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Understanding and Explaining the Literary Text: A Return to Interpretation

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I would like to take the opportunity of our present theme, ‘Old Challenges / New Horizons’, not to report on any very particular aspect of my own research, but to offer some thoughts on issues which seem to me important for the nature and future of English literature as a discipline, on the basis of my experience as a scholar and teacher of English literature in the English university environment. Some of my observations and concerns no doubt relate specifically to the United Kingdom, and they might at least satisfy some of the curiosities you may have about the odd ways in which we British do things. Some of my observations however may have larger and European resonances. I speak as one who professes the discipline of English literature, but I shall be exploring areas where language studies have much to offer, and where the cooperation of literary and language expertise might well, it seems to me, be profitably explored. I am a scholar of the long eighteenth century, and both a practising and a theorising textual editor, and many of my examples, but not all, come from that period and that field.

We are all of us familiar with the notion that English literature is chronically a discipline in crisis. In some ways that might seem an odd notion. The subject remains, throughout the world, intellectually vibrant and productive, and recruits well in a competitive world. Nevertheless, English literature has surely experienced, over the last three decades, a greater degree of internal methodological contest than any other. Self-examination is healthy; *nosce teipsum*. A continuous and unremitting state of self-questioning however has led, many believe, to a radical loss of disciplinary confidence and identity. The theory explosion of the seventies and eighties deconstructed many old certainties about texts and their understanding. The hermeneutics of suspicion have led many to read texts not for what they say, but for what they allegedly conceal. The notions that texts might be read for their avowed meanings, or that authorial intention might be a credible voucher of meaning, or that meanings might be in any sense determinable, fractured under these pressures. In a field of English literary studies in which I have a strong personal investment, textual editing and explanatory annotation, many theorists argued that not only the meaning of words, but the printed texts in which they appeared, were radically unstable. In the extreme case some theorists went on

to assert that any pretence not only to credible textual editing, but to any kind of credible textual interpretation or explanation, or indeed to English itself as a text-based discipline, was a mere dishonesty. Thus Jonathan Goldberg argued that the multiple forms taken by texts mean “that there is no text itself ... that a text cannot be fixed in terms of original or final intentions”. Hence, Goldberg concluded, “no word in the text is sacred. If this is true, all criticism that has based itself on the text, all forms of formalism, all close reading, is given the lie” (Goldberg 1986: 241, 215). In part as a corollary of a more or less radical disciplinary scepticism about the possibility of interpretation, not only our students, but even our colleagues suffer all too often from a kind of terror of the text, from an unwillingness to engage with literature at the verbal level – ‘all close reading’ in Goldberg’s words. Some professional colleagues manifest even a blank unawareness of the very possibility of close interpretative examination of texts. And as a further and no doubt inevitable consequence, many practitioners of the discipline, having noted with noisy desperation that no new theories were emerging within literary studies as such, and apparently unconvinced that the discipline had ever had or was ever likely to have any underpinning theoretical justification of its own, turned to other disciplines: to linguistics, to sociology, and most of all to history. Peter Barry, in a significant article published some five years ago, appealing for the return of English studies to the text itself, makes the point in these words:

In fact, there were so many turns that the disciplinary pilots ... were dizzied and disoriented. They were shot down by a new enemy – great armies of Contextualists and Historicists ... The contextual army was determined *to make English History* – in both senses of that phrase – and they won their war very easily. ... Soon ninety per cent of the papers given at English conferences were history lessons, and professors of English were happily turning out history books. This was, in a way, the death of the academic discipline of English, since the discipline seemed willing to give up any claim to disciplinary identity ... (Barry 2007: 18).

Like Barry, I still believe in the possibility of a distinct discipline of English (better put, a distinct discipline of literary studies). Like Barry, I am persuaded that a credible discipline of literature must be founded on the text, both broadly and closely conceived and analysed.

I would like to begin my argument by making a number of assertions. Firstly, no discipline can justify its place in the academy until and unless it can demonstrate that it is founded on credible knowledge of its subject. Radical scepticism about its own claims to knowledge is a position no university discipline can safely or credibly adopt. Secondly, the primary and distinctive subject matter of literary studies is the literary text (however broadly we define the word literary, and as an eighteenth-century specialist I’d want to define the word very broadly). Thirdly, literary texts are not mere marks on paper, but sequences of words deliberately set

down by a human agent or agents, usually through cooperating intermediaries, with the purpose of communicating to other human beings a determinable meaning, within the linguistic, cultural and other conventions they share. (By determinable I do not mean simple or unitary; I mean knowable in its complexity and plurality.) Fourthly, knowledge of the literary text is a matter not merely of characterisation or classification, but of understanding: of interpretation of the particular text, and of explanation of the particular text. Fifthly, interpretative engagement with the text is the necessary foundation for pedagogy as well as for scholarship.

