

MEL 30

# The Aims of Interpretation

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I owe a great deal to friends and colleagues who have commented on the ideas of the book. I am especially indebted to Wayne Booth for reading the first, inchoate version, and making valuable suggestions for improving the manuscript.

# I

## Introduction: Meaning and Significance

Except for this chapter and the final one, the chapters that follow are self-contained essays originally contributed to festschriften and journals, or presented as lectures, but always conceived as parts of a coherent book. At the center of the envisioned book, as I first imagined it some years ago, was the subject of literary evaluation—a topic I had not developed very fully in my previous theoretical work. But in the course of time another sort of subject connected with theory of interpretation also presented itself insistently to my mind, and I gradually began to foresee a book that fell into two related parts, corresponding roughly to the distinction in hermeneutics between meaning and significance. Meaning and its relation to valid interpretation had been the central subject of my earlier work; the central subject of this book was at first to be significance and its relation to literary evaluation. But the plan was only half fulfilled. My further speculations on the subject of meaning turned out to be just as compelling as my ideas on evaluation, so that the present book divides itself into two almost equal parts. The unifying theme that binds these two parts together is the defense of the possibility of knowledge in interpretation. At every point, the stable determinacy of meaning is being defended, even when significance is under discussion, for without the stable determinacy of meaning there can be no knowledge in interpretation, nor any knowledge in the many humanistic disciplines based upon textual interpretation. In order to enhance the already implicit coherence of the chapters, I have made revisions in the original essays by adding new materials, deleting some repetitive passages and inserting some cross-references.

The concepts governing the two parts of the book, meaning

and significance respectively, are applications to theory of interpretation of a quite general epistemological distinction. I first encountered the distinction, as I remember, in Husserl's illuminating book, *Erfahrung und Urteil*, expressed by him as the "inner and outer horizons" of any act of knowing. This distinction has been central to my thinking and writing on hermeneutic theory since 1960, when I devoted a section of an essay to meaning and significance under the heading "The Two Horizons of Textual Meaning."<sup>1</sup> I develop this distinction further in the present book, pages 79-81. I believe that the concepts of meaning and significance, or of any analogous distinctions, are essential concepts for comprehending how meaning could be stable and determinate, and hence how interpretive knowledge is possible. Recently, in a quite unexpected quarter, I discovered an unsuspected ally fostering this hermeneutical distinction. The following passage is from Lucien Goldmann's essay "Genetic Structuralist Method in the History of Literature":

The illumination of a meaningful structure constitutes a process of comprehending it [meaning]; while insertion of it into a vaster structure is to explain it [significance]. As an example: to throw light on the tragic structure of Pascal's *Pensées* and Racine's theater is a process of comprehending them; inserting them in extremist Jansenism while setting forth the structure of the latter is a process of comprehending the latter, but is a process of explaining the writings of Pascal and Racine; inserting extremist Jansenism into the global history of Jansenism is to explain the first and comprehend the second. To insert Jansenism, as an ideologically expressive movement, into the history of the nobility of the robe of the seventeenth century is to explain Jansenism and to comprehend the nobility of the robe.<sup>2</sup>

It should be obvious from Goldmann's account that such a distinction is potentially applicable to any act of attention whatever, and to any text or part of a text. In the present book, unless otherwise specified, the term "meaning" refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text, and "significance" to textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another mind, another era, a

wider subject matter, an alien system of values, and so on. In other words, "significance" is textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself.

