E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

b. 1928

Twentieth-century scholars have been immensely interested in semantics, analytical and ordinary language philosophy, and all the problems of "meaning." Through
their tendency to define poetry as a language critical theorists have raised as many critical issues as they sought to solve. Adopting some of the terminology of the phe-
nomenologist Husserl and the structural linguist Saussure, Hirsch in Objective Inte-
pretation attacks modes of interpretation that do not apply rigorous principles of exclu-
sion. One such principle is that the meaning of a text is the author's meaning, not any meaning the public or readers of some later age find in it.

Hirsch rejects a number of attitudes toward poetic meaning that have been recently popular. One of these is the idea that the meaning of a text changes in the course of time. He argues that, indeed, the "relevance" of a text may vary from age to age, but "relevance" is a matter for "criticism," an activity separate from but built on "interpretation," which, in turn, has to do with the construing of meaning alone. He believes that interpretation and criticism (as he defines them) have been too often con-
fused. The permanent meaning of a text, the only meaning, is what the author meant. That meaning is determined by the character of the author's intention—not intention as commonly used by modern critics including Wimsatt and Beardsley, but as used by Husserl to mean roughly "awareness."

Hirsch notes that the most vexing problem of construing the meaning of a text lies in grasping the presence of implications and eliminating false or unlikely ones. Applying Saussure's distinction between langue and parole, he attacks the idea that the more possible meanings we can find the better. William Empson's well-known Seven Types of Ambiguity is an example of a book that explores all possibilities as legitimate mean-
ing. Hirsch insists that what a text really means is different from what it might mean.

Hirsch proposes legitimacy, correspondence, generic appropriateness, and coherence as criteria for interpretation. In discussing as an example one of Wordsworth's Lucy poems, he argues in favor of construing the author's characteristic attitudes when faced with two unresolvable but apparently equally likely interpretations.

It is notable that Hirsch emphatically rejects those distinctions made between kinds of language that are characteristic of so much modern criticism. He would appear also to reject the Kantian tradition that led to the idea of the poem as "constitutive" of reality. Hirsch does, however, indicate that there are generic distinctions to be made between texts.

Objective Interpretation

The fact that the term, criticism has become to designate all manner of textual meaning reflects a general acceptance of the doctrine that description and evaluation are inseparable in literary study. In any serious construction 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 misappropriate or misinterpret our texts. It does not entitle us to use the text as the basis for an exercise in "criticism" or to submit serious textual commentary a disingenuous 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." Truth kinds of arguments 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—is subjectivism and relativism—and might even make it possible 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 it says what 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 represents may be construed correctly or incorrectly. The literary text (in the sense of the semi-mystical claims made for its uniqueness) does not have a special ontological status which somehow obliges the reader from the demand universe imposed by all linguistic acts of 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 consumed by the critic before it becomes a poem for him. Then it is, of course, an artifact with special characteristics. But before the critic consumes the poem it is for him an artifact at all, and if he consumes 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, 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 (fragments) 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 confines textual meaning not as such, but as a component within a larger context, Boeckh, defined it as "that philosophical 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." 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 (views and 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 reference or truth-value may be identical. 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 sign of each is different, but the Redesmea (or one aspect of Redesmea—the designation of “Scott” and “author of Waverley”) is the same. Frege considered only on the signs where different Sense have an identical Bedeutung, but it is also true that the same signs may, in the sense 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 sentence 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 the general distinction between the inner and outer horizons of any meaning. In my first section I shall try to show how this 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 of text. For most of my notions I claim 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 movements, which I approve, but only against certain modern theories which have obscured the establishment of normative principles in interpretation and which thereby encourage the subjectivism and individualism which have for many decades discerned 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 Wellis and Warren, a book to which I owe much. I ungratefully select it (especially Chapter 12) 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.

1. 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. 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 we 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, while it also 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, but 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 constructs his own, new meaning instead of that represented by the text.

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 Wells, for example, the meaning of the text changes as it passes “through the minds of its readers, critics, and fellow artists.” Now even when 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 equally evident that textual meaning must change. But is it proper to make textual meaning dependent upon the reader’s own cultural givenness? It may be granted that these given changes 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 radically ad absurdum, the proponent of the current theory points out that in a given age many readers.


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 conception of vegetable (what it means "to do") with the idea that the meanning of meat may even be desirable. No doubt, the associated meaning is less desirable (since it supports the notion of the perfume), 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 conception, since if we could separate the sense of vegetable from the notion of an erotic coquette, we would 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 new 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 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 contextually changing relevance of a text's meaning.

It is in the light of the distinction between meaning and relevance that critical theories like those of T. S. Eliot's need to be viewed. Eliot, like many modern critics, invokes 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 continually 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. As 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 (in Sans) does not change any more than the hue and saturation of the red object changes when seen against different backgrounds. Yet the analogies 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 constructed it. Before I can judge just how the changed tradition has altered the relevance of a text, I must understand its meaning or sense.

This permanent meaning is, and can be nothing other than the author's meaning. There have been, of course, several other definitions of textual meaning: what the author's contemporaries would ideally have conceived, what the ideal present-day reader conceives, 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 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 elucidate 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 means 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. When I look at a box, then close my eyes, and then reopen them, I can perceive in this second view the identical box, I 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 daily and temporarily 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 a plurality of mental acts.

The relation between an act of awareness and its object Husserl calls "intention," using it 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 as Husserl's sense.) 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 acts:

[1][Hinlich] 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 to use verbal analogies I would have to compromise in my approach to the core of my argument concerning meaning. I discuss a literary text in the second and final section. The example of a box was suggested to me by Brentano and Kulas, the Phenomenological Concept of "Nothing," in "Phenomenological Essays in Memory of Ed- mund Husserl," edited by Martinus Nijhoff (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 1960). [2]See John Gaw DeSanto, The Invention of Consciousness, in Philosophical Essays, ed. et al. [3]Although Husserl's term is a standard philosophical one for which there is no adequate substitute, editors of translations may understandably associate it with the intentional fallacy. The essence of the word, however, quite distinct. As used by Husserl critics turn their term to a purpose which they may or may not be realized by a writer. As used by Husserl the term refers to a process of consciousness. Thus in the latter usage, which involves problems of rhetoric, it is possible to speak of an unfulfilled intention, while in Husserl's usage such a notion 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 underlined procedure which may even misunderstanding.
Husserl's views provide an excellent context for dis-\counting the central problems of interpretation. For once we define verbal meaning as the "content" of the author's "intention" (which for brevity's sake I shall call simply the au-\thor's "verbal intention"), the problem for the interpreter is quite clear: he must distinguish those meanings which be-\long to that "verbal intention" from those which do not be-\long. This problem may be simplified, of course, in a way that nearly everyone will accept: the interpreter has to distin-\guish 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 impli-\cations 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. Gen-\erally, the explicit meanings of a text can be construed to the satisfaction of most readers; the problems arise in determin-\ing implicit or "unsaid" meanings. If, for example, I in-\nounce, "I have a headache," there is no difficulty in con-\struing what I say; but there may be great difficulty in con-\struing implications like "I desire sympathy." "I have a headache" is not simply an expression of dis-\satisfaction. 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 ordi-\nary statements like "I have a headache," means the con-\textual situation in which the utterance occurs. In the case of written texts, however, context generally means "verbal con-\text:" (the explicit meanings as we extract them from the probiemi-\cal passage). But these explicit meanings alone do not ex-\haust 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 im-\plication belong with these other meanings within a particu-\lar sort of" overall meaning? For example, we cannot deter-\mine whether nominals belong with or implies hurt 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 Tylenol," 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 psychology is useful. The author's "verbal intention" (this 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," it is precisely the same way that the "unconscious" implications of an utterance belong to the author's "intention." They 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. "Horizons" is then an essential aspect of what we usually call context. It is an explicitly conscious system of the whole, derived from the explicit meanings present to consciousness. Thus, my view of three surfaces, presented in a familiar and typically boxlike 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 particular significant task to determine just which components of his meaning the author 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 may 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 may 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 deduce 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-compos- ites. Thus, before we interpret a text, we often classify it as "casual conversation," "lyric poem," "military command," "scientific prose," "occasional verse," "fable," "epic," and so on. In a similar way, I have to classify the object I see as a box, a sphere, a tree, or so on, before I can deduce the character of its unseen or implicit components. But these generic classifications are simply preliminary indicators. 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 root 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 other wants to specify a particular paint 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 simple meanings corresponding to individual "inten- tional acts" (Williamsburg Blue is not simply an individual patch of color); they are typical meanings, particular yet re- producible 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,
this 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 constraining 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, impose
his 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 irreal" 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 intellec
tual cosmos. But whether or not this is the case is not a mat
ter for a priori discussion; the decision must be based on a
knowledgeable inference to the particular "intention" being considered.

Within the horizon of a text's meaning, however, the pro cess 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 educate not only the three unseen sides, but also the fact that the surfaces of the box contain twenty-four 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 im plied in my "intention" of a box, I must answer affirmatively. Is the case of linguistic meanings, where the horizon defines a much more complex "interpretative object," such de terminations are far more difficult to make. But the proba bility of an interpreter's inference may be judged by two cri teria 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 what was, consciously or uncon sciously, 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 mean ing has relationships to other meanings; it is always a com ponent 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, criti cism states only a portion of this outer horizon as its pecu liar object. Thus, for example, Eliot parceled 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, axiomatic, and objective as the inner horizon which brings textual meaning. But the critic, like the inter preter, 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. Determinatess of Textual Meaning

In the previous section I defined textual meaning in the "ver bal 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, then the object of interpretation is not the author but his text. This plausible argument assumes, of course, that the text auto matically has a meaning simply because it represents an un alterable 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 chairmanship is defined by public norms. 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., shareable) meaning: no one can interpret or 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. Referring 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's). The fact that no one would radically misinterpret [56] The principle of explication comes from the first paragraph of William Empson's The P cooker of Language, 3rd ed. (New York, 1955). It is typical of the critical school Empson founded.
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-potentials. Under the public norm 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 any one then does the most useful 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 Casser's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, which is largely devoted to a demonstration that verbal meaning arises from the "reciprocal determinateness" of public linguistic possibilities and subjective specifications of those possibilities. Just as language constitutes and colon subjective, 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 windmills. The burden of this section is, then, an attack on the view that a text is a "piece of language" and it's 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 "narrative of a correct interpretation. This is the same impasse which results from the theory that a text reads a life of its own, and indeed, the two position 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 Welke 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 mere text but by the vital potency of language itself. Welke 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."

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 group of norms which will not stand still.

Welke's brief comment on the problem involved in defining and locating correctness in interpretation is representative of a widespread concern among literary critics that the most correct interpretation is the point "inductive" one. Indeed, the view that is so widely accepted that Welke did not need to defend his version of (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-potentials represented by the text. Every plausible reading which remains within public linguistic norms is a correlative reading as far as types are, but each reading is inevitably partial since it cannot realize all the potentialities of the text. The guiding principle is 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.

Inclusionism is textural in a position which inducse & readiness to consider the results of others, but, aside from promoting an estimable tolerance, it has little theoretical value. For although it aim to reconcile different plausible readings in an ideal, comprehensive interpretation, it cannot, in fact, either reconcile different readings or choose between

1[Note] W. J. Language, translated by J. H. New Haven, 1951. It is, I believe, a common wisdom that Casser's work should be studied to the extent that it is possible.

2[Note] W. J. Language, translated by J. H. New Haven, 1951. It is, I believe, a common wisdom that Casser's work should be studied to the extent that it is possible.

The third point is necessarily incorrect in the sense that it fails to replicate all a text's implications. But this kind of assumption interpretation may still carry as absolutely correct system of emphasis and at accurate sense of the whole. This kind of misinterpretation is subtly different than that proposed by the inclusivists, for whereas a writer of the whole means a group of the various possible meanings which, what one can plausibly mean.
them. As a normative idea, or principle of correctness, it is
unnecessary. This point may be illustrated by citing two exact
readings of a well-known poem by Wordsworth. I shall first
quote the poem and then quote excerpts from two published
texts in order to demonstrate the kind of impasse which
inclusivism always provokes when it attempts to reconcile
interpretations, and, incidentally, to demonstrate the very
close kind of interpretative problem which call for a guiding
principle:

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

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

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

1. [The poet] attempts to suggest something of the
lowered atmosphere at the loved one's present
lack of motion—of his response utterly
and horribly inertness—. . . Part of the effect, of
course, resides in the fact that a dead lifeless-
ness 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, compartmented by things shaped like a
tree to one particular spot, or by things com-
pletely inseparable like rocks and stones, . . .
[She] is caught up helplessly into the emptiness
which of the earth which measures and makes
her. 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
the contrasting moods, but of a single mood
measuring in a climax in the pantheistic magnifi-
cence of the last two lines. . . . The vague liv-
ing—Lucy of this poem is opposed to the
grand 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, be-
cause she is now a part of the life of nature,
and not just a human "thing." 

Now, if we grant, as I think we must, that both the cited in-
terpretations are permitted by the text, the problem for the
inclusivist is to reconcile the two readings.

Three modes of reconciliation are available to the inclus-
vivist: (1) Brooks's reading includes Bateson's; it shows that
any affirmative suggestion 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 na-
ture." (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 par-
tially right, but they must be fused to supplement one
other. 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 em-
ployed, 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 read-
ings 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 em-
phasis which cannot be reconciled with Bateson's reading.
While Bateson construes a primary emphasis on life and af-
firmation, Brooks emphasizes deadness and inertness.
No amount of manipulation can reconcile these divergent
emphases, since one pattern of emphasis irrecoverably
excludes other patterns, and, since emphasis is always rel-
tional to meaning, the two constructions of meaning rigorously
exclude one another. Precisely the same structures hold, of
course, for the argument that Bateson's reading comprehen-
seds that of Brooks. Nor may mode 3 escape with impunity.

18 [Hirsch] Cleath Brooks, "Found as a Principle of Structure," in M. D. Zehdi,
p. 53 and pp. 80-81.
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 submeanings 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 to do its job when it simply encounters what the component readings are. The interpreter must also determine their probable structure, and particularly their substructure 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 irrevocable; it excludes alternatives. It may be asserted as a general rule that whenever a reader conveys 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 this, 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 Bateman would be wrong to emphasize one emotion at the expense of the other. Ambiguity or, for that matter, vagueness is not the task of determinateness. 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 Brook's Sunday supplement magpie squares which first seem to jostle out and then jost in. With tests 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, inclusiveness 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 interpretative 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 speeches alone are insufficient in textual interpretation). But it is obvious that a text might represent several structures of meaning without not implying 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 work's 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 more system of possibilities. Further, the text is conceived to represent all the actual structures of meaning permissible within the public frames of language, then no single construction (with its exclusive 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 coheres at a widely accepted principle in linguistics. I refer to Swasey's distinction between langue and parole.

Swasey defined langue as the system of linguistic possibilites shared by a speech community at a given point in time. This system of possibilities contains two distinguishable levels. The first consists of habits, grammatical 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 "potentials." 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 occurrences of individuals who draw upon it. These actual utterances are called paroles; they are acts of language, and actualize some (but never all) of the meaning-possibilities constituting the langue.

[1]Richard this is the "quadrivium" as opposed to the "quintum" sense of the term. See Permingot de Saussure, Cours de phonétique par la parole (Paris, 1913). Useful discussions may be found in Stephen Urson, The Principles of Semantics (New York, 1957), and W. W. Warburg, Einführung in die Prinzipien und Methoden der Sprachwissenschaft (Göttingen, 1943).]
Saussure"s distinction pertains the issue: does a text represent a segment of langue (as modern theorists hold) or a parole? A simple task 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 inscribed words in disincor-
rectation (Wintern as opposed to Worte). A parole, on the other hand, is always composed of sentences, an assertion corrobor-
ated by the firmly established principle that the sentence is the fundamental unit of speech. If, of course, there are nu-
merous lexical and one-word sentences, but wherever it can be correctly inferred that a text represents sentences and not simply inscribed 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-potentialities. But under one of the subheadings in an illustrative sentence, those same letters represent the word as parole, as a partic-
ular, selective actualization from langue. In yet another illus-
trative sentence, under another subheading, the very same word represents a different selective actualization. Of

course, many sentences, especially those found in poetry, ac-

tualize different possibilities than illustrative sentences in a dictionary. Any pun, for example, realizes simultaneously at least two divergent meaning-potentialities. But the pun is nevertheless an actualization from langue and not a stable system of meaning-potentialities.

