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On Authorial Intention

—E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* Revisited—

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I

E. D. Hirsch's hermeneutic theory, propounded more than twenty years ago,¹ was in its origin an effective antidote against the excess of the New Criticism. Revisited now after the rage of the so-called avant-garde theories of literary interpretation, it still retains its refreshing tone, though in a different context. It has gained a new 'significance,' to borrow Hirsch's own term. Instead of opposing itself to the New Criticism, it points to a unifying principle of the traditional or common-sense viewpoints including even the legacy of the New Criticism.² Just as every revolutionary movement breeds in the end a longing for something stable or unchanging, a longing for what may be called the wisdom of ages as against individual eccentricity, so one might be tempted now to return to a more natural way of responding to literature.³ Moreover, what is natural and apparently simple or naive is very often found to comprise in it a far more complicated mechanism than is expected from any novel or sophisticated theorizing. A common reader's response to literature is just such an example. It is based on a complex process, however naturally and even unconsciously it may have been performed. That most of it should be performed unconsciously is the essence of the process, for the reading of a literary text stands upon the age-long and long-tried tacit compact between the author and his reader. The task of a literary theory consists in unravelling this complicated half-unconscious process, rather than inventing some new distorted way of reading. Of all the traditional theorists in recent debate, it is Hirsch who has most faithfully adhered to this essential core of our common sense, as he himself so aptly refers to his own theory as the 'logic of common sense.'⁴

Common sense in literature or in aesthetics is no simple thing; it abounds in unsolvable paradoxes. Take for instance the concept of mimesis that originated from Aristotle. It insists that artistic mimesis is a copy and, at the same time, not a mere copy, of an external world. Or of catharsis.

It insists that tragedy excites and at the same time purgates emotions such as pity and fear; that it is at once emotional disturbance and calmness of mind.⁵ No wonder Keats coined the paradoxical phrase 'negative capability,' and diagnosed the creative genius as being at once 'nothing' and 'everything.' Or we may cite Coleridge's definition of poetic imagination as 'the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete....'⁶ In this context, the distinction between subjective and objective, too, simply does not apply. Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and T. S. Eliot's impersonal 'escape from emotion' combine to point out the paradox of aesthetic expression. Poetic expression is subjective in the sense that it has sprung from the poet's emotion, but objective at the same time in the sense that the poet tries to objectify it by means of an 'objective correlative.' Any theorizing that fails to grasp this paradoxical fact is far more liable to error than mere naivety.

Hirsch's 'logic of common sense' consists of three tenets: 1) the principle of authorial intention, 2) the principle of a single correct reading, and 3) the distinction between meaning and significance. Though they are inter-related with each other, the following discussion will take them up separately for the sake of clarity.

II

The principal thesis in Hirsch's theory is that interpretation should aim at the author's intended meaning. Now, this is a fundamental fact inherent in our literary experience. Even Rosenblatt who objects to Hirsch's theory admits this point:

What is more natural than to sense the author behind the words to which we have vividly responded? Indeed, with most texts, the naive reader automatically assumes that his interpretation approximates to the author's 'meaning,' to 'what the author had in mind.'

Moreover, this is the most valuable part of our reading experience. In it is comprised everything that we prize in literature; so much so that to ignore the presence of the author is wholly to ignore literature. This point has been given an eloquent expression by Benedetto Croce:

On Authorial Intention

To judge Dante, we must raise ourselves to his level: let it be well understood that empirically we are not Dante, nor Dante we; but in that moment of contemplation and judgement, our spirit is one with that of the poet, and in that moment, we and he are one thing. In this identity alone resides the possibility that our little souls can echo great souls, and grow great with them in the universality of the spirit.⁸

Hirsch propounded this thesis in order to refute the New Critical tenet that the author's subjective context is irrelevant to the interpretation of a literary text. He objected that, if cut off from the author's subjective context, literary texts can very often give several different meanings, and there is no way of deciding which is the valid one. And the result will be pluralism, inclusivism, relativism, or an empty formalism. Such apprehensions had often been expressed by critics before Hirsch. For example, John F. Danby wrote:

There is a plausible theory that a poem is—and is only—the words on the pages, and that to discuss therefore the writer's intention is fallacious: we cannot know what he had in his mind. Part of the paralysing fright in the suggestion comes from its reinforcement by our awareness of the existence of mechanical brains, and the logical possibility that in an indefinitely long time a monkey on a typewriter would jumble out a Shakespearean play.... Words exist not on the page but between people: only people can *mean* anything.⁹

Hirsch's task was to integrate these objections into a theory based on hermeneutics.

