

Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Reception Theory

In 1918 Europe lay in ruins, devastated by the worst war in history. In the wake of that catastrophe, a wave of social revolutions rolled across the continent: the years around 1920 were to witness the Berlin Spartacus uprising and the Vienna General Strike, the establishment of workers' soviets in Munich and Budapest, and mass factory occupations throughout Italy. All of this insurgency was violently crushed; but the social order of European capitalism had been shaken to its roots by the carnage of the war and its turbulent political aftermath. The ideologies on which that order had customarily depended, the cultural values by which it ruled, were also in deep turmoil. Science seemed to have dwindled to a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the categorizing of facts; philosophy appeared torn between such a positivism on the one hand, and an indefensible subjectivism on the other; forms of relativism and irrationalism were rampant, and art reflected this bewildering loss of bearings. It was in this context of widespread ideological crisis, one which long pre-dated the First World War itself, that the German philosopher Edmund Husserl sought to develop a new philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating civilization. It was a choice, Husserl was to write later in his *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1935), between irrationalist barbarity on the one hand, and spiritual rebirth through an 'absolutely self-sufficient science of the spirit' on the other.

Husserl, like his philosopher predecessor René Descartes, started out on his hunt for certainty by provisionally rejecting what he called the 'natural attitude' – the commonsensical person-in-the-street belief that objects existed independently of ourselves in the external world, and that our

information about them was generally reliable. Such an attitude merely took the possibility of knowledge for granted, whereas it was this, precisely, which was in question. What then *can* we be clear about and certain of? Although we cannot be sure of the independent existence of things, Husserl argues, we can be certain of how they appear to us immediately in consciousness, whether the actual thing we are experiencing is an illusion or not. Objects can be regarded not as things in themselves but as things posited, or 'intended', by consciousness. All consciousness is consciousness of something: in thinking, I am aware that my thought is 'pointing towards' some object. The act of thinking and the object of thought are internally related, mutually dependent. My consciousness is not just a passive registration of the world, but actively constitutes or 'intends' it. To establish certainty, then, we must first of all ignore, or 'put in brackets', anything which is beyond our immediate experience; we must reduce the external world to the contents of our consciousness alone. This, the so-called 'phenomenological reduction', is Husserl's first important move. Everything not 'immanent' to consciousness must be rigorously excluded; all realities must be treated as pure 'phenomena', in terms of their appearances in our mind, and this is the only absolute data from which we can begin. The name Husserl gave to his philosophical method – phenomenology – stems from this insistence. Phenomenology is a science of pure phenomena.

This, however, is not enough to resolve our problems. For perhaps all we find, when we inspect the contents of our minds, is no more than a random flux of phenomena, a chaotic stream of consciousness, and we can hardly find certainty upon this. The kind of 'pure' phenomena with which Husserl is concerned, however, are more than just random individual particulars. They are a system of universal *essences*, for phenomenology varies each object in imagination until it discovers what is invariable about it. What is presented to phenomenological knowledge is not just, say, the experience of jealousy or of the colour red, but the universal types or essences of these things, jealousy or redness as such. To grasp any phenomenon wholly and purely is to grasp what is essential and unchanging about it. The Greek word for type is *eidos*; and Husserl accordingly speaks of his method as effecting an 'eidetic' abstraction, along with its phenomenological reduction.

All of this may sound intolerably abstract and unreal, which indeed it is. But the aim of phenomenology was in fact the precise opposite of abstraction: it was a return to the concrete, to solid ground, as its famous slogan 'Back to the things themselves!' suggested. Philosophy had been too concerned with concepts and too little with hard data: it had thus built its precarious, top-heavy intellectual systems on the frailest of foundations.

Phenomenology, by seizing what we could be experientially sure of, could furnish the basis on which genuinely reliable knowledge could be constructed. It could be a 'science of sciences', providing a method for the study of anything whatsoever: memory, matchboxes, mathematics. If offered itself as nothing less than a science of human consciousness – human consciousness conceived not just as the empirical experience of particular people, but as the very 'deep structures' of the mind itself. Unlike the sciences, it asked not about this or that particular form of knowledge, but about the conditions which made any sort of knowledge possible in the first place. It was thus, like the philosophy of Kant before it, a 'transcendental' mode of enquiry; and the human subject, or individual consciousness, which preoccupied it was a 'transcendental' subject. Phenomenology examined not just what I happened to perceive when I looked at a particular rabbit, but the universal essence of rabbits and of the act of perceiving them. It was not, in other words, a form of empiricism, concerned with the random, fragmentary experience of particular individuals; neither was it a kind of 'psychologism', interested just in the observable mental processes of such individuals. It claimed to lay bare the very structures of consciousness itself, and in the same act to lay bare the very phenomena themselves.

It should be obvious even from this brief account of phenomenology that it is a form of methodological idealism, seeking to explore an abstraction called 'human consciousness' and a world of pure possibilities. But if Husserl rejected empiricism, psychologism and the positivism of the natural sciences, he also considered himself to be breaking with the classical idealism of a thinker like Kant. Kant had been unable to solve the problem of how the mind can really know objects outside it at all; phenomenology, in claiming that what is given in pure perception is the very essence of things, hoped to surmount this scepticism.

It all seems a far cry from Leavis and the organic society. But is it? After all, the return to 'things in themselves', the impatient dismissal of theories unrooted in 'concrete' life, is not so far from Leavis's naively mimetic theory of poetic language as embodying the very stuff of reality itself. Leavis and Husserl both turn to the consolations of the concrete, of what can be known on the pulses, in a period of major ideological crisis; and this recourse to 'things themselves' involves in both cases a thoroughgoing irrationalism. For Husserl, knowledge of phenomena is absolutely certain, or as he says 'apodictic', because it is intuitive: I can doubt such things no more than I can doubt a sharp tap on the skull. For Leavis, certain forms of language are 'intuitively' right, vital and creative, and however much he conceived of criticism as a collaborative argument there was in the end no gainsaying this.

For both men, moreover, what is intuited in the act of grasping the concrete phenomenon is something universal: the *eidōs* for Husserl, *Life* for Leavis. They do not, in other words, have to move beyond the security of the immediate sensation in order to develop a 'global' theory: the phenomena come ready equipped with one. But it is bound to be an authoritarian theory, since it depends wholly on intuition. Phenomena for Husserl do not need to be *interpreted*, constructed this way or that in reasoned argument. Like certain literary judgements, they force themselves upon us 'irresistibly', to use a key Leavisian word. It is not difficult to see the relation between such dogmatism – one manifest throughout Leavis's own career – and a conservative contempt for rational analysis. Finally, we may note how Husserl's 'intentional' theory of consciousness suggests that 'being' and 'meaning' are always bound up with one another. There is no object without a subject, and no subject without an object. Object and subject, for Husserl as for the English philosopher F. H. Bradley, who influenced T. S. Eliot, are really two sides of the same coin. In a society where objects appear as alienated, cut off from human purposes, and human subjects are consequently plunged into anxious isolation, this is certainly a consoling doctrine. Mind and world have been put back together again – at least in the mind. Leavis, too, is concerned to heal the disabling rift between subjects and objects, 'men' and their 'natural human environments', which is the result of 'mass' civilization.

If phenomenology secured a knowable world with one hand, it established the centrality of the human subject with the other. Indeed it promised nothing less than a science of subjectivity itself. The world is what I posit or 'intend': it is to be grasped in relation to me, as a correlate of my consciousness, and that consciousness is not just fallibly empirical but transcendental. This was a reassuring sort of thing to learn about oneself. The crass positivism of nineteenth-century science had threatened to rob the world of subjectivity altogether, and neo-Kantian philosophy had tamely followed suit; the course of European history from the later nineteenth century onwards appeared to cast grave doubt on the traditional presumption that 'man' was in control of his destiny, that he was any longer the creative centre of his world. Phenomenology, in reaction, restored the transcendental subject to its rightful throne. The subject was to be seen as the source and origin of all meaning: it was not really itself part of the world, since it brought that world to be in the first place. In this sense, phenomenology recovered and refurbished the old dream of classical bourgeois ideology. For such ideology had pivoted on the belief that 'man' was somehow prior to his history and social conditions, which flowed from him as water shoots forth from a fountain.

How this 'man' had come to be in the first place – whether he might be the product of social conditions, as well as the producer of them – was not a question to be seriously contemplated. In recentring the world upon the human subject, then, phenomenology was providing an imaginary solution to a grievous historical problem.

In the realm of literary criticism, phenomenology had some influence on the Russian Formalists. Just as Husserl 'bracketed off' the real object so as to attend to the act of knowing it, so poetry for the Formalists bracketed the real object and focused instead on the way it was perceived.¹¹ But the main critical debt to phenomenology is evident in the so-called Geneva school of criticism, which flourished in particular in the 1940s and 1950s, and whose major luminaries were the Belgian Georges Poulet, the Swiss critics Jean Starobinski and Jean Rousset, and the Frenchman Jean-Pierre Richard. Also associated with the school were Emil Staiger, Professor of German at the University of Zürich, and the early work of the American critic J. Hillis Miller.

Phenomenological criticism is an attempt to apply the phenomenological method to literary works. As with Husserl's 'bracketing' of the real object, the actual historical context of the literary work, its author, conditions of production and readership are ignored; phenomenological criticism aims instead at a wholly 'immanent' reading of the text, totally unaffected by anything outside it. The text itself is reduced to a pure embodiment of the author's consciousness: all of its stylistic and semantic aspects are grasped as organic parts of a complex totality, of which the unifying essence is the author's mind. To know this mind, we must not refer to anything we actually know of the author – biographical criticism is banned – but only to those aspects of his or her consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself. Moreover, we are concerned with the 'deep structures' of this mind, which can be found in recurrent themes and patterns of imagery; and in grasping these we are grasping the way the writer 'lived' his world, the phenomenological relations between himself as subject and the world as object. The 'world' of a literary work is not an objective reality, but what in German is called *Lebenswelt*, reality as actually organized and experienced by an individual subject. Phenomenological criticism will typically focus upon the way an author experiences time or space, on the relation between self and others or his perception of material objects. The methodological concerns of Husserlian philosophy, in other words, very often become the 'content' of literature for phenomenological criticism.

To seize these transcendental structures, to penetrate to the very interior of a writer's consciousness, phenomenological criticism tries to achieve

complete objectivity and disinterestedness. It must purge itself of its own predilections, plunge itself empathetically into the 'world' of the work, and reproduce as exactly and unbiassedly as possible what it finds there. If it is tackling a Christian poem, it is not concerned to pass value-judgements on this particular world-view, but to demonstrate what it felt like for the author to 'live' it. It is, in other words, a wholly uncritical, non-evaluative mode of analysis. Criticism is not seen as a construction, an active interpretation of the work which will inevitably engage the critic's own interests and biases; it is a mere passive reception of the text, a pure transcription of its mental essences. A literary work is presumed to constitute an organic whole, and so indeed do all the works of a particular author; phenomenological criticism can thus move with aplomb between the most chronologically disparate, thematically different texts in its resolute hunt for unities. It is an idealist, essentialist, anti-historical, formalist and organicist type of criticism, a kind of pure distillation of the blind spots, prejudices and limitations of modern literary theory as a whole. The most impressive and remarkable fact about it is that it succeeded in producing some individual critical studies (not least those by Poulet, Richard and Starobinski) of considerable insight.

For phenomenological criticism, the language of a literary work is little more than an 'expression' of its inner meanings. This somewhat second-hand view of language runs back to Husserl himself. For there is really little place for language as such in Husserlian phenomenology. Husserl speaks of a purely private or internal sphere of experience; but such a sphere is in fact a fiction, since all experience involves language and language is inextricably social. To claim that I am having a wholly private experience is meaningless: I would not be able to have an experience in the first place unless it took place in the terms of some language within which I could identify it. What supplies meaningfulness to my experience for Husserl is not language but the act of perceiving particular phenomena as universals – an act which is supposed to occur independently of language itself. For Husserl, in other words, meaning is something which pre-dates language; language is no more than a secondary activity which gives names to meanings I somehow already possess. How I can possibly come to possess meanings without already having a language is a question which Husserl's system is incapable of answering.

The hallmark of the 'linguistic revolution' of the twentieth century, from Saussure and Wittgenstein to contemporary literary theory, is the recognition that meaning is not simply something 'expressed' or 'reflected' in language: it is actually *produced* by it. It is not as though we have meanings, or experiences, which we then proceed to cloak with words; we can only have the meanings and experiences in the first place because we have a language

to have them in. What this suggests, moreover, is that our experience as individuals is social to its roots; for there can be no such thing as a private language, and to imagine a language is to imagine a whole form of social life. Phenomenology, by contrast, wishes to keep certain 'pure' internal experiences free from the social contaminations of language – or alternatively to see language as no more than a convenient system for 'fixing' meanings which have been formed independently of it. Husserl himself, in a revealing phrase, writes of language as 'conform[ing] in a pure measure to what is seen in its full clarity'.² But how is one able to see something clearly at all, without the conceptual resources of a language at one's disposal? Aware that language poses a severe problem for his theory, Husserl tries to resolve the dilemma by imagining a language which would be purely expressive of consciousness – which would be freed from any burden of having to indicate meanings exterior to our minds at the time of speaking. The attempt is doomed to failure: the only imaginable such 'language' would be purely solitary, interior utterances which would signify nothing whatsoever.³

This idea of a meaningless solitary utterance untainted by the external world is a peculiarly fitting image of phenomenology as such. For all its claims to have retrieved the 'living world' of human action and experience from the arid clutches of traditional philosophy, phenomenology begins and ends as a head without a world. It promises to give a firm grounding for human knowledge, but can do so only at a massive cost: the sacrifice of human history itself. For surely human meanings are in a deep sense historical: they are not a question of intuiting the universal essence of what it is to be an onion, but a matter of changing, practical transactions between social individuals. Despite its focus on reality as actually experienced, as *Lebenswelt* rather than inert fact, its stance towards that world remains contemplative and unhistorical. Phenomenology sought to solve the nightmare of modern history by withdrawing into a speculative sphere where eternal certainty lay in wait; as such, it became a symptom, in its solitary, alienated brooding, of the very crisis it offered to overcome.

The recognition that meaning is historical was what led Husserl's most celebrated pupil, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, to break with his system of thought. Heidegger begins with the transcendental subject; Heidegger rejects this starting-point and sets out instead from a reflection on the irreducible 'givenness' of human existence, or *Dasein* as he calls it. It is for this reason that his work is often characterized as 'existentialist', in contrast to the remorseless 'essentialism' of his mentor. To move from

Husserl to Heidegger is to move from the terrain of pure intellect to a philosophy which meditates on what it feels like to be alive. Whereas English philosophy is usually modestly content to enquire into acts of promising or contrast the grammar of the phrases 'nothing matters' and 'nothing matters', Heidegger's major work *Being and Time* (1927) addresses itself to nothing less than the question of Being itself – more particularly, to that mode of being which is specifically human. Such existence, Heidegger argues, is in the first place always being-in-the-world: we are human subjects only because we are practically bound up with others and the material world, and these relations are constitutive of our life rather than accidental to it. The world is not an object 'out there' to be rationally analysed, set over against a contemplative subject: it is never something we can get outside of and stand over against. [We emerge as subjects from inside a reality which we can never fully objectify, which encompasses both 'subject' and 'object', which is inexhaustible in its meanings and which constitutes us quite as much as we constitute it. The world is not something to be dissolved *à la* Husserl to mental images: it has a brute, recalcitrant being of its own which resists our projects, and we exist simply as part of it.] Husserl's enthroning of the transcendental ego is merely the latest phase of a rationalist Enlightenment philosophy for which 'man' imperiously stamps his own image on the world. Heidegger, by contrast, will partly decentre the human subject from this imaginary position of dominance. [Human existence is a dialogue with the world, and the more reverent activity is to listen rather than to speak. Human knowledge always departs from and moves within what Heidegger calls 'pre-understanding'. Before we have come to think systematically at all, we already share a host of tacit assumptions gleaned from our practical bound-upness with the world, and science or theory are never more than partial abstractions from these concrete concerns, as a map is an abstraction of a real landscape. Understanding is not first of all a matter of isolatable 'cognition', a particular act I perform, but part of the very structure of human existence. For I live humanly only by constantly 'projecting' myself forwards, recognizing and realizing fresh possibilities of being; I am never purely identical with myself, so to speak, but a being always already thrown forwards in advance of myself.] My existence is never something which I can grasp as a finished object, but always a question of fresh possibility, always problematic; and this is equivalent to saying that a human being is constituted by history, or time. [Time is not a medium we move in as a bottle might move in a river: it is the very structure of human life itself, something I am made out of before it is something I measure. Understanding, then, before it is a question of understanding anything in particular, is a dimension of

Dasein, the inner dynamic of my constant self-transcendence. Understanding is radically historical: it is always caught up with the concrete situation I am in, and that I am trying to surpass.

If human existence is constituted by time, it is equally made up of language. Language for Heidegger is not a mere instrument of communication, a secondary device for expressing 'ideas': it is the very dimension in which human life moves, that which brings the world to be in the first place. Only where there is language is there 'world', in the distinctively human sense. Heidegger does not think of language primarily in terms of what you or I might say: it has an existence of its own in which human beings come to participate, and only by participating in it do they come to be human at all. Language always pre-exists the individual subject, as the very realm in which he or she unfolds; and it contains 'truth' less in the sense that it is an instrument for exchanging accurate information than in the sense that it is the place where reality 'un-conceals' itself, gives itself up to our contemplation. In this sense of language as a quasi-objective event, prior to all particular individuals, Heidegger's thinking closely parallels the theories of structuralism.

What is central to Heidegger's thought, then, is not the individual subject but Being itself. The mistake of the Western metaphysical tradition has been to see Being as some kind of objective entity, and to separate it sharply from the subject; Heidegger seeks rather to return to pre-Socratic thought, before the dualism between subject and object opened up, and to regard Being as somehow encompassing both. The result of this suggestive insight, in his later work particularly, is an astonishing cringing before the mystery of Being. Enlightenment rationality, with its ruthlessly dominative, instrumental attitude towards Nature, must be rejected for a humble listening to the stars, skies and forests, a listening which in the acid words of one English commentator bears all the marks of a 'stupefied peasant'. Man must 'make way' for Being by making himself wholly over to it: he must turn to the earth, the inexhaustible mother who is the primary fount of all meaning. Heidegger, the Black Forest philosopher, is yet another Romantic exponent of the 'organic society', though in his case the results of this doctrine were to be more sinister than in the case of Leavis. The exaltation of the peasant, the downgrading of reason for spontaneous 'pre-understanding', the celebration of wise passivity – all of these, combined with Heidegger's belief in an 'authentic' existence-towards-death superior to the life of the faceless masses, led him in 1933 into explicit support of Hitler. The support was short-lived; but it was implicit for all that in elements of the philosophy.

What is valuable in that philosophy, among other things, is its insistence that theoretical knowledge always emerges from a context of practical social interests. Heidegger's model of a knowable object is, significantly, a tool: we know the world not contemplatively, but as a system of interrelated things which, like a hammer, are 'to hand', elements in some practical project. Knowing is deeply related to doing. But the other side of that peasant-like practicality is a contemplative mysticism: when the hammer breaks, when we cease to take it for granted, its familiarity is stripped from it and it yields up to us its authentic being. A broken hammer is more of a hammer than an unbroken one. Heidegger shares with the Formalists the belief that art is such a defamiliarization: when van Gogh shows us a pair of peasant shoes he estranges them, allowing their profoundly authentic shoeness to shine forth. Indeed for the later Heidegger it is in art alone that such phenomenological truth is able to manifest itself, just as for Leavis literature comes to stand in for a mode of being which modern society has supposedly lost. Art, like language, is not to be seen as the expression of an individual subject: the subject is just the place or medium where the truth of the world speaks itself, and it is this truth which the reader of a poem must attentively *hear*. Literary interpretation for Heidegger is not grounded in human activity: it is not first of all something we *do*, but something we must let happen. We must open ourselves passively to the text, submitting ourselves to its mysteriously inexhaustible being, allowing ourselves to be interrogated by it. Our posture before art, in other words, must have something of the servility which Heidegger advocated for the German people before the Führer. The only alternative to the imperious reason of bourgeois industrial society, it would appear, is a slavish self-abnegation.

I have said that understanding for Heidegger is radically historical, but this now needs to be qualified somewhat. The title of his major work is *Being and Time* rather than *Being and History*; and there is a significant difference between the two concepts. 'Time' is in one sense a more abstract notion than history: it suggests the passing of the seasons, or the way I might experience the shape of my personal life, rather than the struggles of nations, the nurturing and slaughtering of populations or the making and toppling of states. 'Time' for Heidegger is still an essentially metaphysical category, in a way that 'history' for other thinkers is not. It is a derivation from what we actually do, which is what I am taking 'history' to mean. This kind of concrete history concerns Heidegger hardly at all: indeed he distinguishes between *Historie*, meaning roughly 'what happens', and *Geschichte*, which is 'what happens' experienced as authentically meaningful. My own personal history is authentically meaningful when I accept responsibility for my own

existence, seize my own future possibilities and live in enduring awareness of my own future death. [This may or may not be true, but it does not seem to have any immediate relevance to how I live 'historically' in the sense of being bound up with particular individuals, actual social relations and concrete institutions.] All of this, from the Olympian heights of Heidegger's ponderously esoteric prose, looks very small beer indeed. 'True' history for Heidegger is an inward, 'authentic' or 'existential' history – a mastering of dread and nothingness, a resoluteness towards death, a 'gathering in' of my powers – which operates in effect as a substitute for history in its more common and practical senses. As the Hungarian critic Georg Lukács put it, Heidegger's famous 'historicity' is not really distinguishable from *ahistoricity*.

In the end, then, Heidegger fails to overturn the static, eternal truths of Husserl and the Western metaphysical tradition by historicizing them. All he does instead is set up a different kind of metaphysical entity – *Dasein* itself. His work represents a flight from history as much as an encounter with it; and the same can be said of the fascism with which he flirted. Fascism is a desperate, last-ditch attempt on the part of monopoly capitalism to abolish contradictions which have become intolerable; and it does so in part by offering a whole alternative history, a narrative of blood, soil, the 'authentic' race, the sublimity of death and self-abnegation, the Reich that will endure for a thousand years. This is not to suggest that Heidegger's philosophy as a whole is no more than a rationale for fascism; it *is* to suggest that it provided one imaginary solution to the crisis of modern history as fascism provided another, and that the two shared a number of features in common.

Heidegger describes his philosophical enterprise as a 'hermeneutic of Being'; and the word 'hermeneutic' means the science or art of interpretation. Heidegger's form of philosophy is generally referred to as 'hermeneutical phenomenology', to distinguish it from the 'transcendental phenomenology' of Husserl and his followers; it is called this because it bases itself upon questions of historical interpretation rather than on transcendental consciousness.⁴ The word 'hermeneutics' was originally confined to the interpretation of sacred scripture; but during the nineteenth century it broadened its scope to encompass the problem of textual interpretation as a whole. Heidegger's two most famous predecessors as 'hermeneuticists' were the German thinkers Schleiermacher and Dilthey; his most celebrated successor is the modern German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. With Gadamer's central study *Truth and Method* (1960), we are in the arena of problems which have never ceased to plague modern literary theory. What is the meaning of a literary text? How relevant to this meaning is the author's

intention? Can we hope to understand works which are culturally and historically alien to us? Is 'objective' understanding possible, or is all understanding relative to our own historical situation? There is, as we shall see, a good deal more at stake in these issues than 'literary interpretation' alone.

For Husserl, meaning was an 'intentional object'. By this he meant that it was neither reducible to the psychological acts of a speaker or listener, nor completely independent of such mental processes. Meaning was not objective in the sense that an armchair is, but it was not simply subjective either. It was a kind of 'ideal' object, in the sense that it could be expressed in a number of different ways but still remain the same meaning. On this view, the meaning of a literary work is fixed once and for all: it is identical with whatever 'mental object' the author had in mind, or 'intended', at the time of writing.