All of these assertions are open to question, and certainly I cannot hope within the space allowed to make a soundly philosophical case for any of them; but all of these assertions seem to me logically credible, and, perhaps more importantly, ethically credible.

I have asserted that literary texts consist of words set down by a human agent in order to communicate a determinable meaning. That is an intentionalist position. I should make clear from the outset what kinds of intentionalism I believe are defensible, and which are not. We cannot see into an author's mind, whether an author be living or dead, and no credible modern intentionalist theorist has claimed we can. Intended meanings are accessible through particular texts, not through the changing or inaccessible consciousness of their authors. Texts belong as Karl Popper pointed out, not to the second world of mental acts or states, but to the third, knowable, world of human discourse (Popper 1979: 162-3). That distinction has long been understood. Writing as early as 1671, the Anglican clergyman and controversialist John Eachard replied, to a reader who had misunderstood his *Contempt of the Clergy* (1671): "Who can tell, Sir, what my design was, but my self, any further than it may be judged by my words?" (Eachard 1671: 74). John Wilson, an Anglican scriptural interpretative theorist writing in 1678, similarly insisted that "Real interpretation" is concerned not with the author's mind, but with "the Exposition of the Author's Mind Signified by those Words as they are so and so placed" (Wilson 1678: 159).

Words however, have multiple and changeable meanings, and the relations in which they are "so and so placed" in an utterance may be differently construed. If we are to determine the meaning of an utterance (complex or simple, single or multiple), we cannot appeal directly to an author, living or dead. We can appeal to the context, or rather to the contexts, of the utterance. As J. L. Austin famously put it in 1955, "the occasion of an utterance matters seriously, and ... the words used are to some extent to be 'explained' by the 'context' in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken in a linguistic interchange" (Austin 1975: 100). I would like to structure my ensuing discussion around the different kinds and levels of context in which the words of a text have been written, and in which they appear.

A first level is what E. D. Hirsch has called “the terms and proprieties of the text’s own language” (Hirsch 1967: 134). The interpretative importance of the original lexis, semantics and idioms of the text has long been understood, and has played a vital part historically in the criticism of both biblical and secular texts. John Locke, for instance, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, insisted that the Scriptures must be read in what he called “the plain direct meaning of the words and phrases such as they ... had in the mouths of speakers, who used them according to the language of that time and country wherein they lived” (Locke 1695: 2-3.). Words change their meanings and their range of meanings. The word ‘critic’ has a number of distinct meanings now, and in centuries past had a similarly large number of distinct, and different, meanings. The “plain, direct meaning of the words” is bounded by what senses were available when a text was written, and which sense or senses are articulated within the syntactical frame of the text. Samuel Johnson describes his friend Dr Robert Levet, in 1783, as “officious, innocent, sincere”. Here “officious” means not interfering or pompous, as the word does now, but dutiful, attentive, kind. The modern sense was available in Johnson’s time, but is plainly not activated in the context of Johnson’s line. An editor annotating this line might draw on the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s authority; nowadays, recognising that *OED* too is a text, and understanding the limits of its secondary authority, we might ideally resort to the evidence of online databases, or historical corpora.

Determining meaning according to the criterion of ‘Propriety of speech’ demands understanding words in their larger textual contexts. Again, this hermeneutic imperative has a long history. Thomas Hobbes had grounded his argument, in chapter 43 of the *Leviathan*, on scriptural texts which are “agreeable to the harmony and scope of the whole Bible”, for:

it is not the bare Words, but the Scope of the writer that giveth the true light, by which any writing is to bee interpreted; and they that insist upon single Texts, without considering the Main designe, can derive no thing from them cleerly; but rather by casting atomes of Scripture, as dust before mens eyes, make every thing more obscure than it is; an ordinary artifice of those that seek not the truth, but their own advantage. (Hobbes 1968: 626)

John Locke, in the prefatory essay to his paraphrase of the Pauline epistles, insisted that to cite isolated verses of scripture, instead of understanding them as part of “a continued coherent Discourse”, is to deprive them of the “Tenour of the Context” which limits and defines the sense. Since the factitious division of the epistles into chapters and verses, we have become “accustom’d to hear them quoted as distinct Sentences, without any limitation or explication of their precise Meaning from the Place they stand in, and the Relation to what goes before, or Follows”. This breakdown of discursive coherence makes valid interpretation impossible, and,

worse, allows the subjective “wresting” of the meaning as odd words are snatched out “to serve a Purpose” (Locke 1707: vii, ix). Such interpretative failures or distortions have historically had real effects, and not only for the history of belief. The Second Article of the Ten Original Amendments to the United States Constitution stipulates that “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed”. “The right of the people to keep and bear Arms” is a phrase regularly cited by the National Rifle Association; the limiting conditional phrase, “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State”, is not. The elision of that verbal, and historical, context makes a material, not to say a lethal, difference.

