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Untangling the Strands of Interpretation

This article considers the categories and frames of reference that can be used to analyse and appraise the interpretations produced by literary scholars. The overall objective is not merely to consider interpretations in terms of their origins (the schools of literary criticism or theory to which they belong) but to appraise them on their own terms (with respect to what they claim to do). The analytic and critical tools employed to this end must be correspondingly flexible and unbiased.

It is necessary to begin by clarifying the concepts involved, for there are at least two different senses in which the term ›interpretation‹ can be used. On the one hand, interpretations are understood as individual statements that assign particular meanings to a literary text or its components and features. On the other hand, the word ›interpretation‹ is used to refer to scholarly texts that elucidate the overall meaning of literary texts. The scholarly texts that people describe as interpretations do not only contain statements that assign meaning; they always also contain statements involving textual analysis, value judgements, matters of literary theory, or the description of contextual factors. A number of theorists have taken this to mean that any analysis, description, evaluation, or the like can sensibly be classified as an interpretation. The designation, however, is appropriate only if the elucidation of meaning lies at the heart of the scholarly text in question.

If the critical study of interpretation is to appraise the objects of its attention on their own terms, it must be able to determine what aims a particular interpretation has and what claims to validity it makes. Habermas's theory of universal pragmatics proves to be of assistance in this respect, for it provides a number of distinctions that can be used to help segment the field of literary interpretation. A claim to constative truth is made by all interpretations that aim to provide an adequate explanation of a text's meaning, seek to use its meaning to describe the context in which it came into being, or endeavour to express a general truth whose validity is not confined to the world in which the text came into being. A claim to normative rightness is made by all interpretations that aim to formulate a value judgement or an assertion about proper behaviour, or endeavour to put into practice the mode of interpretation associated with a particular school of literary study. A claim to expressive truth is made by interpretations that give voice to a spontaneous, subjective understanding of a text without (or without yet) having reflected on it. The first of these aims, that of

elucidating the meaning of a text adequately (in other words, laying claim to constative truth), is central to the discourse of literary studies; the other aims cannot be achieved without at the same time attempting to provide an adequate elucidation of the text's meaning. Substantiating this assertion is one of the central concerns of the article's argument, which thereby contests the widespread view that the inherent aesthetic character of literary texts prevents us from making any claim to constative truth when assigning meanings to them. In actual fact, this view is itself an interpretative assertion about each and every individual literary text and passage, one that lays claim to the very truthfulness that it denies other interpretations the right to have.

Another objective of the article is to disprove the view that the interpretations put forward in the study of literature cannot actually provide adequate statements of meaning even though they may claim to do so, and that it is therefore impossible to measure their success in terms of this objective. According to this argument, interpretations are wholly determined by conventions and can thus be evaluated only in terms of their normative rightness, not in terms of their constative truth. By referring to general theories of interpretation that stem from non-relativist forms of pragmatism, the article shows that there is every reason to believe that the idea of truth can be reformulated if we distinguish between conventions depending on how binding they are. There are, for example, some basic conventions that are almost universally shared in the interpretive community. Four basic assumptions of this kind are discussed in closer detail: (*a*) that meaning is conditioned by the language in which a statement is made and understood, (*b*) that meaning is conditioned by the context in which a statement is made and understood, (*c*) that meaning is conditioned by the way in which a statement is made and understood, and (*d*) that meaning is conditioned by an entity that causes it. These core assumptions are very binding indeed; they are the foundation in which the less binding, more strongly conventional beliefs held by the interpreters of literature are grounded. There is, for example, a wide range of views about the entity that causes meaning: scholars of literature have suggested that meaning can be traced back to authorial intention, to social energies, to a language or discourse that speaks, to pre-texts, to readers' intentions, and so on. The actual acts of interpretation belong to a third level; interpreters perform these acts when, for example, they identify a particular authorial intention or social force and assign it as a meaning to the text being interpreted.

An example is used to illustrate the methods of a critical analysis of interpretation that distinguishes the levels described above and investigates whether the acts and beliefs involved are compatible and whether they correspond to our underlying basic assumptions. In this way, it is possible to reject or accept an interpretation's claim to truthfulness on a rational basis. What cannot be discussed in the space available here is the necessity of moving beyond the scope of this kind of analysis, which is limited to the internal aspects of interpretation. The article therefore con-

cludes by raising the possibility that an interpretation must also be compatible with the knowledge that exists outside it even if it is not considered in it, in so far as this knowledge is relevant to the particular questions asked by that interpretation.

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