Recently I have come to understand more clearly than I did just why this distinction—crucial to the determinacy and stability of meaning and hence to the possibility of hermeneutical knowledge—has been the main bone of contention for critics of my earlier book, particularly for those relativists who deny the possibility of hermeneutical knowledge. These dogmatic relativists, whom I call cognitive atheists, insist strongly upon the artificiality of any distinction between meaning and significance. I have noticed that resistance to my theories has usually manifested itself as resistance to this distinction. I believe it is not the distinction itself, however, but rather what it entails regarding dogmatic relativism that lies behind this resistance. For the distinction itself is far from artificial; it is natural and universal in our experience. In fact, if we could not distinguish a content of consciousness from its contexts, we could not know any object at all in the world. The context in which something is known is always a different context on a different occasion. Without actualizing such distinctions, we could not recognize today that which we experienced yesterday: this inkwell, that phonograph recording, for such re-cognition entails an ability to demarcate a content from its changed context. An experienced sameness of a content (or object) despite the differentness of the context in which we know it, proves real the distinction between an object of knowledge and the context in which it is known. Those who proclaim these acts of re-cognition to be artificial or illusory do not in fact live by their more "natural" relativistic theory of knowledge. Nobody could live by it in his ordinary intercourse with the world, and indeed we learn to live in the world, as Piaget has shown, precisely by overcoming our infantile confusions of content and context.<sup>3</sup> No, the resistance to a distinction between meaning and significance or its analogues, is not a return to a tough-minded, Heraclitean sense of reality; it is, rather, an abstract consequence of a previously assumed psychological or historical relativism. Resistance to the distinction is

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based on no decisive experience, but rather on a relativistic theory about the nature of experience in general.

It is important to understand that both parties to this theoretical debate are relativists in one sense of the term. Being post-Kantians, both parties accept the principle that any experience, and of course any experience of textual meaning, is relative to mind. Objects *for us* are the only objects we have. But this more general Kantian relativism is in principle quite neutral on the subject of cognitive atheism in hermeneutics; it implies absolutely nothing about the validity of the distinction between meaning and significance. For even if, as both parties accept, contents for us are correlative to our minds, that hardly entails that a change in some aspects of our minds compels a change in all the contents or meanings we experience. Hence the debate is between two kinds of Kantian relativists.

That point is brought into stark relief by the disagreement between two important post-Kantian philosophers, Husserl and his student Heidegger. It was the central disagreement between them, over which they finally parted company, with Heidegger renouncing claim to the Kantian term "phenomenology," in deference to the respected master to whom he dedicated *Sein und Zeit*. Their disagreement, which I shall now sketch in the briefest schematic terms, stands as a paradigm for (as well as an important historical origin behind) the subsequent quarrels of their epigones. In making this brief allusion to their complex differences, my aim is not historical accuracy, since both philosophers changed their thinking over their careers. The historical disagreement is a convenient way of defining the main theoretical issue as simply and clearly as possible.<sup>4</sup>

In his attempt to find a nonpsychologistic explanation for the existence of stable objects of knowledge, Husserl posited a number of functions in our minds which permitted psychology to overcome psychologism. He posited the mental function of intentionality, and he posited the mind's capacity to "bracket" a domain of experience so that the domain could be contemplated over time. "Bracketing," then, is a simplified, visual metaphor for our ability to demarcate not only a content but also the

mental acts by which we attend to that content, apart from the rest of our experience. This demarcation, corresponding to the distinction between meaning and significance, alone assures the potential sameness of objects in experience over time.

For Heidegger, Husserl's ideas pertaining to bracketing suggested an excessively abstract cognitive model that left out of account the fullness of the experienced life through which we know something in the world. So in place of brackets, Heidegger took as his model a more expansive epistemic form: the circle, the hermeneutic circle as expounded by Dilthey. The two forms or models are for Heidegger quite antithetical in their implications. The hermeneutic circle is based on the paradox that we must know the whole in a general way *before* we know a part, since the nature of the part as such is determined by its function in the larger whole. Of course, since we can know a whole only through its parts, the process of interpretation is a circle. Experience as we interpret it must, by the compulsion of logic, follow this circular pattern. But since we must in some sense pre-know a whole before we know a part, every experience is pre-constituted by the whole context in which it is experienced. On this model, it is *impossible* to bracket off one part of experience and separate it from the whole of experienced life. What we know at any time is "pre-conceptually" known and constituted by the whole of our world, and since that world changes in time, so must the objects (for us) change which that world pre-constitutes. The "artificial" brackets have been swept away, and replaced with the fulness of lived experience.

