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OBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION

By E. D. HIRSCH, JR.

THE FACT that the term "criticism" has now come to designate all commentary on textual meaning reflects a general acceptance of the doctrine that description and evaluation are inseparable in literary study. In any serious confrontation of literature it would be futile, of course, to attempt a rigorous banishment of all evaluative judgment, but this fact does not give us the license to misunderstand or misinterpret our texts. It does not entitle us to use the text as the basis for an exercise in "creativity" or to submit as serious textual commentary a disguised argument for a particular ethical, cultural, or aesthetic viewpoint. Nor is criticism's chief concern—the present relevance of a text—a strictly necessary aspect of textual commentary. That same kind of theory which argues the inseparability of description and evaluation also argues that a text's meaning is simply its meaning "to us, today." Both kinds of argument support the idea that interpretation is criticism and vice versa. But there is clearly a sense in which we can neither evaluate a text nor determine what it means "to us, today" until we have correctly apprehended what it means. Understanding (and therefore interpretation, in the strict sense of the word) is both logically and psychologically prior to what is generally called criticism. It is true that this distinction between understanding and evaluation cannot always show itself in the finished work of criticism—nor, perhaps, should it—but a general grasp and acceptance of the distinction might help correct some of the most serious faults of current criticism (its subjectivism and relativism) and might even make it plausible to think of literary study as a corporate enterprise and a progressive discipline.

No one would deny, of course, that the more important issue is not the status of literary study as a discipline but the vitality of literature—especially of older literature—in the world at large. The critic is right to think that the text should speak to *us*. The point which needs to be grasped clearly by the critic is that a text cannot be made to speak to us until what it says has been understood. This is not an argument in favor of historicism as against criticism—it is simply a brute ontological fact. Textual meaning is not a naked given like a physical object. The text is first of all a conventional representation like a musical score, and what the score repre-

sents may be construed correctly or incorrectly. The literary text (in spite of the semi-mystical claims made for its uniqueness) does not have a special ontological status which somehow absolves the reader from the demands universally imposed by all linguistic texts of every description. Nothing, that is, can give a conventional representation the status of an immediate given. The text of a poem, for example, has to be construed by the critic before it becomes a poem for him. Then it is, no doubt, an artifact with special characteristics. But before the critic construes the poem it is for him no artifact at all, and if he construes it wrongly, he will subsequently be talking about the wrong artifact, not the one represented by the text. If criticism is to be objective in any significant sense, it must be founded on a self-critical construction of textual meaning, which is to say, on objective interpretation.

The distinction I am drawing between interpretation and criticism was one of the central principles in the now vestigial science of hermeneutics. August Boeckh, for example, divided the theoretical part of his *Encyklopädie* into two sections, one devoted to *Interpretation (Hermeneutik)* and the other to *Kritik*. Boeckh's discussion of this distinction is illuminating: interpretation is the construction of textual meaning as such; it explicates (*legt aus*) those meanings, and only those meanings, which the text explicitly or implicitly represents. Criticism, on the other hand, builds on the results of interpretation; it confronts textual meaning not as such, but as a component within a larger context. Boeckh defined it as "that philological function through which a text is understood not simply in its own terms and for its own sake, but in order to establish a relationship with something else, in such a way that the goal is a knowledge of this relationship itself."¹ Boeckh's definition is useful in emphasizing that interpretation and criticism confront two quite distinct "objects," for this is the fundamental distinction between the two activities. The object of interpretation is textual meaning in and for itself and may be called the *meaning* of the text. The object of criticism, on the other hand, is that meaning in its bearing on something else (standards of value, present

¹ August Boeckh, *Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, ed. E. Bratuscheck, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1886), p. 170.

concerns, etc.) and this object may therefore be called the *relevance* of the text.

The distinction between the meaning and the relevance of a text was first clearly made by Frege in his article "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," where he demonstrated that although the meanings of two "texts" may be different, their referent or truth-value may be identical.² For example, the statement, "Scott is the author of *Waverley*" is true and yet the meaning of "Scott" is different from that of "the author of *Waverley*." The *Sinn* of each is different, but the *Bedeutung* (or one aspect of *Bedeutung*—the designatum of "Scott" and "author of *Waverley*") is the same. Frege considered only cases where different *Sinne* have an identical *Bedeutung*, but it is also true that the same *Sinn* may, in the course of time, have different *Bedeutungen*. For example, the sentence, "There is a unicorn in the garden," is *prima facie* false. But suppose the statement were made when there *was* a unicorn in the garden (as happened in Thurber's imaginative world); the statement would be true; its relevance would have shifted. But true or false, the meaning of the proposition would remain the same; for unless its *meaning* remained self-identical we would have nothing to label true or false. Frege's distinction, now widely accepted by logicians, is a special case of Husserl's general distinction between the inner and outer horizons of any meaning. In my first section I shall try to clarify Husserl's concept and to show how it applies to the problems of textual study, and especially to the basic assumptions of textual interpretation.

My purpose is primarily constructive rather than polemical. I would not willingly argue that interpretation should be practiced in strict separation from criticism. I shall ignore criticism simply in order to confront the special problems involved in construing the meaning or *Sinn* of a text. For most of my notions I disclaim any originality. My aim is to revive some forgotten insights of literary study and to apply to the theory of interpretation certain other insights from linguistics and philosophy. For although the analytical movement in criticism has permanently advanced the cause of intrinsic literary study, it has not yet paid enough attention to the problem of establishing norms and limits in interpretation. If I display any argumentative intent, it is not, therefore, against the analytical movement, which I approve, but only against certain modern theories which hamper the establishment of normative principles in interpretation and which thereby encourage the

subjectivism and individualism which have for many students discredited the analytical movement. By normative principles I mean those notions which concern the nature of a correct interpretation. When the critic clearly conceives what a correct interpretation is in principle, he possesses a guiding idea against which he can measure his construction. Without such a guiding idea, self-critical or objective interpretation is hardly possible. Current theory, however, fails to provide such a principle. The most influential and representative statement of modern theory is *Theory of Literature* by Wellek and Warren, a book to which I owe much. I ungratefully select it (especially Ch. XII) as a target of attack, both because it is so influential and because I need a specific, concrete example of the sort of theory which requires amendment.³

I. The Two Horizons of Textual Meaning

The metaphorical doctrine that a text leads a life of its own is used by modern theorists to express the idea that textual meaning changes in the course of time.⁴ This theory of a changing meaning serves to support the fusion of interpretation and criticism, and, at the same time, the idea that present relevance forms the basis for textual commentary. But the view should not remain unchallenged, since if it were correct there could be no objective knowledge about texts. Any statement about textual meaning could be valid only for the moment, and even this temporary validity could not be tested, since there would be no permanent norms on which validating judgments could be based. While the "life" theory does serve to explain and sanction the fact that different ages tend to interpret texts differently, and while it emphasizes the importance of a text's present relevance, it overlooks the fact that such a view undercuts *all* criticism, even the sort which emphasizes present relevance. If the view were correct, criticism would not only lack permanent validity, it could not even claim current validity by the time it got into print. Both the text's meaning and the tenor of the age would have altered. The "life" theory really masks the idea that the reader construes his own, new meaning instead of that represented by the text.

² Gottlob Frege, "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 100, 1892. The article has been translated, and one English version may be found in: H. Feigl and W. Sellars, *Readings in Philosophical Analysis* (New York, 1949).

³ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1956), Ch. XII. This chapter is by Wellek.

⁴ See, for example, *Theory of Literature*, p. 31.

The "life" theory thus implicitly places the principle of change squarely where it belongs, that is, not in textual meaning as such but in changing generations of readers. According to Wellek, for example, the meaning of the text changes as it passes "through the minds of its readers, critics, and fellow artists."⁵ Now when even a few of the norms which determine a text's meaning are allotted to readers, and made dependent on their attitudes and concerns, it is evident that textual meaning must change. But is it proper to make textual meaning dependent upon the reader's own cultural givens? It may be granted that these givens change in the course of time, but does this imply that textual meaning itself changes? As soon as the reader's outlook is permitted to determine what a text means, we have not simply a changing meaning but quite possibly as many meanings as readers.

Against such a *reductio ad absurdum*, the proponent of the current theory points out that in a given age many readers will agree in their construction of a text and will unanimously repudiate the accepted interpretation of a former age. For the sake of fair-mindedness, this presumed unanimity may be granted, but must it be explained by arguing that the text's meaning has changed? Recalling Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, the change could be explained by saying that the meaning of the text has remained the same, while the relevance of that meaning has shifted.⁶ Contemporary readers will frequently share similar cultural givens and will therefore agree about what the text means to them. But might it not be the case that they agree about the text's meaning "to them" because they have first understood its meaning? If textual meaning itself could change, contemporary readers would lack a basis for agreement or disagreement. No one would bother seriously to discuss such a protean object. The relevance of textual meaning has no foundation and no objectivity unless meaning itself is unchanging. To fuse meaning and relevance, or interpretation and criticism, by the conception of an autonomous, living, changing meaning, does not really free the reader from the shackles of historicism; it simply destroys the basis both for any agreement among readers and for any objective study whatever.

The dilemma created by the fusion of *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* in current theory is exhibited as soon as the theorist attempts to explain how norms can be preserved in textual study. The explanation becomes openly self-contradictory: "It could be scarcely denied that there is [in

textual meaning] a substantial *identity* of 'structure' which has remained the *same* throughout the ages. This *structure*, however, is dynamic: it *changes* throughout the process of history while passing through the minds of its readers, critics, and fellow artists."⁷ First the "structure" is self-identical; then it changes! What is given in one breath is taken away in the next. Although it is a matter of common experience that a text appears different to us than it appeared to a former age, and although we remain deeply convinced that there *are* permanent norms in textual study, we cannot properly explain the facts by equating or fusing what changes with what remains the same. We must distinguish the two and give each its due.

A couplet from Marvell, used by Wellek to suggest how meaning changes, will illustrate my point:⁸

My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires and more slow.

Wellek grants that "vegetable" here probably means more or less what we should nowadays express by "vegetative," but he goes on to suggest that we cannot avoid associating the modern connotation of "vegetable" (what it means "to us"). Furthermore, he suggests that this enrichment of meaning may even be desirable. No doubt, the associated meaning *is* here desirable (since it supports the mood of the poem), but Wellek could not even make his point unless we could distinguish between what "vegetable" probably means as used in the text, and what it commonly means to us. Simply to discuss the issue is to admit that Marvell's poem probably does not imply the modern connotation, since if we could not separate the sense of "vegetative" from the notion of an "erotic cabbage," we could not talk about the difficulty of making the separation. One need not argue that the delight we may take in such new meanings must be ignored. On the contrary, once we have self-critically understood the text, there is little reason to exclude valuable or pleasant associations which enhance its relevance. But it is essential to exclude these associations in the process of interpretation, in the process, that is, of understanding what a text means. The way out of the theoretical dilemma is to perceive that the meaning of a

⁵ *Theory of Literature*, p. 144.

⁶ It could also be explained, of course, by saying that certain generations of readers tend to misunderstand certain texts.

⁷ *Theory of Literature*, p. 144. My italics.

⁸ *Theory of Literature*, pp. 166-167.

text does not change, and that the modern, different connotation of a word like "vegetable" belongs, if it is to be entertained at all, to the constantly changing relevance of a text's meaning.

It is in the light of the distinction between meaning and relevance that critical theories like T. S. Eliot's need to be viewed.⁹ Eliot, like other modern critics, insists that the meaning of a literary work changes in the course of time, but, in contrast to Wellek, instead of locating the principle of change directly in the changing outlooks of readers, Eliot locates it in a changing literary tradition. In his view, the literary tradition is a "simultaneous" (as opposed to temporal) order of literary texts which is constantly rearranging itself as new literary works appear on the public scene. Whenever a new work appears it causes a rearrangement of the tradition as a whole, and this brings about an alteration in the meaning of each component literary text. When Shakespeare's *Troilus*, for example, entered the tradition, it altered the meaning not only of Chaucer's *Troilus*, but also, to some degree, the meaning of every other text in the literary tradition.

If the changes in meaning Eliot speaks of are considered to be changes in relevance, then his conception is perfectly sound. And indeed, by definition, Eliot is speaking of relevance rather than meaning, since he is considering the work in relation to a larger realm, as a component rather than a world in itself. It goes without saying that the character of a component considered as such changes whenever the larger realm of which it is a part changes. A red object will appear to have different color qualities when viewed against differently colored backgrounds. The same is true of textual meaning. But the meaning of the text (its *Sinn*) does not change any more than the hue and saturation of the red object changes when seen against different backgrounds. Yet the analogy with colored objects is only partial: I can look at a red pencil against a green blotting pad and perceive the pencil's color in that special context without knowing the hue and saturation of either pencil or blotter. But textual meaning is a construction, not a naked given like a red object, and I cannot relate textual meaning to a larger realm until I have construed it. Before I can judge just how the changed tradition has altered the relevance of a text, I must understand its meaning or *Sinn*.

This permanent meaning is, and can be, nothing other than the author's meaning. There have been, of course, several other definitions of tex-

tual meaning: what the author's contemporaries would ideally have construed, what the ideal present-day reader construes, what the norms of language permit the text to mean, what the best critics conceive to be the best meaning, and so on. In support of these other candidates, various aesthetic and psychological objections have been aimed at the author: first, his meaning, being conditioned by history and culture, is too confined and simple; second, it remains, in any case, inaccessible to us because we live in another age, or because his mental processes are private, or because he himself did not know what he meant. Instead of attempting to meet each of these objections separately, I shall attempt to describe the general principle for answering all of them, and in doing so, to clarify further the distinction between meaning and relevance. The aim of my exposition will be to confirm that the author's meaning, as represented by his text, is unchanging and reproducible. My problem will be to show that although textual meaning is *determined* by the psychic acts of an author, and realized by those of a reader, textual meaning itself must not be *identified* with the author's or reader's psychic acts as such. To make this crucial point, I shall find it useful to draw upon Husserl's analysis of verbal meaning.

In his chief work, *Logische Untersuchungen*, Husserl sought, among other things, to avoid an identification of verbal meaning with the psychic acts of speaker or listener, author or reader, but to do this he did not adopt a strict, Platonic idealism by which meanings have an actual existence apart from meaning-experiences. Instead, he affirmed the objectivity of meaning by analyzing the observable relationship between it and those very mental processes in which it is actualized. For in meaning-experiences themselves the objectivity and constancy of meaning are confirmed.

Husserl's point may be grasped by an example from visual experience.¹⁰ When I look at a box, then close my eyes, and then re-open them, I can perceive in this second view the identical box I

⁹ T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (New York, 1932).

¹⁰ Most of my illustrations in this section are visual rather than verbal since the former may be more easily grasped. If, at this stage, I were to choose verbal examples I would have to interpret the examples before making my point. I discuss a literary text in the second and third sections. The example of a box was suggested to me by Helmut Kuhn, "The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon,'" in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (Cambridge, Mass., 1940).

saw before. Yet, although I perceive the same box, the two acts of seeing are distinctly different—in this case temporally different. The same sort of result is obtained when I alter my acts of seeing spatially. If I go to another side of the room, or stand on a chair, what I actually “see” alters with my change in perspective, and yet I still “perceive” the identical box; I still understand that the *object* of my seeing is the same. Furthermore, if I leave the room, and simply recall the box in memory, I still understand that the *object* I remember is identical with the object I saw. For if I did not understand that, how could I insist that I was remembering? The examples are paradigmatic: All events of consciousness, not simply those involving visual perception and memory, are characterized by the mind’s ability to make modally and temporally different *acts* of awareness refer to the same *object* of awareness. An object for the mind remains the same even though what is “going on in the mind” is not the same. The mind’s “object” therefore may not be equated with psychic processes as such; the mental object is self-identical over against a plurality of mental acts.¹¹

The relation between an act of awareness and its object Husserl calls “intention,” using the term in its traditional philosophical sense, which is much broader than that of “purpose” and is roughly equivalent to “awareness.” (When I employ the word subsequently, I shall be using it in Husserl’s sense.)¹² This term is useful for distinguishing the components of a meaning-experience. For example, when I “intend” a box, there are at least three distinguishable aspects of that event. First, there is the object as perceived by me, second, there is the act by which I perceive the object, and finally there is (for physical things) the object which exists independently of my perceptual act. The first two aspects of the event Husserl calls “intentional object” and “intentional act” respectively. Husserl’s point, then, is that *different* “intentional acts” (on different occasions) “intend” an *identical* “intentional object.”

The general term for all “intentional objects” is meaning. Verbal meaning is simply a special kind of “intentional object,” and like any other one, it remains self-identical over against the many different acts which “intend” it. But the noteworthy feature of verbal meaning is its supra-personal character. It is not an “intentional object” for simply one person, but for many—potentially for all persons. Verbal meaning is, by definition, *that aspect of a speaker’s “intention” which, under linguistic conventions, may be shared*

by others. Anything not sharable in this sense does not belong to the *verbal* “intention” or verbal meaning. Thus, when I say, “The air is crisp,” I may be thinking, among other things, “I should have eaten less at supper,” and “Crisp air reminds me of my childhood in Vermont,” and so on. In certain types of utterance such unspoken accompaniments to meaning may be sharable, but in general they are not, and they do not, therefore, generally belong to verbal meaning. The non-verbal aspects of the speaker’s “intention” Husserl calls “experience” and the verbal ones “content.” However, by “content” he does not mean simply “intellectual content” but all those aspects of the “intention,” cognitive, emotive, phonetic (and in writing, even visual) which may be conveyed to others by the linguistic means employed.¹³

Husserl’s analysis (in my brief exposition) makes, then, the following points: 1) Verbal meaning, being an “intentional object,” is unchanging, that is, it may be reproduced by different “intentional acts,” and remains self-identical through all these reproductions. 2) Verbal meaning is the sharable “content” of the *speaker’s* “intentional object.” 3) Since this meaning is both unchanging and interpersonal, it may be reproduced by the mental acts of different persons. Husserl’s view is thus essentially historical, for even though he insists that verbal meaning is unchanging, he also insists that any particular verbal utterance, written or spoken, is historically determined. That is to say, the meaning is determined once and for all by the character of the speaker’s “intention.”¹⁴

Husserl’s views provide an excellent context for discussing the central problems of interpretation. For once we define verbal meaning as the “content” of the author’s “intention” (which for

¹¹ See Aaron Gurwitsch, “On the Intentionality of Consciousness,” in *Philosophical Essays*, ed. cit.

¹² Although Husserl’s term is a standard philosophical one for which there is no adequate substitute, students of literature may unwittingly associate it with the intentional fallacy. The two uses of the word are, however, quite distinct. As used by literary critics the term refers to a purpose which may or may not be realized by a writer. As used by Husserl the term refers to a process of consciousness. Thus in the literary usage, which involves problems of rhetoric, it is possible to speak of an unfulfilled intention, while in Husserl’s usage such a locution would be meaningless. In order to call attention to the fact that I use the word in Husserl’s sense, I have consistently placed inverted commas around it—an awkward procedure which may avert misunderstanding.

¹³ Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen. Zweiter Band. Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis. I Teil*, 2nd ed. (Halle, 1913), pp. 96–97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

brevity's sake I shall call simply the author's "verbal intention"), the problem for the interpreter is quite clear: he must distinguish those meanings which belong to that "verbal intention" from those which do not belong. This problem may be rephrased, of course, in a way that nearly everyone will accept: the interpreter has to distinguish what a text implies from what it does not imply; he must give the text its full due, but he must also preserve norms and limits. For hermeneutic theory, the problem is to find a *principle* for judging whether various possible implications should or should not be admitted.

I describe the problem in terms of implication, since, for practical purposes, it lies at the heart of the matter. Generally, the explicit meanings of a text can be construed to the satisfaction of most readers; the problems arise in determining implicit or "unsaid" meanings. If, for example, I announce, "I have a headache," there is no difficulty in construing what I "say," but there may be great difficulty in construing implications like "I desire sympathy," "I have a right not to engage in distasteful work." Such implications may belong to my verbal meaning, or they may not belong. This is usually the area where the interpreter needs a guiding principle.

It is often said that implications must be determined by referring to the "context" of the utterance, which, for ordinary statements like "I have a headache," means the concrete situation in which the utterance occurs. In the case of written texts, however, "context" generally means "verbal context": the explicit meanings which surround the problematical passage. But these explicit meanings alone do not exhaust what we mean by "context" when we educe implications. The surrounding explicit meanings provide us with a sense of the whole meaning, and it is from this sense of the whole that we decide what the problematical passage implies. For we do not ask simply, "Does this implication belong with these other, explicit meanings?" but rather, "does this implication belong with these other meanings *within a particular sort of total meaning?*" For example, we cannot determine whether "root" belongs with or implies "bark" unless we know that the total meaning is "tree" and not "grass." The ground for educing implications is a sense of the whole meaning, and this is an indispensable aspect of what we mean by "context."

Previously I defined the whole meaning of an utterance as the author's "verbal intention." Does this mean that the principle for admitting or excluding implications must be to ask, "Did

the author have in mind such an implication?" If that is the principle, all hope for objective interpretation must be abandoned, since in most cases it is impossible (even for the author himself) to determine precisely what he was thinking of at the time or times he composed his text. But this is clearly not the correct principle. When I say, "I have a headache," I may indeed imply "I would like some sympathy," and yet I might not have been explicitly conscious of such an implication. The first step, then, in discovering a principle for admitting and excluding implications is to perceive the fundamental distinction between the author's "verbal intention" and the meanings of which he was explicitly conscious. Here again, Husserl's rejection of psychologism is useful. The author's "verbal intention" (his total verbal meaning) may be likened to my "intention" of a box. Normally, when I perceive a box, I am explicitly conscious of only three sides, and yet I assert with full confidence (although I might be wrong) that I "intend" a box, an object with *six* sides. Those three *unseen* sides belong to my "intention," in precisely the same way that the "unconscious" implications of an utterance belong to the author's "intention." They belong to the "intention" taken as a whole.