This, in effect, is the position taken up by the American hermeneuticist E. D. Hirsch Jr, whose major work, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), is considerably indebted to Husserlian phenomenology. It does not follow for Hirsch that because the meaning of a work is identical with what the author meant by it at the time of writing, only one interpretation of the text is possible. There may be a number of different valid interpretations, but all of them must move within the 'system of typical expectations and probabilities' which the author's meaning permits. Nor does Hirsch deny that a literary work may 'mean' different things to different people at different times. But this, he claims, is more properly a matter of the work's 'significance' rather than its 'meaning'. The fact that I may produce *Macbeth* in a way which makes it relevant to nuclear warfare does not alter the fact that this is not what *Macbeth*, from Shakespeare's own viewpoint, 'means'. Significances vary throughout history, whereas meanings remain constant; authors put in meanings, whereas readers assign significances.

In identifying the meaning of a text with what the author meant by it, Hirsch does not presume that we always have access to the author's intentions. He or she may be long dead, or may have forgotten what she intended altogether. It follows that we may sometimes hit on the 'right' interpretation of a text but never be in a position to know this. This does not worry Hirsch much, as long as his basic position – that literary meaning is absolute and immutable, wholly resistant to historical change – is maintained. Why Hirsch is able to maintain this position is essentially because his theory of meaning, like Husserl's, is pre-linguistic. Meaning is something which the author *wills*: it is a ghostly, wordless mental act which is then 'fixed' for all time in a particular set of material signs. It is an affair of consciousness, rather than of words. Quite what such a wordless consciousness consists in

is not made plain. Perhaps the reader would care to experiment here by looking up from the book for a moment and 'meaning' something silently in his or her head. What did you 'mean'? And was it different from the words in which you have just formulated the response? To believe that meaning consists of words plus a wordless act of willing or intending is rather like believing that every time I open the door 'on purpose' I make a silent act of willing while opening it.

There are obvious problems with trying to determine what is going on in somebody's head and then claiming that this is the meaning of a piece of writing. For one thing, a great many things are likely to be going on in an author's head at the time of writing. Hirsch accepts this, but does not consider that these are to be confused with 'verbal meaning'; to sustain his theory, however, he is forced to make a fairly drastic reduction of all that the author might have meant to what he calls meaning 'types', manageable categories of meaning into which the text may be narrowed, simplified and sifted by the critic. Our interest in a text can thus only be in these broad typologies of meaning, from which all particularity has been carefully banished. The critic must seek to reconstruct what Hirsch calls the 'intrinsic genre' of a text, by which he means, roughly, the general conventions and ways of seeing which would have governed the author's meanings at the time of writing. Little more than this is likely to be available to us: it would doubtless be impossible to recover *exactly* what Shakespeare meant by 'cream-fac'd loon', so we have to settle for what he might generally have had in mind. All of the particular details of a work are presumed to be governed by such generalities. Whether this does justice to the detail, complexity and conflictive nature of literary works is another question. To secure the meaning of a work for all time, rescuing it from the ravages of history, criticism has to police its potentially anarchic details, hemming them back with the compound of 'typical' meaning. Its stance towards the text is authoritarian and juridical: anything which cannot be herded inside the enclosure of 'probable authorial meaning' is brusquely expelled, and everything remaining within that enclosure is strictly subordinated to this single governing intention. The unalterable meaning of the sacred scripture has been preserved; what one does with it, how one uses it, becomes a merely secondary matter of 'significance'.

The aim of all this policing is the protection of private property. For Hirsch an author's meaning is his own, and should not be stolen or trespass upon by the reader. The meaning of the text is not to be socialized, made the public property of its various readers; it belongs solely to the author, who should have the exclusive rights over its disposal long after he

or she is dead. Interestingly, Hirsch concedes that his own point of view is really quite arbitrary. There is nothing in the nature of the text itself which constrains a reader to construe it in accordance with authorial meaning; it is just that if we do not choose to respect the author's meaning then we have no 'norm' of interpretation, and risk opening the floodgates to critical anarchy. Like most authoritarian regimes, that is to say, Hirschian theory is quite unable rationally to justify its own ruling values. There is no more reason in principle why the author's meaning should be preferred than there is for preferring the reading offered by the critic with the shortest hair or the largest feet. Hirsch's defence of authorial meaning resembles those defences of landed titles which begin by tracing their process of legal inheritance over the centuries, and end up by admitting that if you push that process back far enough the titles were gained by fighting someone else for them.

Even if critics could obtain access to an author's intention, would this securely ground the literary text in a determinate meaning? What if we asked for an account of the meaning of the author's intentions, and then for an account of that, and so on? Security is possible here only if authorial meanings are what Hirsch takes them to be: pure, solid, 'self-identical' facts which can be unimpeachably used to anchor the work. But this is a highly dubious way of seeing any kind of meaning at all. Meanings are not as stable and determinate as Hirsch thinks, even authorial ones – and the reason they are not is because, as he will not recognize, they are the products of language, which always has something slippery about it. It is difficult to know what it could be to have a 'pure' intention or express a 'pure' meaning; it is only because Hirsch holds meaning apart from language that he is able to trust to such chimeras. An author's intention is itself a complex 'text', which can be debated, translated and variously interpreted just like any other.

Hirsch's distinction between 'meaning' and 'significance' is in one obvious sense valid. It is unlikely that Shakespeare thought that he was writing about nuclear warfare. When Gertrude describes Hamlet as 'far' she probably does not mean that he is overweight, as modern readers might tend to suspect. But the absoluteness of Hirsch's distinction is surely untenable. It is just not possible to make such a complete distinction between 'what the text means' and 'what it means to me'. [My account of what *Macbeth* might have meant in the cultural conditions of its time is still *my* account, inescapably influenced by my own language and frames of cultural reference.] I can never pick myself up by my bootstraps out of all that and come to know in some absolutely objective way what it was Shakespeare actually had in mind. Any such notion of absolute objectivity is an illusion Hirsch does not himself seek such absolute certainty, largely because he knows he cannot have it: he

must content himself instead with reconstructing the author's 'probable' intention. But he pays no attention to the ways in which such reconstructing can only go on within his own historically conditioned frames of meaning and perception. Indeed such 'historicism' is the very target of his polemic. Like Husserl, then, he offers a form of knowledge which is timeless and sublimely disinterested. That his own work is far from disinterested – that he believes himself to be safeguarding the immutable meaning of literary works from certain contemporary ideologies – is only one factor which might lead us to view such claims with suspicion.

The target which Hirsch has firmly in his sights is the hermeneutics of Heidegger, Gadamer and others. For him, the insistence of these thinkers that meaning is always historical opens the door to complete relativism. On this argument, a literary work can mean one thing on Monday and another on Friday. It is interesting to speculate why Hirsch should find this possibility so fearful; but to stop the relativist rot he returns to Husserl and argues that meaning is unchangeable because it is always the intentional act of an individual at some particular point in time. There is one fairly obvious sense in which this is false. If I say to you in certain circumstances, 'Close the door!' and when you have done so impatiently add, 'I meant of course open the window', you would be quite entitled to point out that the English words 'Close the door' mean what they mean whatever I might have intended them to mean. This is not to say that one could not imagine contexts in which 'Close the door' meant something entirely different from its usual meaning: it could be a metaphorical way of saying, 'Don't negotiate any further'. The meaning of the sentence, like any other, is by no means immutably fixed: with enough ingenuity one could probably invent contexts in which it could mean a thousand different things. But if a gale is ripping through the room and I am wearing only a swimming costume, the meaning of the words would probably be situationally clear; and unless I had made a slip of the tongue or suffered some unaccountable lapse of attention it would be futile for me to claim that I had 'really' meant 'Open the window'. This is one evident sense in which the meaning of my words is not determined by my private intentions – in which I cannot just choose to make my words mean anything at all, as Humpty-Dumpty in *Alice* mistakenly thought he could. The meaning of language is a social matter: there is a real sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me.