I have stressed the issue of verbal context because, in my pedagogical and scholarly experience, English literature as a modern discipline lays less stress on textual coherence than it might. A chapter of the Bible, a sonnet by Philip Sidney, a paragraph by Jane Austen, a verse paragraph in Milton or in Dryden, a poem by Plath, are discursive units. Meaning is communicated by a speaking voice or voices, placing words within a syntactical frame. Literary texts of any genre present us with articulated thought, not merely with ‘words, words, words’ (if I may quote Hamlet in satirical mood). I’d like to offer you the case of a poem by Tennyson, lyric 11 of *In Memoriam A. H. H.*:

Calm is the morn without a sound,
 Calm as to suit a calmer grief,
 And only through the faded leaf
 The chestnut pattering to the ground:

Calm and deep peace on this high wold,
 And on these dews that drench the furze,
 And all the silvery gossamers
 That twinkle into green and gold:

Calm and still light on yon great plain
 That sweeps with all its autumn bowers,
 And crowded farms and lessening towers,
 To mingle with the bounding main:

Calm and deep peace in this wide air,
 These leaves that redden to the fall;
 And in my heart, if calm at all,
 If any calm, a calm despair:

Calm on the seas, and silver sleep,
 And waves that sway themselves in rest,
 And dead calm in that noble breast
 Which heaves but with the heaving deep.

This short elegiac lyric was one of a collection written over a period of some 17 years following the death of Tennyson's close friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Hallam died suddenly in Vienna, at the age of 22; his body was immediately sealed in a coffin and despatched upon its long sea-voyage home to England. Lyric 11 of *In Memoriam* is written in the voice of the mourning friend, and set within the dewy damps of a Lincolnshire autumn. I have talked about this poem with clever and involved students on more than one occasion. I used to ask students the open question, 'what is your impression of this poem?' The poem gives, my students told me, an impression of calm. And so, of course, it does, if one considers the lexis of the poem in isolation. Within the poem's twenty lines the word 'calm' appears ten times, and the comparative 'calmer' once. Words within the same semantic field appear throughout the poem: 'sleep', 'still', 'peace', 'rest', in keeping with a general theme of autumnal quiet. Indeed, my more recent students regularly appeal in their reading and their writing to the notion of the semantic field. It is not difficult to discover why that should be. They come to us from school, where they have been given instruction on textual analysis, of a kind that encourages them and enables them both to characterise and describe what they are reading, 'moving from individual words through phrases, sentence structures and other grammatical and syntactical issues, to how the text is put together, and finally on to what it looks like as a whole'. This is excellent advice, but partial. Nowhere in this official written guidance do the words 'meaning' or 'sense' appear. My students arrive at university having been taught to characterise the text, but not to interpret or understand it; nor, apparently, has it been suggested to them that texts might be open to, and demand, interpretation and understanding. The semantic field is a proper professional linguist's tool of description and analysis, but it is not, from what I see of its use, an interpretative tool. And indeed the discourse of Tennyson's poem works against the tendencies of its lexis, with a bitter and plangent discordance. We know almost from the start that the calmness of the time is out of joint, as far as the poem's speaker is concerned: "calm, as to suit a calmer grief". No fewer than three stanzas describe the external world in its muted sounds and gradual colours, before an abrupt transition to the internal mourning poetic voice: "And in my heart, if calm at all, / If any calm, a calm despair". Here repetition within conditional constructions of the poem's theme word culminate in oxymoronic personal agony. The final stanza of the poem reverts to the external world, not of England, but of the sea which bears Arthur Hallam's body home. Here, in its final iteration, the word 'calm' is given a wittily nautical sense, shocking in both its literal propriety and its metaphorical impropriety, invoking the brute and physical fact of Arthur Hallam's corpse in its coffin: "And dead calm in that noble breast / Which heaves but with the heaving deep". This is a poem which ends not in calm acceptance, but in disturbing disjunction between the stillness

and unconsciousness of the world, the different and irremediably final calm of Arthur Hallam, and the desolation of the poet, to whom any kind of calmness is impossible. The poem as we read it, in fact, as the speaking voice articulates its argument, bears a meaning which contradicts its purely lexical make-up.