Most if not all meaning-experiences or "intentions" are occasions in which the whole meaning is not explicitly present to consciousness. But how are we to define the manner in which these "unconscious" meanings are implicitly present? In Husserl's analysis, they are present in the form of a "horizon," which may be defined as a system of typical expectations and probabilities.¹⁵ "Horizon" is thus an essential aspect of what we usually call "context." It is an inexplicit sense of the whole, derived from the explicit meanings present to consciousness. Thus, my view of three surfaces, presented in a familiar and typically box-like way, has a horizon of typical continuations; or, to put it another way, my "intention" of a whole box defines the horizon for my view of three visible sides. The same sort of relationship holds between the explicit and implicit meanings in a verbal "intention." The explicit meanings are components in a total meaning which is bounded by a horizon. Of the manifold typical continuations within this horizon the author is not and cannot be explicitly conscious, nor would it be a particularly significant task to determine just which components of his meaning the au-

¹⁵ See Edmund Husserl, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, ed. L. Landgrebe (Hamburg, 1948), pp. 26-36, and H. Kuhn, "The Phenomenological Concept of 'Horizon'," ed. cit.

thor was thinking of. But it is of the utmost importance to determine the *horizon* which defines the author's "intention" as a whole. For it is only with reference to this horizon, or sense of the whole, that the interpreter may distinguish those implications which are typical and proper components of the meaning from those which are not.

The interpreter's aim, then, is to posit the author's horizon and carefully to exclude his own accidental associations. A word like "vegetable," for example, had a meaning-horizon in Marvell's language which was evidently somewhat different from the horizon it has in contemporary English. This is the linguistic horizon of the word, and it strictly bounds its *possible* implications. But all of these possible implications do not necessarily belong within the horizon of the particular utterance. What the word implies in the particular usage must be determined by asking, "Which implications are typical components of the whole meaning under consideration?" By analogy, when three surfaces are presented to me in a special way, I must know the typical continuations of the surfaces. If I have never encountered a box before, I might think that the unseen surfaces were concave or irregular, or I might simply think there are other sides, but I have no idea what they are like. The probability that I am right in the way I educe implications depends upon my familiarity with the type of meaning I consider.

That is the reason, of course, that the genre concept is so important in textual study. By classifying the text as belonging to a particular genre, the interpreter automatically posits a general horizon for its meaning. The genre provides a sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning-components. Thus, before we interpret a text, we often classify it as "casual conversation," "lyric poem," "military command," "scientific prose," "occasional verse," "novel," "epic," and so on. In a similar way, I have to classify the object I see as a box, a sphere, a tree, and so on, before I can deduce the character of its unseen or inexplicit components. But these generic classifications are simply preliminary indications. They give only a rough notion of the horizon for a particular meaning. The aim of interpretation is to specify the horizon as far as possible. Thus, the object I see is not simply a box but a cigarette carton, and not simply that but a carton for a particular brand of cigarettes. If a paint mixer or dyer wants to specify a particular patch of color, he is not content to call it blue; he calls it Williamsburg Blue. The example of a color patch is paradigmatic for all particular

verbal meanings. They are not simply *kinds* of meanings, nor are they single meanings corresponding to individual "intentional acts" (Williamsburg Blue is not simply an individual patch of color); they are *typical* meanings, particular yet reproducible, and the typical *components* of such meanings are similarly specific. The interpreter's job is to specify the text's horizon as far as he is able, and this means, ultimately, that he must familiarize himself with the typical meanings of the author's mental and experiential world.

The importance of the horizon concept is that it defines in principle the norms and limits which bound the meaning represented by the text. But, at the same time, the concept frees the interpreter from the constricting and impossible task of discovering what the author was explicitly thinking of. Thus, by defining textual meaning as the author's meaning, the interpreter does not, as it is so often argued, impoverish meaning; he simply excludes what does not belong to it. For example, if I say, "My car ran out of gas," I imply, typically, "The engine stopped running." But whether or not I also imply "Life is ironical" depends on the generality of my "intention." Some linguistic utterances, many literary works among them, have an extremely broad horizon which at some points may touch the boundaries of man's intellectual cosmos. But whether or not this is the case is not a matter for a priori discussion; the decision must be based on a knowledgeable inference as to the particular "intention" being considered.

Within the horizon of a text's meaning, however, the process of explication is unlimited. In this respect Dryden was right; no text is ever fully explicated. For example, if I undertook to interpret my "intention" of a box, I could make explicit unlimited implications which I did not notice in my original "intention." I could educe not only the three unseen sides, but also the fact that the surfaces of the box contain 24 right angles, that the area of two adjoining sides is less than half the total surface area, and so on. And if someone asked me whether or not such meanings were implicit in my "intention" of a box, I must answer affirmatively. In the case of linguistic meanings, where the horizon defines a much more complex "intentional object," such determinations are far more difficult to make. But the probability of an interpreter's inference may be judged by two criteria alone: the accuracy with which he has sensed the horizon of the whole and the typicality of such a meaning within such a whole. Insofar as the inference

meets these criteria, it is truly an explication of textual meaning. It simply renders explicit that which was, consciously or unconsciously, in the author's "intention."

The horizon which grounds and sanctions inferences about textual meaning is the *inner horizon* of the text. It is permanent and self-identical. But beyond this inner horizon any meaning has an *outer horizon*; that is to say, any meaning has relationships to other meanings; it is always a component in larger realms. This outer horizon is the domain of criticism. But this outer horizon is not only unlimited, it is also changing since the world itself changes. In general, criticism stakes out only a portion of this outer horizon as its peculiar object. Thus, for example, Eliot partitioned off that aspect of the text's outer horizon which is defined by the simultaneous order of literary texts. The simultaneous order at a given point in time is therefore the inner horizon of the meaning Eliot is investigating, and this inner horizon is just as definite, atemporal, and objective as the inner horizon which bounds textual meaning. But the critic, like the interpreter, must construe correctly the *components* of his inner horizon, and one major component is textual meaning itself. The critic must first accurately interpret the text. He need not perform a detailed explication, but he needs to achieve (and validate) that clear and specific sense of the whole meaning which makes detailed explication possible.

II. Determinateness of Textual Meaning

In the previous section I 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 construing 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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

¹⁶ The phrase, "piece of language," comes from the first paragraph of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1955). It is typical of the critical school Empson founded.

¹⁷ *Vol. I. Language*, trans. R. Manheim (New Haven, 1953). It is ironic that Cassirer's work should be used to support the notion that a text speaks for itself. The realm of language is autonomous for Cassirer only in the sense that it follows an independent development which is reciprocally determined by objective *and* subjective factors. See pp. 69, 178, 213, 249-250, et passim.

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."¹⁸ 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. *Ergo* 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.¹⁹

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. For 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 in order to demonstrate the kind of impasse 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.

¹⁸ *Theory of Literature*, p. 144.

¹⁹ Every interpretation is necessarily incomplete in the sense that it fails to explicate all a text's implications. But this kind of incomplete interpretation may still carry an absolutely correct system of emphases and an accurate sense of the whole meaning. This kind of incompleteness is radically different from that postulated by the inclusivists, for whom a sense of the whole means a grasp of the various possible meanings which a text can plausibly represent.

She is touched by and held by earthly time in its most powerful and horrible image.

2. 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."²⁰

Now, 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 and 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.

Close examination, however, reveals that none of the three modes of argument manages to reconcile or fuse the two different readings. Mode (1), for example, insists that Brooks's reading comprehends Bateson's, but although it is conceivable that Brooks implies all the meanings which Bateson has perceived, Brooks also implies a *pattern of emphasis* which cannot be reconciled with Bateson's reading. While Bateson construes a primary emphasis on life and affirmation, Brooks emphasizes deadness and inertness. No amount of manipulation can reconcile these divergent emphases, since one pattern of emphasis irrevocably excludes other patterns, and, since emphasis is always crucial to meaning, the

two constructions of meaning rigorously exclude one another. Precisely the same strictures hold, of course, for the argument that Bateson's reading comprehends that of Brooks. Nor can mode (3) escape with impunity. Although it seems to preserve a stress both on negation and on affirmation, thereby coalescing the two readings, it actually excludes both readings, and labels them not simply partial, but wrong. For if the poem gives equal stress to bitter irony and to affirmation, then any construction which places a primary stress on either meaning is simply incorrect.

The general principle implied by my analysis is very simple. The sub-meanings of a text are not blocks which can be brought together additively. Since verbal (and any other) meaning is a *structure* of component meanings, interpretation has not done its job when it simply enumerates what the component meanings are. The interpreter must also determine their probable structure, and particularly their structure of emphases. Relative emphasis is not only crucial to meaning (perhaps it is the most crucial and problematical element of all), it is also highly restrictive; it excludes alternatives. It may be asserted as a general rule that whenever a reader confronts two interpretations which impose different emphases on similar meaning components, at least one of the interpretations must be wrong. They cannot be reconciled.

By insisting that verbal meaning always exhibits a determinate structure of emphases, I do not, however, imply that a poem or any other text must be unambiguous. It is perfectly possible, for example, that Wordsworth's poem ambiguously implies both bitter irony and positive affirmation. Such complex emotions are commonly expressed in poetry, but if that is the kind of meaning the text represents Brooks and Bateson would be wrong to emphasize one emotion at the expense of the other. Ambiguity or, for that matter, vagueness is not the same as indeterminateness. This is the crux of the issue. To say that verbal meaning is determinate is not to exclude complexities of meaning but only to insist that a text's meaning is what it is and not a hundred other things. Taken in this sense, a vague or ambiguous text is just as determinate as a logical proposition; it means what it means and nothing else. This is true even if one argues that a text could display shifting emphases like

²⁰ Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure," in M. D. Zabel, ed., *Literary Opinion in America*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1951), p. 736. F. W. Bateson, *English Poetry. A Critical Introduction* (London, 1950), p. 33 and pp. 80-81.

those Sunday supplement magic squares which first seem to jut out and then to jut in. With texts of this character (if any exist), one need only say that the emphases shift, and must not, therefore, be construed statically. Any static construction would simply be wrong. The fundamental flaw in the "theory of the most inclusive interpretation" is that it overlooks the problem of emphasis. Since different patterns of emphasis *exclude* one another, inclusivism is neither a genuine norm nor an adequate guiding principle for establishing an interpretation.

But aside from the fact that inclusivism cannot do its appointed job, there are more fundamental reasons for rejecting it and all other interpretive ideals based on the conception that a text represents a system of meaning-possibilities. No one would deny that for the interpreter the text is at first the source of numerous possible interpretations. The very nature of language is such that a particular sequence of words can represent several different meanings (that is why public norms alone are insufficient in textual interpretation). But to say that a text *might* represent several structures of meaning does not imply that it does in fact represent all the meanings which a particular word sequence can legally convey. Is there not an obvious distinction between what a text might mean and what it does mean? According to accepted linguistic theory, it is far more accurate to say that a written composition is not a mere locus of verbal possibilities, but, rather, a record (made possible by the invention of writing) of a verbal actuality. The interpreter's job is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of possibilities. Indeed, if the text *represented* a system of possibilities, interpretation would be impossible, since no actual reading could correspond to a mere system of possibilities. Furthermore, if the text is conceived to represent all the *actual* structures of meaning permissible within the public norms of language, then no single construction (with its exclusivist pattern of emphases) could be correct, and any legitimate construction would be just as incorrect as any other. When a text is conceived as a piece of language, a familiar and all too common anarchy follows. But, aside from its unfortunate consequences, the theory contradicts a widely accepted principle in linguistics. I refer to Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*.

Saussure defined *langue* as the system of linguistic possibilities shared by a speech community at a given point in time.²¹ This system of possibilities contains two distinguishable levels.

The first consists of habits, engrams, prohibitions, and the like derived from past linguistic usage; these are the "virtualities" of the *langue*. Based on these virtualities, there are, in addition, sharable meaning-possibilities which have never before been actualized; these are the "potentialities." The two types of meaning-possibilities taken together constitute the *langue* which the speech community draws upon. But this system of possibilities must be distinguished from the actual verbal utterances of individuals who draw upon it. These actual utterances are called *paroles*; they are *uses* of language, and actualize some (but never all) of the meaning-possibilities constituting the *langue*.

Saussure's distinction pinpoints the issue: does a text represent a segment of *langue* (as modern theorists hold) or a *parole*? A simple test suffices to provide the answer. If the text is composed of sentences it represents *parole*, which is to say the determinate verbal meaning of a member of the speech community. *Langue* contains words and sentence-forming principles, but it contains no sentences. It may be represented in writing only by isolated words in disconnection (*Wörter* as opposed to *Worte*). A *parole*, on the other hand, is always composed of sentences, an assertion corroborated by the firmly established principle that the sentence is the fundamental unit of speech.²² Of course, there are numerous elliptical and one-word sentences, but wherever it can be correctly inferred that a text represents sentences and not simply isolated words, it may also be inferred that the text represents *parole*, which is to say, actual, determinate verbal meaning.

The point is nicely illustrated in a dictionary definition. The letters in boldface at the head of the definition represent the word as *langue*, with all its rich meaning-possibilities. But under one of the sub-headings, in an illustrative sentence, those same letters represent the word as *parole*, as a particular, selective actualization from *langue*. In yet another illustrative sentence, under another sub-heading, the very same word represents a different selective actualization. Of course, many sentences, especially those found in poetry, actualize far more possibilities than illustrative sentences in a dictionary. Any pun, for example, realizes simultaneously at least

²¹ This is the "synchronic" as opposed to the "diachronic" sense of the term. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris, 1931). Useful discussions may be found in Stephen Ullman, *The Principles of Semantics* (Glasgow, 1951), and W. v. Wartburg, *Einführung in die Problematik und Methodik der Sprachwissenschaft* (Halle, 1943).

²² See, for example, Cassirer, p. 304.

two divergent meaning-possibilities. But the pun is nevertheless an actualization from *langue* and not a mere system of meaning-possibilities.