It is this which Heidegger understood, and which Hans-Georg Gadamer goes on to elaborate in *Truth and Method*. For Gadamer, the meaning of a literary work is never exhausted by the intentions of its author; as the work passes from one cultural or historical context to another, new meanings may

be culled from it which were perhaps never anticipated by its author or contemporary audience. Hirsch would admit this in one sense but relegate it to the realm of 'significance'; for Gadamer, this instability is part of the very character of the work itself. All interpretation is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture; there is no possibility of knowing the literary text 'as it is'. It is this 'scepticism' which Hirsch finds most unnerving in Heideggerian hermeneutics, and against which he wages his rearguard action.

For Gadamer, all interpretation of a past work consists in a dialogue between past and present. Confronted with such a work, we listen with wise Heideggerian passivity to its unfamiliar voice, allowing it to question our present concerns; but what the work 'says' to us will in turn depend on the kind of questions which we are able to address to it, from our own vantage-point in history. It will also depend on our ability to reconstruct the 'question' to which the work itself is an 'answer', for the work is also a dialogue with its own history. All understanding is *productive*: it is always 'understanding otherwise', realizing new potential in the text, making a difference to it. The present is only ever understandable through the past, with which it forms a living continuity; and the past is always grasped from our own partial viewpoint within the present. The event of understanding comes about when our own 'horizon' of historical meanings and assumptions 'fuses' with the 'horizon' within which the work itself is placed. At such a moment we enter the alien world of the artefact, but at the same time gather it into our own realm, reaching a more complete understanding of ourselves. Rather than 'leaving home', Gadamer remarks, we 'come home'.

It is hard to see why Hirsch should find all this so unnerving. On the contrary, it all seems considerably too smooth. Gadamer can equably surrender himself and literature to the winds of history because these scattered leaves will always in the end come home – and they will do so because beneath all history, silently spanning past, present and future, runs a unifying essence known as 'tradition'. As with T. S. Eliot, all 'valid' texts belong to this tradition, which both speaks through the work of the past that I am contemplating, and speaks through me in the act of 'valid' contemplation. Past and present, subject and object, the alien and the intimate are thus securely coupled together by a Being which encompasses them both. Gadamer is not worried that our tacit cultural preconceptions or 'pre-understandings' may prejudice the reception of the past literary work, since these pre-understandings come to us from the tradition itself, of which the literary work is a part. Prejudice is a positive rather than a negative factor: it was the Enlightenment, with its dream of a wholly disinterested knowledge,

which led to the modern 'prejudice against prejudice'. Creative prejudices, as against ephemeral and distorting ones, are those which arise from the tradition and bring us into contact with it. The authority of the tradition itself, linked with our own strenuous self-reflection, will sort out which of our preconceptions are legitimate and which are not – just as the historical distance between ourselves and a work of the past, far from creating an obstacle to true understanding, actually aids such cognition by stripping the work of all that was of merely passing significance about it.

It might be as well to ask Gadamer whose and what 'tradition' he actually has in mind. For his theory holds only on the enormous assumption that there is indeed a single 'mainstream' tradition; that all 'valid' works participate in it; that history forms an unbroken continuum, free of decisive rupture, conflict and contradiction; and that the prejudices which 'we' (who?) have inherited from the 'tradition' are to be cherished. It assumes, in other words, that history is a place where 'we' can always and everywhere be at home; that the work of the past will deepen – rather than, say, decimate – our present self-understanding; and that the alien is always secretly familiar. It is, in short, a grossly complacent theory of history, the projection on to the world at large of a viewpoint for which 'art' means chiefly the classical monuments of the high German tradition. It has little conception of history and tradition as oppressive as well as liberating forces, areas rent by conflict and domination. History for Gadamer is not a place of struggle, discontinuity and exclusion but a 'continuing chain', an ever-flowing river, almost, one might say, a club of the like-minded. Historical differences are tolerantly conceded, but only because they are effectively liquidated by an understanding which 'bridges' the temporal distance which separates the interpreter from the text; thus it overcomes... the alienation of meaning which has befallen the text'.⁵ There is no need to strive to surmount temporal distance by projecting oneself empathetically into the past, as Wilhelm Dilthey among others had believed, since this distance is already bridged by custom, prejudice and tradition. Tradition holds an authority to which we must submit: there is little possibility of critically challenging that authority, and no speculation that its influence may be anything but benevolent. Tradition, Gadamer argues, 'has a justification that is outside the arguments of reason'.⁶

'The conversation that we are', was how Gadamer once described history. Hermeneutics sees history as a living dialogue between past, present and future, and seeks patiently to remove obstacles to this endless mutual communication. But it cannot tolerate the idea of a failure of communication which is not merely ephemeral, which cannot be righted merely by more

[sensitive textual interpretation, but which is somehow *systematic*: which is, so to speak, built into the communication structures of whole societies. It cannot, in other words, come to terms with the problem of ideology – with the fact that the unending ‘dialogue’ of human history is as often as not a monologue by the powerful to the powerless, or that if it is indeed a ‘dialogue’ then the partners – men and women, for example – hardly occupy equal positions. It refuses to recognize that discourse is always caught up with a power which may be by no means benign; and the discourse in which it most signally fails to recognize this fact is its own.]

Hermeneutics, as we have seen, tends to concentrate on works of the past: the theoretical questions it asks arise mainly from this perspective. This is hardly surprising, given its scriptural beginnings, but it is also significant: it suggests that criticism’s main role is to make sense of the classics. It would be difficult to imagine Gadamer grappling with Norman Mailer. Along with this traditionalist emphasis goes another: the assumption that works of literature form an ‘organic’ unity. The hermeneutical method seeks to fit each element of a text into a complete whole, in a process commonly known as the ‘hermeneutical circle’: individual features are intelligible in terms of the entire context, and the entire context becomes intelligible through the individual features. Hermeneutics does not generally consider the possibility that literary works may be diffuse, incomplete and internally contradictory, though there are many reasons to assume that they are.⁷ It is worth noting that E. D. Hirsch, for all his antipathy to Romantic organicist concepts, also shares the prejudice that literary texts are integrated wholes, and logically so: the unity of the work resides in the author’s all-pervasive intention. There is in fact no reason why the author should not have had several mutually contradictory intentions, or why his intention may not have been somehow self-contradictory, but Hirsch does not consider these possibilities.

The most recent development of hermeneutics in Germany is known as ‘reception aesthetics’ or ‘reception theory’, and unlike Gadamer it does not concentrate exclusively on works of the past. Reception theory examines the reader’s role in literature, and as such is a fairly novel development. Indeed one might very roughly periodize the history of modern literary theory in three stages: a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and a marked shift of attention to the reader over recent years. The reader has always been the most underprivileged of this trio – strangely, since without him or her there would be no literary texts at all. Literary texts do not exist on bookshelves: they are processes of signification materialized only in the

practice of reading. For literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.

What is involved in the act of reading? Let me take, almost literally at random, the first two sentences of a novel: “‘What did you make of the new couple?’ The Hanemas, Piet and Angela, were undressing.” (John Updike, *Couples*.) What are we to make of this? We are puzzled for a moment, perhaps, by an apparent lack of connection between the two sentences, until we grasp that what is at work here is the literary convention by which we may attribute a piece of direct speech to a character even if the text does not explicitly do this itself. We gather that some character, probably Piet or Angela Hanema, makes the opening statement; but why do we presume this? The sentence in quotation marks may not be spoken at all: it may be a thought, or a question which someone else has asked, or a kind of epigraph placed at the opening of the novel. Perhaps it is addressed to Piet and Angela Hanema by somebody else, or by a sudden voice from the sky. One reason why the latter solution seems unlikely is that the question is a little colloquial for a voice from the sky, and we might know that Updike is in general a realist writer who does not usually go in for such devices; but a writer’s texts do not necessarily form a consistent whole and it may be unwise to lean on this assumption too heavily. It is unlikely on realist grounds that the question is asked by a chorus of people speaking in unison, and slightly unlikely that it is asked by somebody other than Piet or Angela Hanema, since we learn the next moment that they are undressing; perhaps speculate that they are a married couple, and know that married couples, in our suburb of Birmingham at least, do not make a practice of undressing together before third parties, whatever they might do individually.