Or so Heideggerians and other dogmatic relativists believe. My own opinion is that both parties can be criticized for taking too literally or too consistently these cognitive metaphors, as though they were true and necessary simulacra of experience. I believe that both models can at different times describe different experiences. Neither is a necessary feature of cognitive life, if ordinary experience should be allowed to intrude into these realms. It is not clear to me why accepting the validity in some experiences of the circular, hermeneutical model, should entail its being valid for all experiences. And the Husserlians on their

side readily concede that bracketing is a possibility, not a requirement of all experience. Their more modest claim seems a more plausible claim to me. Whenever I am told by a Heideggerian that I have misunderstood Heidegger, my still unrebutted response is that I will readily (if uneasily) concede that point, since the concession in itself implies a more important point, namely, that Heidegger's text *can* be interpreted correctly, and has been so interpreted by my accuser. Since the accusation assumes the determinateness and stability of Heidegger's meaning, *and* the possibility of its being correctly interpreted, I admit the practical error for the sake of the theoretical truth. I was once told by a theorist who denied the possibility of correct interpretation that I had not interpreted his writings correctly.

If one had, then, to choose a hermeneutical model it should hardly be one that entirely excluded the possibility of Husserl's brackets. The brackets implied by the terms "meaning" and "significance" do in fact represent something that most of us believe we experience in verbal discourse, namely, an alien meaning, something meant by an implied author or speaker who is not ourselves. Whenever we have posited another person's meaning, we have bracketed a region of our own experience as being that of another person. This paradox of self and other in verbal discourse is even easier to accept (because more widely experienced) than the paradox of part and whole in the hermeneutic circle. No doubt the paradoxical doubling of personality involved in verbal intercourse is a bracketing experience for which some persons have greater talents than others, but it is nonetheless a widespread experience. The hermeneutic circle, on the other hand, as I shall point out at the end of the next chapter, has now been shown to be an inadequate model for what actually happens in the interpretation of speech. The magic circle is breakable.

Before I outline the general argument of the essays that are to follow, it may be useful to some readers if I give an account of the relations between the present book and my previous one on the same general subject, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven:

Yale University Press, 1967). One purpose of this book is to amplify important subjects that were dealt with only briefly in the earlier one. Over the past few years, when these amplifications have been presented as lectures, they have sometimes given rise to the impression that they constitute revisions of the earlier argument. I do not object to revising my earlier views and would welcome the chance to recant some of them: recantation is such a rare occurrence in theoretical discussions that it has a certain appeal as a proof of one's reasonableness and bona fides. Nonetheless, these essays do not, in any respect that I am aware of, represent substantive revisions of the earlier argument. On this score, I wish especially to avoid some confusions that arose when chapter 5 of this book was published as a separate essay. There I concede that authorial intention is not the only possible norm for interpretation, though it is the only practical norm for a cognitive discipline of interpretation. The choice of an interpretive norm is not required by the "nature of the text," but, being a choice, belongs to the domain of ethics rather than the domain of ontology. This observation had been made in the earlier book, but so briefly that it was generally overlooked by readers:

The object of interpretation is precisely that which cannot be defined by the ontological status of a text, since the distinguishing characteristic of a text is that from it not just one but many disparate complexes of meaning can be construed. Only by ignoring this fact can a theorist attempt to erect a normative principle out of a neutral and variable state of affairs—a fallacy that seems endemic to discussions of hermeneutics. Bluntly, no necessity requires the object of interpretation to be determinate or indeterminate, changing or unchanging. On the contrary, the object of interpretation is no automatic given, but a task that the interpreter sets himself. *He* decides what he wants to actualize and what purpose his actualization should achieve.<sup>5</sup>

The amplification of this point in chapter 5 does not in the least alter the defense of the authorial norm in the earlier book, though some readers sympathetic to that defense have expressed

their disappointment at my apparent retreat, while others have found comfort in the apparent theoretical license to disregard authorial intention. Neither response is warranted. The discussion changes nothing in the earlier argument. Meanings that are actualized by a reader are of course the reader's meanings—generated by him. Whether they are also meanings intended by an author cannot be determined with absolute certainty, and the reader is in fact free to choose whether or not he will *try* to make his actualized meanings congruent with the author's intended ones. No one disputes that a reader can *try* to realize the author's intended meaning. The two important questions are: (1) whether he should try, and (2) whether he could succeed if he did try. In this book, as in the previous one, my emphatic answer to both questions is yes. The reader should try to reconstruct authorial meaning, and he can in principle succeed in his attempt. The amplifications conducted in chapter 5 are concerned with the first question, the ethical one, which asks whether authorial intention *should* be the norm of interpretation.

A second confusion has sometimes arisen over my use of the word "meaning." My emphasis on the determinacy of meaning has perhaps misled some readers into conceiving it to be far less capacious than it is. "Meaning" is not restricted to conceptual meaning. It is not even restricted to mental "content," since, on my description, it embraces not only any content of mind represented by written speech but also the affects and values that are necessarily correlative to such a content. Defined in Husserl's terms, "meaning" embraces not only intentional objects but also the species of intentional acts which sponsor those intentional objects. In the later chapters of the earlier book, my exposition sometimes took a shortcut when it discussed meaning as an object or content. This is a convenience that I continue to exploit in the present book, but the reader should understand that an intentional object cannot be dis severed from a species of intentional act, that subjective feeling, tone, mood, and value, are constitutive of meaning in its fullest sense. One cannot *have* a meaning without having its necessarily correlative affect or value. This point is developed more fully in chapter 6, where I discuss the

necessary correlation of value-stance and content. That correlation is a model for all the other correlations of affect and content, act and object, embraced by the word "meaning."

The four chapters of Part I are arranged to form a conceptual double funnel, with the narrow parts in the middle and the broad ones at the two ends. The two general essays, chapters 2 and 5, serve to contextualize and introduce the essays that follow them, chapter 5 being both an introduction to Part II and a coda to Part I. The first of these general chapters, chapter 2, "Old and New in Hermeneutics," describes a recurrent debate between what might be called the legal and the biblical traditions in hermeneutic theory. This general essay had its origin in an attempt, which I soon abandoned, to write a historical encyclopedia article on interpretation in which the recurring issues were to be analyzed in a-historical, theoretical terms. In my early efforts, the historical and analytical aims were so incompatible that I resigned my commission and set upon the more congenial, analytical project of distinguishing schematically some of the perennial positions in hermeneutics. The purpose of schematizing the old debates is to clarify the current ones. The chapter concludes with what I conceive to be its main contribution to the subject—a resolution of some of the old conflicts by the simple expedient of abandoning the hermeneutic circle as the model of interpretation. In its place I suggest a more refined model that conforms with the results of psychological and psycholinguistic research. This alternative description of the understanding process brings the theoretical model closer to experience, and explains in principle why the so-called circle of understanding is breakable. The alternative description is therefore a potentially decisive argument against that form of dogmatic relativism which is based on the model of the hermeneutic circle.

Chapter 3, "Faulty Perspectives," is a tactical sortie against relativism from another quarter. It points to fundamental inadequacies in the metaphor of visual perspective when that metaphor is used, as it so often is, as a model for the process of interpretation. When it is so used, the metaphor is just another version of the naive, entrapped sort of Kantianism implied by

the unbreakable hermeneutic circle. I show that most of the assumptions implied by the metaphor of perspective are both philosophically naive and empirically untrue. This argument is carried into those domains, subjective, historical, and methodological, where the metaphor is used to sanction relativism, and to proclaim the irreproducibility of original meaning.

Chapter 4, the second of the two more specialized raids on dogmatic skepticism in hermeneutics, focuses on the subject of synonymy. The implications of this discussion branch out in a number of directions. The doctrine that linguistic form compels linguistic meaning is opposed by my account of the unpredictability of the relations between form and meaning in actual speech. Paradoxically, this "indeterminacy" of form and meaning must be argued if the determinacy of meaning is to be accounted for. Those who claim that under linguistic conventions form compels meaning, are forced by necessity to the corollary that textual meaning is indeterminate. For, all agree that several possible conventions can legitimately control any text. Since the operative convention is indeterminate in principle, the meaning that convention compels must be indeterminate in principle. The doctrine that form compels meaning suffers, therefore, all the embarrassments of the strict conventionalist theory analyzed critically in chapter 2. Only if form does not compel meaning is synonymy possible. The chapter demonstrates that synonymy is in fact possible, and that on this possibility depends the determinacy of meaning, the emancipation of thought from the prison house of a particular linguistic form, and the possibility of fields of knowledge generally. That is a big return for the small price of dashing the more extravagant aspirations of stylistics to be a reliable method of interpretation.

The final chapter of Part I, "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics," discriminates those aspects of textual commentary pertaining to meaning from those aspects pertaining to significance. It summarizes the issues involved in choosing a norm for meaning, and it introduces the issues concerning significance, especially evaluative significance. The essay is an overview which bridges

Parts I and II. Its main contribution, already alluded to, is its discrimination of the ethical act involved in choosing a norm for the realization of meaning from a text.

Part II is devoted to evaluation. Its first chapter, chapter 6, "Evaluation as Knowledge," proposes an important exception to the general distinction between evaluation and interpretation. So much recent debate has been devoted to this subject that it seemed important to try to adjudicate the issue. For historical reasons that do not need restating here, some literary theorists, led by René Wellek, have insisted on the inseparability of valuation and interpretation, while others, including Northrop Frye, have insisted on the importance of keeping the whirligig of taste and preference out of literary scholarship. Since one foundation of my own work is the distinction between meaning and significance, I of course stand closer to Frye than to Wellek on the issue. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the terms of the debate have not been sufficiently refined, and that one ought to acknowledge the limited sense in which Wellek is correct. To do so requires an acknowledgment of the necessary correlation between value and meaning in any *construing* of meaning. To get to the nub of that issue it was instructive to go back to fundamentals and to Kant's third critique. As I observed above, this necessary correlation of value-stance and content, act and object, extends to the whole domain of meaning.

Whereas Part I defends the determinacy of authorial meaning and implicitly defends the privileged status of authorial meaning, one of the main objects of Part II is to deny a privileged status to any single kind of significance, and more particularly to the "literary" evaluation of literature. In chapters 7 and 8, I argue that the "essence" of literature is not necessarily aesthetic, and hence aesthetic criticism is not necessarily intrinsic. Moreover, even demonstrably intrinsic evaluation is not inherently privileged evaluation. This negative argument has the positive aim of defending mixed and *ad hoc* value-criteria. In the eighth chapter I accept the challenge of defining the principles of valuation that I adhere to and which I also consider to be the most

durable and beneficial principles. On this last point the reader will not find any new revelations. The only novelty in my discussion is in the theoretical explanation why the classical, mixed tradition of evaluation has been (and is destined still to be) the most durable tradition of literary evaluation.

Chapter 8 also takes stock of our present situation in literary study, particularly with respect to evaluation. The recent over-emphasis on aesthetic values in literature has had a restrictive and inhibiting effect on literary criticism and literary study. The aesthetic conception of literature has too rigidly limited the canon of literature and has too narrowly confined the scope of literary study, leaving present-day scholars with little to do that is at once "legitimate" and important. I argue for the legitimacy of several important kinds of inquiry which have recently been excluded from "literary" study; and I argue for an expansion of the literary canon. In the end I make one specific and concrete proposal to my fellow teachers of literature, for enhancing the value of literary study.

In the concluding chapter, I bring together some of the main themes of the book: futility of relativism, the possibility of humanistic knowledge, and the correlations that exist between knowledge and value, not just in interpretation but in the humanities generally. I point out the structural similarities between the old, outmoded forms of humanistic relativism and the most up-to-date new forms, native and imported. I argue in the end that the application of humanistic knowledge is of more value than the application of a *jeu d'esprit* pretending to be knowledge or value.

One purpose of this book, then, is to give encouragement to those who are still willing to entertain the belief that knowledge is possible even in textual interpretation. The book does not claim that knowledge has in fact been achieved in such and such a case, for we cannot know *that* we know. On the other hand, no philosophical or actual barrier precludes either true knowledge or probabilistic knowledge in interpretation. In those circumstances, cognitive agnosticism is intellectually more respectable than cognitive atheism in literary study.

Some of my colleagues are indignant at the present decadence in literary scholarship, with its anti-rationalism, faddism, and extreme relativism. I share their feelings. Scholars are right to feel indignant toward those learned writers who deliberately exploit the institutions of scholarship—even down to its punctilious conventions like footnotes and quotations—to deny the whole point of the institutions of scholarship, to deny, that is, the possibility of knowledge. It is ethically inconsistent to batten on institutions whose very foundations one attacks. It is logically inconsistent to write scholarly books which argue that there is no point in writing scholarly books. For such cognitive atheists, all principles are subject to a universal relativism except relativism itself. But whence comes *its* exemption? What is the sanction, in a world devoid of absolutes, for *its* absoluteness? We are never told. This question, so absurdly simple, yet so embarrassing to relativism, is never answered by even the most brilliant of the cognitive atheists. It is not answered, for instance, by Heidegger's disciple Jacques Derrida, currently the most fashionable of the theologians of cognitive atheism in the domain of literary theory.

The reader will notice that the names attacked in this book are mainly philosophical names like Heidegger and Derrida. They represent philosophical theories, not persons. The book does not pause to describe by personal name the many variations on relativistic themes in contemporary hermeneutics. Sometime in the future I may write a detailed account of current theories. In this book, relativism itself, rather than its individual manifestations, is the object of attack. On this issue there are only two or three fundamental theories; there is not much that is new, or can be new, under the hermeneutical sun.

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assumption that scholars give what all the best writers give—permanently useful knowledge. On the other hand, evaluative criticism can be of great importance at a particular time, more valuable, in that historical context, than pure *scientia*. Yet, without *scientia*, humanistic evaluation is empty and pointless. That which humanists recover, understand, and preserve needs to be preserved intact. To be useful, humanistic study, like any other study, needs to be believed.

## Notes

← the conclusion

## Chapter 1

1. "Objective Interpretation," *PMLA* 75 (September 1960): 463-79.
2. Reprinted in B. Lang and F. Williams, eds., *Marxism and Art*, trans. F. Williams (New York, 1972), pp. 249-50.
3. See chapter 2, pp. 30-31.
4. "For his part Heidegger made it clear that for him the stumbling blocks in Husserl's philosophy consisted in the transcendental reduction as 'bracketing of Being,' in the 'reduction' of man to pure consciousness, and finally, in the 'reduction' of Being into Being-object-for." J. J. Kockelmans, *Phenomenology* (New York, 1967), p. 274. See also Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1960).
5. *Validity*, pp. 24-25.

## Chapter 2

1. Relativism in Heidegger and Gadamer is mainly historical relativism. A key phrase in Gadamer is "the historicity of understanding." See *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960), a learned work that reinterprets the tradition of Schleiermacher in Heideggerian terms.
2. August Boeckh, *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* (Leipzig, 1877), pp. 11-12.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. Except for Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, no semantic theorist I know of has been a pure intuitionist, nor do I know of any important theorist who has been a pure positivist. I describe the pure positions for the sake of clarity and also, more to the point, to show why a choice between them is logically required at some stage, even in an eclectic theory.
5. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
6. J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).