The *langue-parole* distinction, besides affirming the determinateness of textual meaning, also clarifies the special problems posed by revised and interpolated texts. With a revised text, composed over a long period of time (*Faust*, for example) how are we to construe the *unrevised* portions? Should we assume that they still mean what they meant originally or that they took on a new meaning when the rest of the text was altered or expanded? With compiled or interpolated texts, like many books of the Bible, should we assume that sentences from varied provenances retain their original meanings, or that these heterogeneous elements have become integral components of a new total meaning? In terms of Saussure's distinction, the question becomes: should we consider the text to represent a compilation of divers *paroles* or a new unitary *parole* "respoken" by the new author or editor? I submit that there can be no definitive answer to the question, except in relation to a specific scholarly or aesthetic purpose, for in reality the question is not, "How are we to interpret the text?" but, "Which text are we to interpret?" Is it to be the heterogeneous compilation of past *paroles*, each to be separately considered, or the new, homogeneous *parole*? Both may be represented by the written score. The only problem is to choose, and having chosen, rigorously to refrain from confusing or in any way identifying the two quite different and separate "texts" with one another. Without solving any concrete problems, then, Saussure's distinction nevertheless confirms the critic's right in most cases to regard his text as representing a single *parole*.

Another problem which Saussure's distinction clarifies is that posed by the bungled text, where the author aimed to convey a meaning which his words do not convey to others in the speech community. One sometimes confronts the problem in a freshman essay. In such a case, the question is, does the text mean what the author wanted it to mean or does it mean what the speech community at large takes it to mean? Much attention has been devoted to this problem ever since the publication in 1946 of Wimsatt's and Beardsley's essay on "The Intentional Fallacy."²³ In that essay the position was taken (albeit modified by certain qualifications) that the text, being public, means what the speech community takes it to mean. This position is, in an ethical sense, right (and language, being social, has a strong ethical aspect): if the author

has bungled so badly that his utterance will be misconstrued, then it serves him right when folk misunderstand him. However, put in linguistic terms, the position becomes unsatisfactory. It implies that the meaning represented by the text is not the *parole* of an author, but rather the *parole* of "the speech community." But since only individuals utter *paroles*, a *parole* of the speech community is a non-existent, or what the Germans call an *Unding*. A text can represent only the *parole* of a speaker or author, which is another way of saying that meaning requires a meaner.

However, it is not necessary that an author's text represent the *parole* he desired to convey. It is frequently the case, when an author has bungled, that his text represents no *parole* at all. Indeed there are but two alternatives: either the text represents the author's verbal meaning or it represents no *determinate* verbal meaning at all. Sometimes, of course, it is impossible to detect that the author has bungled, and in that case, even though his text does not represent verbal meaning, we shall go on misconstruing the text as though it did, and no one will be the wiser. But with most bumbles we are aware of a disjunction between the author's words and his probable meaning. Eliot, for example, chided Poe for saying "My most immemorial year," when Poe "meant" his most *memorable* year.²⁴ Now we all agree that Poe did not mean what speakers of English generally mean by the word "immemorial"—and so the word cannot have the usual meaning. (An author cannot mean what he does not mean.) The only question, then, is: does the word mean more or less what we convey by "never-to-be-forgotten" or does it mean nothing at all? Has Poe so violated linguistic norms that we must deny his utterance verbal meaning or "content"?

The question probably cannot be answered by fiat. But since Poe's meaning is generally understood, and since the single criterion for verbal meaning is communicability, I am inclined to describe Poe's meaning as verbal.²⁵ I tend to side

²³ *Sewanee Review*, 54, 1946. Reprinted in W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, Ky., 1954).

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, "From Poe to Valéry," *Hudson Review*, 2, 1949, p. 232.

²⁵ The word is, in fact, quite effective. It conveys the sense of "memorable" by the component "memorial," and the sense of "never-to-be-forgotten" by the negative prefix. The difference between this and Jaberwocky words is that it appears to be a standard word occurring in a context of standard words. Perhaps Eliot is right to scold Poe, but he cannot properly insist that the word lacks a determinate verbal meaning.

with the Poes and Malaprops of the world, for the norms of language remain far more tolerant than dictionaries and critics like Eliot suggest. On the other hand, every member of the speech community, and especially the critic, has a duty to avoid and condemn sloppiness and needless ambiguity in the use of language, simply in order to preserve the effectiveness of the *langue* itself. Moreover, there must be a dividing line between verbal meanings and those meanings which we half-divine by a supra-linguistic exercise of imagination. There must be a dividing line between Poe's successful disregard of normal usage and the incommunicable word sequences of a bad freshman essay. However, that dividing line is not between the author's meaning and the reader's, but rather between the author's *parole* and no *parole* at all.

Of course, theoretical principles cannot directly solve the interpreter's problem. It is one thing to insist that a text represents the determinate verbal meaning of an author, but it is quite another to discover what that meaning is. The very same text could represent numerous different *paroles*, as any ironic sentence discloses ("That's a *bright* idea!?" or "That's a *bright ideal*!"). But it should be of some practical consequence for the interpreter to know that he does have a precisely defined task, namely to discover the author's meaning. It is therefore not only sound but necessary for the interpreter to inquire, "What in all probability did the author mean? Is the pattern of emphases I construe the author's pattern?" But it is both incorrect and futile to inquire, "What does the language of the text say?" That question can have no determinate answer.

III. Verification

Since the meaning represented by a text is that of another, the interpreter can never be certain that his reading is correct. He knows furthermore that the norms of *langue* by themselves are far too broad to specify the particular meanings and emphases represented by the text, that these particular meanings were specified by particular kinds of subjective acts on the part of the author, and that these acts, as such, remain inaccessible.²⁶ A less self-critical reader, on the other hand, approaches solipsism if he assumes that the text represents a perspicuous meaning simply because it represents an unalterable sequence of words. For if this "perspicuous" meaning is not verified in some way, it will simply be the interpreter's own meaning, exhibiting the connotations and emphases which he himself im-

poses. Of course, the reader must realize verbal meaning by his own subjective acts (no one can do that for him), but if he remembers that his job is to construe the author's meaning, he will attempt to exclude his own predispositions and to impose those of the author. But no one can establish another's meaning with certainty. The interpreter's goal is simply this: to show that a given reading is more probable than others. In hermeneutics, verification is a process of establishing relative probabilities.

To establish a reading as probable it is first necessary to show, with reference to the norms of language, that it is possible. This is the criterion of *legitimacy*: the reading must be permissible within the public norms of the *langue* in which the text was composed. The second criterion is that of *correspondence*: the reading must account for each linguistic component in the text. Whenever a reading arbitrarily ignores linguistic components or inadequately accounts for them, the reading may be presumed improbable. The third criterion is that of *generic appropriateness*: if the text follows the conventions of a scientific essay, for example, it is inappropriate to construe the kind of allusive meaning found in casual conversation.²⁷ But when these three preliminary criteria have been satisfied, there remains a fourth criterion which gives significance to all the rest, the criterion of plausibility or *coherence*. The three preliminary norms usually permit several readings, and this is by definition the case when a text is problematical. Faced with alternatives, the interpreter chooses the reading which best meets the criterion of coherence. Indeed, even when the text is not problematical, coherence remains the decisive criterion, since the meaning is "obvious" only because it "makes sense." I wish, therefore, to focus attention on the criterion of coherence, and shall take for granted the demands of legitimacy, correspondence, and generic appropriateness. I shall try to show that verification by the criterion of coherence, and ultimately, therefore, verification in general, implies a reconstruction of relevant aspects in the author's outlook. My point may be summarized in the paradox that objectivity in textual interpretation requires explicit reference to the speaker's subjectivity.