We have probably already made a whole set of inferences as we read these sentences. We may infer, for example, that the ‘couple’ referred to is a man and woman, though there is nothing so far to tell us that they are not two women or two tiger cubs. We assume that whoever poses the question cannot mind-read, as then there would be no need to ask. We may suspect that the questioner values the judgement of the addressee, though there is not sufficient context as yet for us to judge that the question is not taunting or aggressive. The phrase ‘The Hanemas’, we imagine, is probably in grammatical apposition to the phrase ‘Piet and Angela’, to indicate that this is their surname, which provides a significant piece of evidence for their being married. But we cannot rule out the possibility that there is some group of people called the Hanemas in addition to Piet and Angela, perhaps a whole tribe of them, and that they are all undressing together in some immense hall. The fact that Piet and Angela may share the same surname does not

confirm that they are husband and wife: they may be a particularly liberated or incestuous brother and sister, father and daughter or mother and son. We have assumed, however, that they are undressing in sight of each other, whereas nothing has yet told us that the question is not shouted from one bedroom or beach-hut to another. Perhaps Piet and Angela are small children, though the relative sophistication of the question makes this unlikely. Most readers will by now probably have assumed that Piet and Angela Hanema are a married couple undressing together in their bedroom after some event, perhaps a party, at which a new married couple was present, but none of this is actually said.

The fact that these are the first two sentences of the novel means, of course, that many of these questions will be answered for us as we read on. But the process of speculating and inferring to which we are driven by our ignorance here is simply a more intense and dramatic example of what we do all the time when reading. As we read on we shall encounter many more problems, which can be solved only by making further assumptions. We will be given the kinds of *facts* which are withheld from us in these sentences, but we will still have to construct questionable interpretations of them. Reading the opening of Updike's novel involves us in a surprising amount of complex, largely unconscious labour: although we rarely notice it, we are all the time engaged in constructing hypotheses about the meaning of the text. The reader makes implicit connections, fills in gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches; and to do this means drawing on a tacit knowledge of the world in general and of literary conventions in particular. The text itself is really no more than a series of 'cues' to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning. In the terminology of reception theory, the reader 'concretizes' the literary work, which is in itself no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page. Without this continuous active participation on the reader's part, there would be no literary work at all. However solid it may seem, any work for reception theory is actually made up of 'gaps', just as tables are for modern physics – the gap, for instance, between the first and second sentences of *Couples*, where the reader must supply a missing connection. The work is full of 'indeterminacies', elements which depend for their effect upon the reader's interpretation, and which can be interpreted in a number of different, perhaps mutually conflicting ways. The paradox of this is that the more information the work provides, the more indeterminate it becomes. Shakespeare's 'secret black and midnight hags' in one sense narrows down what kind of hags are in question, makes them more determinate, but because all three adjectives are richly suggestive, evoking different responses in different readers, the

text has also rendered itself less determinate in the act of trying to become more so.

The process of reading, for reception theory, is always a dynamic one, a complex movement and unfolding through time. The literary work itself exists merely as what the Polish theorist Roman Ingarden calls a set of 'schemata' or general directions, which the reader must actualize. To do this, the reader will bring to the work certain 'pre-understandings', a dim context of beliefs and expectations within which the work's various features will be assessed. As the reading process proceeds, however, these expectations will themselves be modified by what we learn, and the hermeneutical circle – moving from part to whole and back to part – will begin to revolve. Striving to construct a coherent sense from the text, the reader will select and organize its elements into consistent wholes, excluding some and foregrounding others, 'concretizing' certain items in certain ways; he or she will try to hold different perspectives within the work together, or shift from perspective to perspective in order to build up an integrated 'illusion'. What we have learnt on page one will fade and become 'foreshortened' in memory, perhaps to be radically qualified by what we learn later. Reading is not a straightforward linear movement, a merely cumulative affair: our initial speculations generate a frame of reference within which to interpret what comes next, but what comes next may retrospectively transform our original understanding, highlighting some features of it and backgrounding others. As we read on we shed assumptions, revise beliefs, make more and more complex inferences and anticipations; each sentence opens up a horizon which is confirmed, challenged or undermined by the next. We read backwards and forwards simultaneously, predicting and recollecting, perhaps aware of other possible realizations of the text which our reading has negated. Moreover, all of this complicated activity is carried out on many levels at once, for the text has 'backgrounds' and 'foregrounds', different narrative viewpoints, alternative layers of meaning between which we are constantly moving.

Wolfgang Iser, of the so-called Constance school of reception aesthetics, whose theories I have been largely discussing, speaks in *The Act of Reading* (1978) of the 'strategies' which texts put to work, and of the 'repertoires' of familiar themes and allusions which they contain. To read at all, we need to be familiar with the literary techniques and conventions which a particular work deploys; we must have some grasp of its 'codes', by which is meant the rules which systematically govern the ways it produces its meanings. Recall once more the London Underground sign I discussed in the Introduction: 'Dogs must be carried on the escalator.' To understand this notice I need to

do a great deal more than simply read its words one after the other. I need to know, for example, that these words belong to what might be called a 'code of reference' – that the sign is not just a decorative piece of language there to entertain travellers, but is to be taken as referring to the behaviour of actual dogs and passengers on actual escalators. I must mobilize my general social knowledge to recognize that the sign has been placed there by the authorities, that these authorities have the power to penalize offenders, that I as a member of the public am being implicitly addressed, none of which is evident in the words themselves. I have to rely, in other words, upon certain social codes and contexts to understand the notice properly. But I also need to bring these into interaction with certain codes or conventions of reading – conventions which tell me that by 'the escalator' is meant *this* escalator and not one in Paraguay, that 'must be carried' means 'must be carried now', and so on. I must recognize that the 'genre' of the sign is such as to make it highly improbable that the ambiguity I mentioned in the Introduction is actually 'intended'. It is not easy to distinguish between 'social' and 'literary' codes here: concretizing 'the escalator' as 'this escalator', adopting a reading convention which eradicates ambiguity, itself depends upon a whole network of social knowledge.

I understand the notice, then, by interpreting it in terms of certain codes which seem appropriate; but for Iser this is not all of what happens in reading literature. If there were a perfect 'fit' between the codes which governed literary works and the codes we applied to interpret them, all literature would be as uninspiring as the London Underground sign. The most effective literary work for Iser is one which forces the reader into a new critical awareness of his or her customary codes and expectations. The work interrogates and transforms the implicit beliefs we bring to it, 'disconfirms' our routine habits of perception and so forces us to acknowledge them for the first time for what they are. Rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes for understanding. There is a parallel here with Russian Formalism: in the act of reading, our conventional assumptions are 'defamiliarized', objectified to the point where we can criticize and so revise them. If we modify the text by our reading strategies, it simultaneously modifies us: like objects in a scientific experiment, it may return an unpredictable 'answer' to our 'questions'. The whole point of reading, for a critic like Iser, is that it brings us into deeper self-consciousness, catalyzes a more critical view of our own identities. It is as though what we have been 'reading', in working our way through a book, is ourselves.

Iser's reception theory, in fact, is based on a liberal humanist ideology: a belief that in reading we should be flexible and open-minded, prepared to put our beliefs into question and allow them to be transformed. Behind this case lies the influence of Gadamerian hermeneutics, with its trust in that enriched self-knowledge which springs from an encounter with the unfamiliar. But Iser's liberal humanism, like most such doctrines, is less liberal than it looks at first sight. He writes that a reader with strong ideological commitments is likely to be an inadequate one, since he or she is less likely to be open to the transformative power of literary works. What this implies is that in order to undergo transformation at the hands of the text, we must only hold our beliefs fairly provisionally in the first place. The only good reader would *already* have to be a liberal: the act of reading produces a kind of human subject which it also presupposes. This is also paradoxical in another way: for if we only hold our convictions rather lightly in the first place, having them interrogated and subverted by the text is not really very significant. Nothing much, in other words, will have actually happened. The reader is not so much radically upbraided, as simply returned to himself or herself as a more thoroughly liberal subject. Everything about the reading subject is up for question in the act of reading, except what kind of (liberal) subject it is: these ideological limits can be in no way criticized, for then the whole model would collapse. In this sense, the plurality and open-endedness of the process of reading are permissible because they presuppose a certain kind of closed unity which always remains in place: the unity of the reading subject, which is violated and transgressed only to be returned more fully to itself. As with Gadamer, we can foray out into foreign territory because we are always secretly at home. The kind of reader whom literature is going to affect most profoundly is one already equipped with the 'right' kind of capacities and responses, proficient in operating certain critical techniques and recognizing certain literary conventions; but this is precisely the kind of reader who needs to be affected least. Such a reader is 'transformed' from the outset, and is ready to risk further transformation just because of this fact. To read literature 'effectively' you must exercise certain critical capacities, capacities which are always problematically defined; but it is precisely these capacities which 'literature' will be unable to call into question, because its very existence depends on them. What you have defined as a 'literary' work will always be closely bound up with what you consider 'appropriate' critical techniques: a 'literary' work will mean, more or less, one which can be usefully illuminated by such methods of enquiry. But in that case the hermeneutical circle really is a vicious rather than virtuous one: what you get out of the work will depend in large measure on what you put

ing glide of signs, in the provocative glimpses of meanings which surface only to submerge again. Caught up in this exuberant dance of language, delighting in the textures of words themselves, the reader knows less the purposive pleasures of building a coherent system, binding textual elements masterfully together to shore up a unitary self, than the masochistic thrills of feeling that self shattered and dispersed through the tangled webs of the work itself. Reading is less like a laboratory than a boudoir. Far from returning the reader to himself, in some final recuperation of the selfhood which the act of reading has thrown into question, the modernist text explodes his or her secure cultural identity, in a *jouissance* which for Barthes is both readerly bliss and sexual orgasm.

Barthes's theory is not, as the reader might have suspected, without its problems. There is something a little disturbing about this self-indulgent avant-garde hedonism in a world where others lack not only books but food. If Iser offers us a grimly 'normative' model which reins in the unbounded potential of language, Barthes presents us with a private, asocial, essentially anarchic experience which is perhaps no more than the flip-side of the first. Both critics betray a liberal distaste for systematic thought; both in their different ways ignore the position of the reader in history. For readers do not of course encounter texts in a void: all readers are socially and historically positioned, and how they interpret literary works will be deeply shaped by this fact. Iser is aware of the social dimension of reading, but chooses to concentrate largely on its 'aesthetic' aspects; a more historically-minded member of the school of Constance is Hans Robert Jauss, who seeks in Gadamerian fashion to situate a literary work within its historical 'horizon', the context of cultural meanings within which it was produced, and then explores the shifting relations between this and the changing 'horizons' of its historical readers. The aim of this work is to produce a new kind of literary history – one centred not on authors, influences and literary trends, but on literature as defined and interpreted by its various moments of historical 'reception'. It is not that literary works themselves remain constant, while interpretations of them change: texts and literary traditions are themselves actively altered according to the various historical 'horizons' within which they are received.

A more detailed historical study of literary reception is Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1948). What Sartre's book makes clear is the fact that a work's reception is never just an 'external' fact about it, a contingent matter of book reviews and bookshop sales. It is a constitutive dimension of the work itself. Every literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written *for*: every work encodes within itself

what Iser calls an 'implied reader', intimates in its every gesture the kind of 'addressee' it anticipates. 'Consumption', in literary as in any other kind of production, is part of the process of production itself. If a novel opens with the sentence 'Jack staggered red-nosed out of the pub', it already implies a reader who understands fairly advanced English, knows what a pub is and has cultural knowledge of the connection between alcohol and facial inflammation. It is not just that a writer 'needs an audience': the language he uses already implies one range of possible audiences rather than another, and this is not a matter in which he necessarily has much choice. A writer may not have in mind a particular kind of reader at all, he may be superbly indifferent to who reads his work, but a certain kind of reader is already included within the very act of writing itself, as an internal structure of the text. Even when I talk to myself, my utterances would not be utterances at all unless they, rather than I, anticipated a potential listener. Sartre's study, then, sets out to pose the question 'For whom does one write?', but in an historical rather than 'existential' perspective. It traces the destiny of the French writer from the seventeenth century, where the 'classical' style signalled a settled contract or shared framework of assumptions between author and audience, to the ingrown self-consciousness of a nineteenth-century literature ineffectually addressed to a bourgeoisie it despised. It ends with the dilemma of the contemporary 'committed' writer, who can address his work neither to the bourgeoisie, the working class, nor some myth of 'man in general'.

Reception theory of the Jauss and Iser kind seems to raise a pressing epistemological problem. If one considers the 'text in itself' as a kind of skeleton, a set of 'schemata' waiting to be concretized in various ways by various readers, how can one discuss these schemata at all without having already concretized them? In speaking of the 'text in itself', measuring it as a norm against particular interpretations of it, is one ever dealing with anything more than one's own concretization? Is the critic claiming some God-like knowledge of the 'text in itself', a knowledge denied to the mere reader who has to make do with his or her inevitably partial construction of the text? It is a version, in other words, of the old problem of how one can know the light in the refrigerator is off when the door is closed. Roman Ingarden considers this difficulty but can provide no adequate solution to it; Iser permits the reader a fair degree of freedom, but we are not free simply to interpret as we wish. For an interpretation to be an interpretation of *this* text and not of some other, it must be in some sense logically constrained by the text itself. The work, in other words, exercises a degree of determinacy over readers' responses to it, otherwise criticism would seem to fall into total anarchy. *Bleak House* would be nothing more than the millions of different,

often discrepant readings of the novel which readers have come up with, and the 'text itself' would drop out, as a kind of mysterious X. What if the literary work were not a determinate structure containing certain indeterminacies, but if everything in the text was indeterminate, dependent on which way the reader chose to construct it? In what sense could we then speak of interpreting the 'same' work?

Not all reception theorists find this an embarrassment. The American critic Stanley Fish is quite happy to accept that, when you get down to it, there is no 'objective' work of literature there on the seminar table at all. *Bleak House* is just all the assorted accounts of the novel that have been or will be given. The true writer is the reader: dissatisfied with mere Iserian co-partnership in the literary enterprise, the readers have now overthrown the bosses and installed themselves in power. For Fish, reading is not a matter of discovering what the text means, but a process of experiencing what it *does* to you. His notion of language is pragmatist: a linguistic inversion, for example, will perhaps generate in us a feeling of surprise or disorientation, and criticism is no more than an account of the reader's developing responses to the succession of words on the page. What the text 'does' to us, however, is actually a matter of what we do to it, a question of interpretation; the object of critical attention is the structure of the reader's experience, not any 'objective' structure to be found in the work itself. Everything in the text – its grammar, meanings, formal units – is a product of interpretation, in no sense 'factually' given; and this raises the intriguing question of what it is that Fish believes he is interpreting when he reads. His refreshingly candid answer to this question is that he does not know; but neither, he thinks, does anybody else.

Fish is in fact careful to guard against the hermeneutical anarchy to which his theory appears to lead. To avoid dissolving the text into a thousand competing readings, he appeals to certain 'interpretative strategies' which readers have in common, and which will govern their personal responses. Not any old reading response will do: the readers in question are 'informed or at-home' readers bred in the academic institutions, whose responses are thus unlikely to prove too wildly divergent from each other to forestall all reasoned debate. He is, however, insistent that there is nothing whatsoever 'in' the work itself – that the whole idea of meaning being somehow 'immanent' in the text's language, awaiting its release by the readers' interpretation, is an objectivist illusion. It is to this illusion, he considers, that Wolfgang Iser has fallen prey.

The argument between Fish and Iser is to some extent a verbal one. Fish is quite right to claim that nothing, in literature or the world at large, is

'given' or 'determinate', if by that is meant 'non-interpreted'. There are no 'brute' facts, independent of human meanings; there are no facts that we do not know about. But this is not what 'given' necessarily or even usually means: few philosophers of science would nowadays deny that the data in the laboratory are the product of interpretation, just that they are not interpretations in the sense that the Darwinian theory of evolution is. There is a difference between scientific hypotheses and scientific data, though both are indubitably 'interpretations', and the uncrossable gulf which much traditional philosophy of science has imagined between them is certainly an illusion.⁸ You can say that perceiving eleven black marks as the word 'nightingale' is an interpretation, or that perceiving something as black or eleven or a word is an interpretation, and you would be right; but if in most circumstances you read those marks to mean 'nightgown' you would be wrong. An interpretation on which everyone is likely to agree is one way of defining a fact. It is less easy to show that interpretations of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' are wrong. Interpretation in this second, broader sense usually runs up against what philosophy of science calls the 'underdetermination of theory', meaning that any set of data can be explained by more theories than one. This does not seem to be the case in deciding whether the eleven marks I have mentioned form the word 'nightingale' or 'nightgown'.

The fact that these marks denote a certain kind of bird is quite arbitrary, a matter of linguistic and historical convention. If the English language had developed differently, they might not; or there may be some language unknown to me in which they denote 'dichotomous'. There may be some culture which would not perceive these marks as imprints at all, as 'marks' in our sense, but see them as bits of black immanent in the white paper which have somehow emerged. This culture may also have a different counting-system from ours and reckon them not as eleven but as three plus an indefinite number. In its form of script, there may well be no distinction between their words for 'nightingale' and 'nightgown'. And so on: there is nothing divinely given or immutably fixed about language, as the fact that the English word 'nightingale' has had more meanings than one in its time would suggest. But interpreting these marks is a constrained affair, because the marks are often used by people in their social practices of communication in certain ways, and these practical social uses *are* the various meanings of the word. When I identify the word in a literary text, these social practices do not simply drop away. I may well come to feel after reading the work that the word now means something quite different, that it denotes 'dichotomous' rather than a kind of bird, because of the transformed context of

meanings into which it has been inserted. But identifying the word in the first place involves some sense of what its practical social uses are.

The claim that we can make a literary text mean whatever we like is in one sense quite justified. What after all is there to stop us? There is literally no end to the number of contexts we might invent for its words in order to make them signify differently. In another sense, the idea is a simple fantasy bred in the minds of those who have spent too long in the classroom. For such texts belong to language as a whole, have intricate relations to other linguistic practices, however much they might also subvert and violate them; and language is not in fact something we are free to do what we like with. If I cannot read the word 'nightingale' without imagining how blissful it would be to retreat from urban society to the solace of Nature, then the word has a certain power for me, or over me, which does not magically evaporate when I encounter it in a poem. This is part of what is meant by saying that the literary work constrains our interpretations of it, or that its meaning is to some extent 'immanent' in it. Language is a field of social forces which shape us to our roots, and it is an academicist delusion to see the literary work as an arena of infinite possibility which escapes it.

Nevertheless, interpreting a poem is in an important sense freer than interpreting a London Underground notice. It is freer because in the latter case the language is part of a practical situation which tends to rule out certain readings of the text and legitimate others. This, as we have seen, is by no means an absolute constraint, but it is a significant one. In the case of literary works, there is also sometimes a practical situation which excludes certain readings and licenses others, known as the teacher. It is the academic institution, the stock of socially legitimated ways of reading works, which operates as a constraint. Such licensed ways of reading are never of course 'natural', and never simply academic either: they relate to dominant forms of valuation and interpretation in a society as a whole. They are still active when I read a popular novel on a train, not just a poem in a university class. But reading a novel remains different from reading a road sign because the reader is not supplied with a ready-made context to render the language intelligible. A novel which opens with the sentence: 'Lok was running as fast as he could' is implicitly saying to the reader: 'I invite you to imagine a context in which it makes sense to say "Lok was running as fast as he could"'.⁹ The novel will gradually construct that context, or if you like the reader will gradually construct it for the novel. Even here it is not a matter of total interpretative freedom: since I speak the English language, the social uses of words like 'running' govern my search for appropriate contexts of meaning. But I am not as constrained as I am by 'No Exit'; and this is one

reason why people often have major disagreements over the meaning of language they treat in a 'literary' way.

I began this book by challenging the idea that 'literature' was an unchanging object. I also argued that literary values are a good deal less guaranteed than people sometimes think. Now we have seen that the literary work itself is much less easy to nail down than we often assume. One nail which can be driven through it to give it a fixed meaning is that of authorial intention: we have seen some of the problems of this tactic in discussing E. D. Hirsch. Another nail is Fish's appeal to a shared 'interpretative strategy', a kind of common competence which readers, at least academic ones, are likely to have. That there is an academic institution which powerfully determines what readings are generally permissible is certainly true; and the 'literary institution' includes publishers, literary editors and reviewers as well as academia. But within this institution there can be a *struggle* of interpretations, which Fish's model would not seem to account for – a struggle not just between this reading of Hölderlin and that, but one waged around the categories, conventions and strategies of interpretation itself. Few teachers or reviewers are likely to penalize an account of Hölderlin or Beckett because it differs from their own. Rather more of them, however, might penalize such an account because it seemed to them 'non-literary' – because it transgressed the accepted boundaries and procedures of 'literary criticism'. Literary criticism does not usually dictate any particular reading as long as it is 'literary critical'; and what counts as literary criticism is determined by the literary institution. It is thus that the liberalism of the literary institution, like Wolfgang Iser's, is in general blind to its own constitutive limits.

Some literary students and critics are likely to be worried by the idea that a literary text does not have a single 'correct' meaning, but probably not many. They are more likely to be engaged by the idea that the meanings of a text do not lie within them like wisdom teeth within a gum, waiting patiently to be extracted, but that the reader has some active role in this process. Nor would many people today be disturbed by the notion that the reader does not come to the text as a kind of cultural virgin, immaculately free of previous social and literary entanglements, a supremely disinterested spirit or blank sheet on to which the text will transfer its own inscriptions. Most of us recognize that no reading is innocent or without presuppositions. But fewer people pursue the full implications of this readerly guilt. One of

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Structuralism and Semiotics

the themes of this book has been that there is no such thing as a purely 'literary' response: all such responses, not least those to literary *form*, to the aspects of a work which are sometimes jealously reserved to the 'aesthetic', are deeply imbricated with the kind of social and historical individuals we are. In the various accounts of literary theories I have given so far, I have tried to show that there is always a great deal more at stake here than views of literature – that informing and sustaining all such theories are more or less definite readings of social reality. It is *these* readings which are in a real sense guilty, all the way from Matthew Arnold's patronizing attempts to pacify the working class to Heidegger's Nazism. Breaking with the literary institution does not just mean offering different accounts of Beckett; it means breaking with the very ways literature, literary criticism and its supporting social values are defined.

The twentieth century had another enormous nail in its literary theoretical armoury with which to fix the literary work once and for all. That nail was called structuralism, which we can now investigate.

We left American literary theory at the end of the Introduction in the grip of New Criticism, honing its increasingly sophisticated techniques and fighting a rearguard action against modern science and industrialism. But as North American society developed over the 1950s, growing more rigidly scientific and managerial in its modes of thought, a more ambitious form of critical technocracy seemed demanded. New Criticism had done its job well, but it was in a sense too modest and particularist to qualify as a hard-nosed academic discipline. In its obsessive concentration on the isolated literary text, its delicate nurturings of sensibility, it had tended to leave aside the broader, more structural aspects of literature. What had happened to literary *history*? What was needed was a literary theory which, while preserving the *formalist* bent of New Criticism, its dogged attention to literature as aesthetic object rather than social practice, would make something a good deal more systematic and 'scientific' out of all this. The answer arrived in 1957, in the shape of the Canadian Northrop Frye's mighty 'totalization' of all literary genres, *Anatomy of Criticism*.

Frye's belief was that criticism was in a sorry unscientific mess and needed to be smartly tidied up. It was a matter of subjective value-judgements and idle gossip, and badly required the discipline of an objective system. This was possible, Frye held, because literature itself formed such a system. It was not in fact just a random collection of writings strewn throughout history: if you examined it closely you could see that it worked by certain objective laws, and criticism could itself become systematic by formulating them. These laws were the various modes, archetypes, myths and genres by which all literary works were structured. At the root of all