In Hirsch's definition of intention, the author can intend a meaning both consciously and unconsciously.¹⁰ Moreover, 'the speaking subject is not ... identical with the subjectivity of the author as an actual historical person; it corresponds, rather, to a very limited and special aspect of the author's total subjectivity.'¹¹ Here Hirsch's definition comprises no sophistry. It is sufficiently endorsed by the aesthetic fact of inspiration. It is what has been meant by Croce in his distinction between 'the imaginative and the willed personality',¹² or, more adequately, by Georg Lukács in his distinction between 'der Mensch ganz' and 'der ganze Mensch'.¹³ Therefore, an approach to authorial intention cannot be attained merely by citing the author's words in conversation or his letters. The approach should be a comprehensive

procedure conducted with great intelligence, as Hirsch explains :

The interpreter's job is to specify the text's horizon as far as he is able, and this means, ultimately, that he must familiarize himself with the typical meanings of the author's mental and experiential world.¹⁴

My point may be summarized in the paradox that objectivity in textual interpretation requires explicit reference to the speaker's subjectivity.¹⁵

An essential task in the process of verification is, therefore, a deliberate reconstruction of the author's subjective stance. . . .¹⁶

The interpreter's primary task is to reproduce in himself the author's 'logic,' his attitudes, his cultural givens, in short his world.¹⁷

Here, an interesting fact is that the eminent members of the New Criticism did not contradict Hirsch's theory (at least in their practice). This explains the deference Hirsch paid in his book to such critics as W. K. Wimsatt and the authors of *The Theory of Literature*, in spite of the theoretical difference. The critical practice recommended by Wimsatt under the slogan of the 'intentional fallacy' is not incompatible with Hirsch's theory. Taking up A. E. Housman's poem "1887," Wimsatt refers to Housman's angry reply of denial to Frank Harris who praised the poem for its 'splendid mockery' of snobbish patriotism. Here is a material, says Wimsatt, which is quite irrelevant to interpretation; that is to say, an example of the intentional fallacy :

Here a statement made in retrospect and under provocation, a kind of profession of loyalty to a sovereign, stands in sharp contrast not only to the cunning details of the poem in question but to the well-known skeptical and cynical cast of the poet's canon.¹⁸

Wimsatt mentions two distinct materials which are in fact both related to authorial intention: 1) Housman's reply to Harris ('a statement made in retrospect and under provocation') and 2) 'the well-known skeptical and cynical cast of the poet's canon' (which belongs to what Hirsch calls 'the author's subjective stance' or 'the author's logic, his attitudes . . .' just quoted above). What Wimsatt is doing here is not wholly to discard materials for authorial intention, but to select a relevant one. The procedure is just the same as is expounded by Hirsch.

On Authorial Intention

Indeed, it is a notorious fact that many members of the New Criticism tacitly resorted to background data in spite of their theory to the contrary. Robert Scholes describes their practice as follows:

Students were given poems to interpret with their titles removed, their author's names concealed, and their dates ignored. Anthologies were produced with the works ordered not by chronology but by the alphabet, with biographical information omitted or hidden in appendices, with no visible clues as to country or date of origin. In the name of improved interpretation, reading was turned into a mystery and the literature classroom into a chapel where the priestly instructor (who knew the authors, dates, titles, biographies, and general provenance of the texts) astounded the faithful with miracles of interpretation. The scandal at the heart of the New Criticism—and the source of its power—was this use of cultural codes by instructors who officially asserted that such material was irrelevant to the interpretive process.¹⁹

Their practice clearly indicates that it is very difficult to read literary texts without regard to authorial intention. Critics are readers first before they start on critical analysis; they have been engaged as sympathetic readers in reproducing authorial intention, and, as a result, unavoidably trail that knowledge behind them. Their tenet of the 'intentional fallacy' is understandable. They thought it necessary for their discipline to eliminate subjective elements (what is in the *mind* of the author or of his reader) in order to attain the so-called scientific objectivity. But, as William E. Cain points out, subjectivity is an unavoidable part of literary studies.²⁰

Perhaps, William Empson's case is an exception. In his *Seven Types of Ambiguity* he has explored the way in which authorial intention can be wholly ignored. That is why his reading has some affinity with that practiced by the recent deconstructionist critics whose slogan is the 'death of the author.' But there is a difference. While their reading is felt to be merely irresponsible, Empson's reading has something tough and strenuous in it. There is a tension in it as if the sympathetic reader and the analytic critic were vying with each other. His practice is actually not a reading but the 'technical process of philosophy' as distinguished by Coleridge from the 'result of philosophy':

In order to obtain adequate notions of any truth, we must intellectually

separate its distinguishable parts; and this is the technical process of philosophy. But having done so, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist; and this is the result of philosophy.²¹

At any rate, