderstanding. Determinacy, then, first of all means self-identity. This is the minimum requirement for sharability. Without it neither communication nor validity in interpretation would be possible.

But by determinacy I also mean something more. Verbal meaning would be determinate in one sense even if it were merely a locus of possibilities—as some theorists have considered it. However, this is a kind of determinacy that cannot be shared in any act of understanding or interpretation. An array of *possible* meanings is no doubt a determinate entity in the sense that it is not an array of *actual* meanings; thus, it too has a boundary. But the human mind cannot entertain a possible meaning; as soon as the meaning is entertained it is actual. “In that case, then,” the proponent of such a view might argue, “let us consider the text to represent an array of different, actual meanings, corresponding to different actual interpretations.” But this escape from the frying pan leads right into the amorphous fire of indeterminacy. Such a conception really denies the self-identity of verbal meaning by suggesting that the meaning of the text can be one thing and also another, different thing, and also another; and this conception (which has nothing to do with the ambiguity of meaning) is simply a denial that the text means anything in particular. I have already shown that such an indeterminate meaning is not sharable. Whatever it may be, it is not verbal meaning nor anything that could be validly interpreted.

“Then,” says the advocate of rich variousness, “let us be more precise. What I really mean is that verbal meaning is historical or temporal. It is something in particular for a span of time. but it is something different in a different period of time.” Certainly the proponent of such a view cannot be reproached with the accusation that he makes verbal meaning indeterminate. On the contrary, he insists on the self-identity of meaning at any moment of time. But . . . this remarkable, quantum-leap theory of meaning has no foundation in the nature of linguistic acts nor does it provide any criterion of validity in interpretation. If a meaning can change its identity and in fact does, then we have no norm for judging whether we are encountering the real meaning in a changed form or some spurious meaning that is pretending to be the one we seek. Once it is admitted that a meaning can change its characteristics, then there is no way of finding the true Cinderella among all the contenders. There is no dependable glass slipper we can use as a test, since the old slipper will no longer fit the new Cinderella. To the interpreter this lack of a stable

normative principle is equivalent to the indeterminacy of meaning. As far as his interests go, the meaning could have been defined as indeterminate from the start, and his predicament would have been precisely the same.

When, therefore, I say that a verbal meaning is determinate, I mean that it is an entity which is self-identical. Furthermore, I also mean that it is an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next—that it is changeless. Indeed, these criteria were already implied in the requirement that verbal meaning be reproducible, that it be always the same in different acts of construing. Verbal meaning, then, is what it is and not something else, and it is always the same. That is what I mean by determinacy.

A determinate verbal meaning requires a determining will. Meaning is not made determinate simply by virtue of its being represented by a determinate sequence of words. Obviously, any brief word sequence could represent quite different complexes of verbal meaning, and the same is true of long word sequences, though it is less obvious. If that were not so, competent and intelligent speakers of a language would not disagree as they do about the meaning of texts. But if a determinate word sequence does not in itself necessarily represent one, particular, self-identical, unchanging complex of meaning, then the determinacy of its verbal meaning must be accounted for by some other discriminating force which causes the meaning to be *this* instead of *that* or *that* or *that*, all of which it could be. That discriminating force must involve an act of will, since unless one particular complex of meaning is *willed* (no matter how “rich” and “various” it might be), there would be no distinction between what an author does mean by a word sequence and what he could mean by it. Determinacy of verbal meaning requires an act of will.

It is sometimes said that “meaning is determined by context,” but this is a very loose way of speaking. It is true that the surrounding text or the situation in which a problematical word sequence is found tends to narrow the meaning probabilities for that particular word sequence; otherwise, interpretation would be hopeless. And it is a measure of stylistic excellence in an author that he should have managed to formulate a decisive context for any particular word sequence within his text. But this is certainly not to say that context determines verbal meaning. At best a context determines the guess of an interpreter (though his construction of the context may be wrong, and his guess correspondingly so). To speak of context as a determinant is to confuse an exigency of interpretation with an author’s determining acts. An author’s verbal meaning is limited by linguistic possibilities but is determined by his actualizing and specifying some of those possibilities. Correspondingly, the verbal meaning that an interpreter construes is determined by *his* act of will,

limited by those same possibilities. The fact that a particular context has led the interpreter to a particular choice does not change the fact that the determination is a choice, even when it is unthinking and automatic. Furthermore, a context is something that has itself been determined—first by an author and then, through a construction, by an interpreter. It is not something that is simply there without anybody having to make any determinations. . . .

III

I [have] defined textual meaning as the verbal intention of the author, and this argues implicitly that hermeneutics must stress a reconstruction of the author's aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for constructing the meaning of his text. It is frequently argued, however, that textual meaning has nothing to do with the author's mind but only with his verbal achievement, that the object of interpretation is not the author but his text. This plausible argument assumes, of course, that the text automatically has a meaning simply because it represents an unalterable sequence of words. It assumes that the meaning of a word sequence is directly imposed by the public norms of language, that the text as a "piece of language" is a public object whose character is defined by public norms.⁸ This view is in one respect sound, since textual meaning must conform to public norms if it is in any sense to be verbal (i.e., sharable) meaning; on no account may the interpreter permit his probing into the author's mind to raise private associations (experience) to the level of public implications (content).

However, this basically sound argument remains one-sided, for even though verbal meaning must conform to public linguistic norms (these are highly tolerant, of course), no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone. Referred to these alone, the text's meaning remains indeterminate. This is true even of the simplest declarative sentence like "My car ran out of gas" (did my Pullman dash from a cloud of Argon?). The fact that no one would radically misinterpret such a sentence simply indicates that its frequency is high enough to give its usual meaning the apparent status of an immediate given. But this apparent immediacy obscures a complex process of adjudications among meaning possibilities. Under the public norms of language alone no such adjudications can occur, since the array of possibilities presents a face of blank indifference. The array of possibilities only begins to become a more selective system of *probabilities* when, instead of confronting merely a word sequence, we also posit a speaker who very likely means something. Then and only then does the most usual sense of the word sequence become the most probable or "obvious"

sense. The point holds true a fortiori, of course, when we confront less obvious word sequences like those found in poetry. A careful exposition of this point may be found in the first volume of Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, which is largely devoted to a demonstration that verbal meaning arises from the "reciprocal determination" of public linguistic possibilities and subjective specifications of those possibilities.⁹ Just as language constitutes and colors subjectivity, so does subjectivity color language. The author's or speaker's subjective act is formally necessary to verbal meaning, and any theory which tries to dispense with the author as specifier of meaning by asserting that textual meaning is purely objectively determined finds itself chasing will-o'-the-wisps. The burden of this section is, then, an attack on the view that a text is a "piece of language" and a defense of the notion that a text represents the determinate verbal meaning of an author.

One of the consequences arising from the view that a text is a piece of language—a purely public object—is the impossibility of defining in principle the nature of a correct interpretation. This is the same impasse which results from the theory that a text leads a life of its own, and, indeed, the two notions are corollaries, since any "piece of language" must have a changing meaning when the changing public norms of language are viewed as the only ones which determine the sense of the text. It is therefore not surprising to find that Wellek subscribes implicitly to the text-as-language theory. The text is viewed as representing not a determinate meaning, but rather a system of meaning potentials specified not by a meaner but by the vital potency of language itself. Wellek acutely perceives the danger of the view:

Thus the system of norms is growing and changing and will remain, in some sense, always incompletely and imperfectly realized. But this dynamic conception does not mean mere subjectivism and relativism. All the different points of view are by no means equally right. It will always be possible to determine which point of view grasps the subject most thoroughly and deeply. A hierarchy of viewpoints, a criticism of the grasp of norms, is implied in the concept of the adequacy of interpretation.¹⁰

The danger of the view is, of course, precisely that it opens the door to subjectivism and relativism, since linguistic norms may be invoked to support any verbally possible meaning. Furthermore, it is not clear how one may criticize a grasp of norms which will not stand still.

Wellek's brief comment on the problem involved in defining and testing correctness in interpretation is representative of a widespread conviction

among literary critics that the most correct interpretation is the most “inclusive” one. Indeed, the view is so widely accepted that Wellek did not need to defend his version of it (which he calls “Perspectivism”) at length. The notion behind the theory is reflected by such phrases as “always incompletely and imperfectly realized” and “grasps the subject most thoroughly.” This notion is simply that no single interpretation can exhaust the rich system of meaning potentialities represented by the text. Hence, every plausible reading which remains within public linguistic norms is a correct reading so far as it goes, but each reading is inevitably partial since it cannot realize all the potentialities of the text. The guiding principle in criticism, therefore, is that of the inclusive interpretation. The most “adequate” construction is the one which gives the fullest coherent account of all the text’s potential meanings.¹¹

Inclusivism is desirable as a position which induces a readiness to consider the results of others, but, aside from promoting an estimable tolerance, it has little theoretical value. Although its aim is to reconcile different plausible readings in an ideal, comprehensive interpretation, it cannot, in fact, either reconcile different readings or choose between them. As a normative ideal, or principle of correctness, it is useless. This point may be illustrated by citing two expert readings of a well-known poem by Wordsworth. I shall first quote the poem and then quote excerpts from two published exegeses to demonstrate the kind of impasses which inclusivism always provokes when it attempts to reconcile interpretations and, incidentally, to demonstrate the very kind of interpretive problem which calls for a guiding principle:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

Here are excerpts from two commentaries on the final lines of the poem; the first is by Cleanth Brooks, the second by F.W. Bateson:

[The poet] attempts to suggest something of the lover’s agonized shock at the loved one’s present lack of motion—of his response to her utter and horrible inertness. . . . Part of the effect, of course, resides in the fact that a dead lifelessness is suggested more sharply by

an object's being whirled about by something else than by an image of the object in repose. But there are other matters which are at work here: the sense of the girl's falling back into the clutter of things, companioned by things chained like a tree to one particular spot, or by things completely inanimate like rocks and stones. . . . [She] is caught up helplessly into the empty whirl of the earth which measures and makes time. She is touched by and held by earthly time in its most powerful and horrible image.

The final impression the poem leaves is not of two contrasting moods, but of a single mood mounting to a climax in the pantheistic magnificence of the last two lines. . . . The vague living-Lucy of this poem is opposed to the grander dead-Lucy who has become involved in the sublime processes of nature. We put the poem down satisfied, because its last two lines succeed in effecting a reconciliation between the two philosophies or social attitudes. Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now a part of the life of Nature and not just a human "thing."¹²

If we grant, as I think we must, that both the cited interpretations are permitted by the text, the problem for the inclusivist is to reconcile the two readings.

Three modes of reconciliation are available to the inclusivist:

1. Brooks's reading includes Bateson's; it shows that any affirmative suggestions in the poem are negated by the bitterly ironical portrayal of the inert girl being whirled around by what Bateson calls the "sublime processes of Nature."
2. Bateson's reading includes Brooks's; the ironic contrast between the active, seemingly immortal girl and the passive, inert, dead girl is overcome by a final unqualified affirmation of immortality.
3. Each of the readings is partially right, but they must be fused to supplement one another.

The very fact that the critics differ suggests that the meaning is essentially ambiguous. The emotion expressed is ambivalent and comprises both bitter regret and affirmation. The third mode of reconciliation is the one most often employed and is probably, in this case, the most satisfactory. A fourth type of resolution, which would insist that Brooks is right and Bateson wrong (or vice versa), is not available to the inclusivist, since the text, as language, renders both readings plausible.