The paradox reflects the peculiar nature of coherence, which is not an absolute, but a de-

²⁶ To recall Husserl's point: a particular verbal meaning depends on a particular species of "intentional act," not on a single, irreducible act.

²⁷ This third criterion is, however, highly presumptive, since the interpreter may easily mistake the text's genre.

pendent quality. The laws of coherence are variable; they depend upon the nature of the total meaning under consideration. Two meanings ("dark" and "bright," for example) which cohere in one context may not cohere in another.²⁸ "Dark with excessive bright" makes excellent sense in *Paradise Lost*, but if a reader found the phrase in a textbook on plant pathology, he would assume that he confronted a misprint for "Dark with excessive blight." Coherence depends on the context, and it is helpful to recall our definition of "context": it is a sense of the whole meaning, constituted of explicit partial meanings plus a horizon of expectations and probabilities. One meaning coheres with another because it is typical or probable with reference to the whole (coherence is thus the first cousin of implication). The criterion of coherence can be invoked only with reference to a particular context, and this context may be inferred only by positing the author's "horizon," his disposition toward a particular type of meaning. This conclusion requires elaboration.

The fact that coherence is a dependent quality leads to an unavoidable circularity in the process of interpretation. The interpreter posits meanings for the words and word-sequences he confronts, and, at the same time, he has to posit a whole meaning or context in reference to which the sub-meanings cohere with one another. The procedure is thoroughly circular; the context is derived from the sub-meanings and the sub-meanings are specified and rendered coherent with reference to the context. This circularity makes it very difficult to convince a reader to alter his construction, as every teacher knows. Many a self-willed student continues to insist that his reading is just as plausible as his instructor's, and, very often, the student is justified; his reading does make good sense. Often, the only thing at fault with the student's reading is that it is probably wrong, not that it is incoherent. The student persists in his opinion precisely because his construction *is* coherent and self-sustaining. In such a case he is wrong because he has misconstrued the context or sense of the whole. In this respect, the student's hard-headedness is not different from that of all self-convinced interpreters. Our readings are too plausible to be relinquished. If we have a distorted sense of the text's whole meaning, the harder we look at it the more certainly we shall find our distorted construction confirmed.

Since the quality of coherence depends upon the context inferred, there is no absolute standard of coherence by which we can adjudicate

between different coherent readings. Verification by coherence implies therefore a verification of the *grounds* on which the reading is coherent. *It is necessary to establish that the context invoked is the most probable context.* Only then, in relation to an established context, can we judge that one reading is more coherent than another. Ultimately, therefore, we have to posit the most probable horizon for the text, and it is possible to do this only if we posit the author's typical outlook, the typical associations and expectations which form in part the context of his utterance. This is not only the single way we can test the relative coherence of a reading, but is also the only way to avoid pure circularity in making sense of the text.

An essential task in the process of verification is, therefore, a deliberate reconstruction of the author's subjective stance to the extent that this stance is relevant to the text at hand.²⁹ The importance of such psychological reconstruction may be exemplified in adjudicating between different readings of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." The interpretations of Brooks and Bateson, different as they are, remain equally coherent and self-sustaining. The implications which Brooks construes cohere beautifully with the explicit meanings of the poem within the context which Brooks adumbrates. The same may be said of Bateson's reading. The best way to show that one reading is more plausible and coherent than the other is to show that one context is more probable than the other. The problem of adjudicating between Bateson and Brooks is therefore, implicitly, the problem every interpreter must face when he tries to verify his reading. He must establish the most probable context.

Now when the *homme moyen sensuel* confronts bereavement such as that which Wordsworth's

²⁸ Exceptions to this are the syncategorematic meanings (color and extension, for example) which cohere by necessity regardless of the context.

²⁹ The reader may feel that I have telescoped a number of steps here. The author's verbal meaning or "verbal intention" is the object of complex "intentional acts." To reproduce this meaning it is necessary for the interpreter to engage in "intentional acts" belonging to the same species as those of the author. (Two different "intentional acts" belong to the same species when they "intend" the same "intentional object.") That is why the issue of "stance" arises. The interpreter needs to adopt sympathetically the author's stance (his disposition to engage in particular kinds of "intentional acts") so that he can "intend" with some degree of probability the same "intentional objects" as the author. This is especially clear in the case of *implicit* verbal meaning, where the interpreter's realization of the author's stance determines the text's horizon.

poem explicitly presents he adumbrates, typically, a horizon including sorrow and inconsolability. These are for him components in the very meaning of bereavement. Sorrow and inconsolability cannot fail to be associated with death when the loved one, formerly so active and alive, is imagined as lying in the earth, helpless, dumb, inert, insentient. And, since there is no hint of life in heaven but only of bodily death, the comforts of Christianity lie beyond the poem's horizon. Affirmations too deep for tears, like those Bateson insists on, simply do not cohere with the poem's explicit meanings; they do not belong to the context. Brooks's reading, therefore, with its emphasis on inconsolability and bitter irony, is clearly justified not only by the text but by reference to universal human attitudes and feelings.

But the trouble with such a reading is apparent to most Wordsworthians. The poet is not an *homme moyen sensuel*; his characteristic attitudes are somewhat pantheistic. Instead of regarding rocks and stones and trees merely as inert objects, he probably regarded them in 1799 as deeply alive, as part of the immortal life of nature. Physical death he felt to be a return to the source of life, a new kind of participation in nature's "revolving immortality." From everything we know of Wordsworth's typical attitudes during the period in which he composed the poem, inconsolability and bitter irony do not belong in its horizon. I think, however, that Bateson overstates his case, and that he fails to emphasize properly the negative implications in the poem ("No motion has she now, no force"). He overlooks the poet's reticence, his distinct unwillingness to express any unqualified evaluation of his experience. Bateson, I would say, has not paid enough attention to the criterion of correspondence. Nevertheless, in spite of this, and in spite of the apparent implausibility of Bateson's reading, it remains, I think, somewhat more probable than that of Brooks. His procedure is also more objective. For even if he had botched his job thoroughly and had produced a less probable reading than that of Brooks, his method would remain fundamentally sound. Instead of projecting his own attitudes (Bateson is presumably not a pantheist) and instead of positing a "universal matrix" of human attitudes (there is none), he has tried to reconstruct the author's probable attitudes so far as these are relevant in specifying the poem's meaning. It is still possible, of course, that Brooks is right and Bateson wrong. A poet's typical attitudes do not always apply to a particular poem, although

Wordsworth is, in a given period, more consistent than most poets. Be that as it may, we shall never be *certain* what any writer means, and since Bateson grounds his interpretation in a conscious construction of the poet's outlook, his reading must be deemed the more probable one until the uncovering of some presently unknown data makes a different construction of the poet's stance appear more valid.

Bateson's procedure is appropriate to all texts, including anonymous ones. On the surface, it would seem impossible to invoke the author's probable outlook when the author remains unknown, but in this limiting case the interpreter simply makes his psychological reconstruction on the basis of fewer data. For even with anonymous texts it is crucial to posit not simply some author or other, but a *particular* subjective stance in reference to which the construed context is rendered probable. That is why it is important to date anonymous texts. The interpreter needs all the clues he can muster with regard not only to the text's *langue* and genre, but also to the cultural and personal attitudes the author might be expected to bring to bear in specifying his verbal meanings. In this sense, all texts, including anonymous ones, are "attributed." The objective interpreter simply tries to make his attribution explicit, so that the grounds for his reading are frankly acknowledged. This opens the way to progressive accuracy in interpretation, since it is possible, then, to test the assumptions behind a reading as well as the coherence of the reading itself.