The langue-parole distinction, besides affording the determinate abstract meaning, also clarifies the special problems posed by revised and unreported texts. With a re-
visited text, composed over a long period of time (Flaubert, for example) how are we to construe the unreported portions? Should we assume that they still mean what they meant orig-

inately or that they took on a new meaning when the rest of the text was altered or expanded? With compilled or interpo-
lated texts, like many books of the Bible, should we assume that sentences from varied provenances retain their original meaninings, or that these heterogeneous elements have be-
come 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 diverse parole or a new unitary parole "spooked" 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 net-
spheric purpose, for in reality the question is not, how are we to interpret the text? but, which text are we to interpret? It is 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 word. The only problem is to choose, and having chosen, rigorously to re-
strain 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 continues the critic's right in most cases to re-
gard his text as representing a single parole.

Another problem which Saussure's distinction clarifies is that posed by the bundled 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 Interpretation Fallacy. 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 lan-
guage, being social, has a strong ethical aspect) if the author has bundled a badly and his utterance will be misconstrued, then it serves him right when folk misunderstand him. How-

ever, put in linguistic terms, the position becomes unam-

plified. 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 parole, a parole of the speech community is nonexistent, or what the Germans call a Unding. A text can only represent the parole of a speaker or author, which is another way of saying that meaning requires a bearer.

However, it is not necessary that an author's text repre-
sent the parole he desired to convey. It is frequently the case, when an author has bundled, that his text represents no par-
ole at all. Indeed these 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 bundled, 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 one will be the wiser. But with most bundles we

—Hitchcock, for example, Cassius' [Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, 1], p. 304.

—Hitchcock, for example, Cassius' [Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, 1], p. 945-52.
are aware of a disjunction between the author’s words and his probable meaning. Elliot, for example, did Poe for saying “My next important year,” when Poe “meant” his most memorable year. 2 Now we all agree that Poe did not mean what speakers of English generally mean by the word “meant”—and so the word cannot have the usual meaning. (As author cannot mean what he does not mean.) The only question, then, is: does the word mean more or less than 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. 3 I tend to side with the Poets and Malaprops of the world, for the norms of language remain far more tolerant than dictionaries and critics like Elliot suggest. On the other hand, every member of the speech community, and especially the critic, has a duty to avoid and condemn slippage and needless ambiguity in the use of language, simply in order to preserve the effectiveness of the language itself. Moreover, there must be a dividing line between verbal meanings and those meanings which we half-divine by a surprising and picturesque 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: so any ironic sentence discloses (“That’s a bright idea!” or “That’s a bright idea!”). 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 emblems I construe the author’s pat-


2[Elliot] The word is in fact quite effective. It conveys the sense of “horrible” by the component meaning, and the sense of “never to be forgotten” by the negative prefix. The difference between this and afterworry words is that it applies to a thought word occurring in a context of stan-
dard words. Perhaps Elliot is right to call Poe, but he cannot properly insist that the word lacks a determinate verbal meaning.

3[Elliot] “To recall H. G. Wells’ phrase: particular verbal meaning depends on a particular species of ‘phonemes.’” Text on a single, unprejudiced ear.

4[Elliot] This third criterion, however, highly persuasive, since the inter-

preter may easily elucidate the text’s genre.
tions several readings, and this is by definition the case when a text is problematical. Faced with alternatives, the in-
terpreter chooses the reading which best meets the criterion of coherence. Indeed, even when the text is not problemati-
cal, 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 coher-
ence, and shall take for good many of the demands of legitimacy, correspondence, and generic appropriateness. I shall try to show that verification by the criterion of coherence, and ul-
timately, therefore, verification in general, implies a recon-
struction of relevant aspects in the author’s outlook. My point may be summarized in the paradox that objectivity in
in-ideal interpretation requires explicit reference to the speak-
ster’s subjectivity.

The paradox reflects the peculiar nature of coherence, which is not an absolute, but a dependent quality. The laws of
coherence are variable; they depend upon the nature of the text
meaning under consideration. Two meanings: ("dark", 
and "bright", for example) which cohere in one context may
not cohere in another.29 "Dark with excessive brightness" makes
excellent sense in Paraphrasis Logicus, 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
brightness." Coherence depends on the context, and it is helpful
to recall our definition of context: it is a sense of the whole
meaning, composed of explicit partial meanings plus a ho-
them of expectations and probabilities. One meaning con-
herent with another because it is typical or probable with ref-
rence to the whole coherence is that the first context of
implication. The criterion of coherence can be invoked only
with reference to a particular context, and this context can be
indicated only by posing the author’s "horizon," his dis-
position toward a particular type of meaning. This conclu-
sion 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-se-
quences 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 process is thor-
oughly circular; the context is derived from the submeanings
and the submeanings 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
29[Heck] Descriptions in this sort the synecdochic meanings (coherent and
uncoherent, for example) which offers no necessity regardless of the context.

to insist that his reading is just as plausible as his instruc-
tor’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 be-
cause his construction is coherent and self-sustaining. In
such a case he is wrong because he has misconstrued the
corpus of the whole. In this respect, the student’s headlessness
is not different from that of all self-con-
vinced interpreters. Our readings are too plausible to be re-
linquished. If we have a distorted sense of the whole
meaning, the harder we look at the text certainly we shall
find our distorted construction confirmed.

Since the quality of coherence depends upon the con-
text inferred, there is no absolute standard of coherence by
which we can judge between different coherent read-
ings. Verification by coherence implies therefore a verifica-
tion of the grounds on which the reading is coherent. It is
necessary to establish that the context inferred 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 post the most
probable horizon for the text, and it is possible to do this only
if we post the author’s typical outlook, the typical associa-
tions 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 also the only way to
avoid pure circularity in making sense of the text.

An essential task in the process of verification is, there-
fore, a deliberate reconstruction of the author’s subjective
stance to the extent that this stance is relevant to the text at
hand.30 The importance of such psychological reconstruction
may be exemplified in adjudicating between different read-
ings at Wordsworth’s A Summer Did My Spirit Seal. The
interpretations of Brooks and Blakson, different as they are,
remain equally coherent and self-sustaining. The implica-
tions which Brooks constructs cohere beautifully with the ex-
plcit meanings of the poem within the context which Brooks

30[Heck] The reader may feel that I have invented too many of the steps here
The author’s verbal meaning or “verbatim reference” is the object of complex
"intentional acts". To reproduce this meaning is necessary for the inter-
preter to translate his "intentional acts" belonging to the same species as those
of the author. (Two different "intentional acts" belonging to the same species
when they "induce" the same "intentional acts".) This is why the issue of
"stasis" arises. The interpretation needs to adopt contextually the author’s
view in this disposition to engage in particular kinds of "intentional acts" so
that he can "induce" with some degree of probability the same "intentional acts"
as the author. This is especially clear in the case of implicit verbal
meanings, where there is no immediate access to the interpreter’s mediation of the
author’s stance determines, the text’s horizon.
adumbrates. The same may be said of Bateon's reading. The best
way to show that one reading is more plausible and co-
herent than the other is to show that one context is more
probable than the other. The problem of adjudicating be-
 tween Bateson and Brooks is therefore, implicitly, the prob-
lem 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 be-
meanement such as that which Wordworth's poem explicitly
prelates him adumbrates, typically, a horizon including sol-
row and incoherence. These are for him components in
the very meaning of bereavement. Sorrow and incoherabil-
ity 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, insistent. And, since there
is no him 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 intuits 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 incoherence and bitter irony, is clearly justifi-
cated not only by the text but by inference to universal human
attitudes and feelings.

But the trouble with such a reading is apparent to most
Wordworthians. The poet is not an Homme moyen sensuel;
his characteristic attitudes are somewhat paranoiac. Instead
of regarding rocks and stones as mere inert ob-
jects, 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 Wordworth's typical attitudes during the period in
which he composed the poem, incoherence 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 evalua-
tion of his experience. Bateson, I would say, has not paid
enough attention to the criterion of correspondence. Never-
theless, in spite of this, and in spite of the apparent implau-
sability 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 doubted his job thor-
oughly and had produced a less probable reading than that of
Brooks, his method would remain fundamentally sound. In-
stead of projecting his own attitudes (Bateson is presumably
not a pantheist) and confounding them with 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 at-
titudes do not always apply to a particular poem, although
Wordworth 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 comparison 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 construc-
tion of the poet's stance appear more valid.

Bateson's procedure is applicable to all texts, includ-
ing anonymous ones. On the surface, it would seem impos-
sible to invoke the author's probable outlook when the au-
thor 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 partic-
ular subjective stance in reference to which the construed
text 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 language and
genre, but also to the cultural and personal attitudes the au-
thor might be expected to bring in bearing 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 in-
terpreted 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 neces-
arily "attributed." These points suggest strongly that it is
amounts to insisting 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 ex-
trinsic data is not, however, read into the text. On the con-
trary, 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 corri-
rective 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 Hus- serl'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 sympa-
thetically reenacts the author's "intentional acts," but al-
though this imaginative act is necessary for realizing mean-
ing, 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 atti-
dudes 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
not to go beyond his text whenever 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 au-
thor's stance are sometimes difficult enough to make even
when all relevant data are brought to bear, and it is self-de-
feating 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 un-
derstanding the text's Sinn) either with the process of con-
struction or with a validation of that process. The Sinn must
be represented by and limited by the text alone, but the pro-
cesses 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 cri-
tera 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 sub-
ject, since it is the author's language, as an internal possession,
and not the interpreter's, which defines the range of mean-
ings possible texts can represent. The criterion of corre-
spondence has force and significance only because we pre-
sume that the author meant something by each of the
linguistic components he employed. And the criterion of ge-
neric appropriateness is relevant only so far as generic con-
tentions are possessed and accepted by the author. The fact
that these criteria all refer ultimately to a psychological con-
struction 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 atti-
tudes, his cultural givens, in short his world. For even though
the process or verification is highly complex and difficult,
the ultimate verificative principle is very simple: the imagi-
native reconstruction of the speaking subject.54

The speaking subject is not, however, identical with the
subjectivity of the author as an actual historical person; it corre-
ponds, 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 mean-
ing.55 The 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 con-
sstruction 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 pre-
cisely 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 adopt a stance different from his own.56

But for the process of interpretation, the author's private ex-
periences are irrelevant. The only relevant aspect of subjec-
tivity is that which determines verbal meaning or, in Hus-
serl's terms, "content."

In a sense all poets are, of course, liars, and to some extent all speakers are, but the deliberate liar, spoken to
in deceiving, 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

54 [Hirsch] has (appropriately) displayed my hypothesis with Dilthey's concepts, Schicksalswahrnehmung and Wahrnehmung. In fact, my entire argument may be read
off in an attempt to ground some of Dilthey's humanitarian principles in Husserl's epistemology and Husserl's linguistics.

55 [Hirsch] speaks only of the "authorial subject." See Erhard Spranger, Zur Theorie der Wahrnehmung und der gesellschaftlichen Psychologie
in Franz Kafka's Der Golem (Munich, 1918), p. 399. It should be clear that I am here in essential agreement with the
American antilinguists here since I count the ordinary senses that they are to exclude private associations from verbal meaning. But it is of
some practical importance to note that when verbal meaning is that aspect of an
author's meaning which is irreducibly context-internal. For this implies that
his verbal meaning is that which, under linguistic norms, one can un-
avoidably, even if one must sometimes work hard to do so.

[Note: The Bolly section of this "abstracted" version of the present essay. See his Linguistique générale et linguistique française. 2nd ed. (Bonn, 1944), p. 37.]}
the dramatic character; that meaning is simply a component in the more complex "intention" of the dramatics. 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 location 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.