Amongst many techniques of use in the critical explanation of texts at the level of the sentence, one of the most significant is paraphrase, the rendering of meaning in other terms. A cornerstone of modern theories of determinate meaning and valid interpretation is that a meaning is not confined to a unique form of words, but may be reproduced in other words. "Synonymity", argues the American theorist E. D. Hirsch,

is in fact possible, and ... on this possibility depends the determinacy of meaning, the emancipation of thought from the prison house of a particular linguistic form, and the possibility of knowledge generally ... the art of explaining nearly always involves the task of discussing meaning in terms that are not native to the original text. (Hirsch 1976: 136)

From such a theoretical point of view it is possible to think of commentary on a text not as inevitably foreign and parasitic, but as genuinely explicatory. Paraphrase historically has been a fundamental element in the making available of Scripture to the general reader, functioning as, or appearing together with, explanation. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Bible was frequently published, for private and family reading especially, in the form of a text accompanied with "paraphrase and commentary". Paraphrase appears with similar regularity, and with the same function, in the earliest editions of secular English literary classics. Patrick Hume makes consistent use of conservative explicating paraphrase in his 1695 commentary on *Paradise Lost*, whose title page indeed promises that "the Obscure Parts [are] render'd in Phrases more Familiar; the Old and Obsolete Words, with their Originals, Explain'd and made Easie to the English Reader". Paraphrase became a staple method in the textual criticism and explication of Shakespeare, from Theobald's *Shakespeare Restored* of 1726, and his 1733 edition of the plays, through to Malone's great 1790 variorum. This difficult passage appears in the fourth Act of *Hamlet*:

Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves.

(4. 5. 163-4)

Alexander Pope, unable in his 1725 edition to make sense of the passage, conjectured that Shakespeare had meant to put into Laertes's mouth the assertion that "Nature is *fire* in love, and that Nature sends 'some precious *incense* of itself". Lewis Theobald however justifies the Folio reading, "*fine* in love", and "instance",

with this cogent explanatory paraphrase, conventionally identified as such by the double quotation marks, which modern editors have substantially followed¹:

I conceive, that this might be the Poet's Meaning, "In the Passion of Love, Nature becomes more exquisite of Sensation, is more delicate and refin'd; *that is*, Natural Affection, rais'd and sublim'd into a Love-Passion, becomes more inflamed and intense than usual; and where it is so, as People in Love generally send what they have of most valuable after their Lovers; so poor *Ophelia* has sent her most precious Senses after the Object of her inflamed Affections." (Shakespeare 1733: 7. 733-4)

Here paraphrase functions both as interpretation, and as explanation. In the Preface to his 1765 *Shakespeare*, Samuel Johnson famously wrote that "Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils", urging the newcomer to Shakespeare's dramas to "read every play from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators". Nevertheless, Johnson urged, "when the pleasures of novelty have ceased, let [the reader] attempt exactness, and read the commentators" (Johnson 1968: 111). "Exactness" here means exactness of textual reading and exactness of textual understanding. Johnson was no doubt ambivalent about detailed, line-by-line annotation, whether its aim be textual emendation or textual explication, and that ambivalence echoes his uneasy relation to the new philology and its evidential methods. Nevertheless, his commentary provides fuller notes than any predecessor, and employs paraphrase throughout as a method both of text-critical decision making, and of explication. "Exactness" is achieved, for Johnson, not through intuitive comprehension, through the flight of the imagination, but through a focussed and particular engagement with the text, and the explanatory knowledge brought to the places of the text by its commentators. Paraphrase remains a predominant tool of the Arden and Oxford Shakespeares, amongst other leading editions. It is a hermeneutic and explanatory feature of use to all readers, and especially perhaps to Johnson's novice reader.

Individual cruxes are located within the context not only of the page and sentence, but of the work as a whole, and the author's body of work as a whole. In protestant biblical criticism it was a principle that, as John Locke insisted, the sacred text could not be reliably interpreted according to the varying standards of language and belief of individual readers. Scripture has to be saved from unguarded accommodation to inappropriate, and subjectively selected, frameworks. Locke insists that "he that would understand St. *Paul* aright, must understand his Terms in

1 See, for example, Harold Jenkins's note on this line (Shakespeare 1982: 358). George Hibbard prefers to accept Samuel Johnson's more alchemical gloss: 'Love ... is the passion by which [human] nature is most exalted and refined; and as substances, refined and subtilised, easily obey any impulse, or follow any attraction, some part of nature, so purified and refined, flies off after the attracting object, after the thing it loves' (Shakespeare 1987: 306).