The fact that anonymous texts may be successfully interpreted does not, however, lead to the conclusion that all texts should be treated as anonymous ones, that they should, so to say, speak for themselves. I have already argued that no text speaks for itself, and that every construed text is necessarily "attributed." These points suggest strongly that it is unsound to insist on deriving all inferences from the "text itself." When we date an anonymous text, for example, we apply knowledge gained from a wide variety of sources which we correlate with data derived from the text. This extrinsic data is not, however, read *into* the text. On the contrary, it is used to *verify* that which we read out of it. The extrinsic information has ultimately a purely verificative function.

The same thing is true of information relating to the author's subjective stance. No matter what the source of this information may be, whether it be the text alone or the text in conjunction with other data, this information is

extrinsic to verbal meaning as such. Strictly speaking, the author's subjective stance is not part of his verbal meaning even when he explicitly discusses his feelings and attitudes. This is Husserl's point again. The "intentional object" represented by a text is different from the "intentional acts" which realize it. When the interpreter posits the author's stance, he sympathetically re-enacts the author's "intentional acts," but although this imaginative act is necessary for realizing meaning, it must be distinguished from meaning as such. In no sense does the text *represent* the author's subjective stance: the interpreter simply adopts a stance in order to make sense of the text, and, if he is self-critical, he tries to verify his interpretation by showing his adopted stance to be, in all probability, the author's.

Of course, the text at hand is the safest source of clues to the author's outlook, since men do adopt different attitudes on different occasions. However, even though the text itself should be the primary source of clues and must always be the final authority, the interpreter should make an effort to go beyond his text wherever possible, since this is the only way he can avoid a vicious circularity. The harder one looks at a text from an incorrect stance, the more convincing the incorrect construction becomes. Inferences about the author's stance are sometimes difficult enough to make even when all relevant data are brought to bear, and it is self-defeating to make the inferential process more difficult than it need be. Since these inferences are ultimately extrinsic, there is no virtue in deriving them from the text alone. One must not confuse the result of a construction (the interpreter's understanding of the text's *Sinn*) either with the *process* of construction or with a validation of that process. The *Sinn* must be represented by and limited by the text alone, but the processes of construction and validation involve psychological reconstruction and should therefore be based on all the data available.

Not only the criterion of coherence but all the other criteria used in verifying interpretations must be applied with reference to a psychological reconstruction. The criterion of legitimacy, for example, must be related to a speaking subject, since it is the author's *langue*, as an internal possession, and not the interpreter's, which defines the range of meaning-possibilities a text can represent. The criterion of correspondence has force and significance only because we presume that the author meant something by each

of the linguistic components he employed. And the criterion of generic appropriateness is relevant only so far as generic conventions are possessed and accepted by the author. The fact that these criteria all refer ultimately to a psychological construction is hardly surprising when we recall that to verify a text is simply to establish that the author probably meant what we construe his text to mean. The interpreter's primary task is to reproduce in himself the author's "logic," his attitudes, his cultural givens, in short his world. For even though the process of verification is highly complex and difficult, the ultimate verificative principle is very simple: the imaginative reconstruction of the speaking subject.³⁰

The speaking subject is not, however, identical with the subjectivity of the author as an actual historical person; it corresponds, rather, to a very limited and special aspect of the author's total subjectivity; it is, so to speak, that "part" of the author which specifies or determines verbal meaning.³¹ This distinction is quite apparent in the case of a lie. When I wish to deceive, my secret awareness that I am lying is irrelevant to the verbal meaning of my utterance. The only correct interpretation of my lie is, paradoxically, to view it as being a true statement, since this is the only correct construction of my "verbal intention." Indeed it is only when my listener has *understood* my meaning (presented as true) that he can *judge* it to be a lie. Since I adopted a truth-telling stance, the verbal meaning of my utterance would be precisely the same, whether I was deliberately lying or suffering from the erroneous conviction that my statement was true. In other words, an author may adopt a stance which differs from his deepest attitudes in the same way that an interpreter must almost always

³⁰ Here I purposefully display my sympathies with Dilthey's concepts, *Sichhineinfühlen* and *Verstehen*. In fact, my whole argument may be regarded as an attempt to ground some of Dilthey's hermeneutic principles in Husserl's epistemology and Saussure's linguistics.

³¹ Spranger aptly calls this the "cultural subject." See Eduard Spranger, "Zur Theorie des Verstehens und zur geisteswissenschaftlichen Psychologie" in *Festschrift Johannes Volkelt zum 70. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1918), p. 369. It should be clear that I am here in essential agreement with the American anti-intentionalists (term used in the ordinary sense). I think they are right to exclude private associations from verbal meaning. But it is of some practical consequence to insist that verbal meaning is that aspect of an author's meaning which is interpersonally *communicable*. For this implies that his verbal meaning is that which, under linguistic norms, one *can* understand, even if one must sometimes work hard to do so.

adopt a stance different from his own.³² But for the process of interpretation, the author's private experiences are irrelevant. The only relevant aspect of subjectivity is that which determines verbal meaning or, in Husserl's terms, "content."

In a sense all poets are, of course, liars, and to some extent all speakers are, but the deliberate lie, spoken to deceive, is a borderline case. In most verbal utterances the speaker's public stance is not totally foreign to his private attitudes. Even in those cases where the speaker deliberately assumes a role, this mimetic stance is usually not the final determinant of his meaning. In a play, for example, the total meaning of an utterance is not the "intentional object" of the dramatic character; that meaning is simply a component in the more complex "intention" of the dramatist. The speaker himself is spoken. The best description of these receding levels of subjectivity was provided by the scholastic philosophers in their distinction between "first intention," "second intention," and so on. Irony, for example, always entails a comprehension of two contrasting stances ("intentional levels") by a third and final complex "intention." The "speaking subject" may be defined as the final and most comprehensive level of awareness determinative of verbal meaning. In the case of a lie the speaking subject assumes that he tells the truth, while the actual subject retains a private awareness of his deception. Similarly, many speakers retain in their isolated privacy a self-conscious awareness of their verbal meaning, an

awareness which may agree or disagree, approve or disapprove, but which does not participate in determining their verbal meaning. To interpretation, this level of awareness is as irrelevant as it is inaccessible. In construing and verifying verbal meaning, only the speaking subject counts.

A separate exposition would be required to discuss the problems of psychological reconstruction. I have here simply tried to forestall the current objections to extrinsic biographical and historical information by pointing, on the one hand, to the exigencies of verification, and, on the other, to the distinction between a speaking subject and a "biographical" person. I shall be satisfied if this part of my discussion, incomplete as it must be, will help revive the half-forgotten truism that interpretation is the construction of *another's* meaning. A slight shift in the way we speak about texts would be highly salutary. It is natural to speak not of what a text says, but of what an author means, and this more natural locution is the more accurate one. Furthermore, to speak in this way implies a readiness (not notably apparent in recent criticism) to put forth a whole-hearted and self-critical effort at the primary level of criticism—the level of understanding.

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³² Charles Bally calls this "dédoublément de la personnalité." See his *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*, 2nd ed. (Bern, 1944), p. 37.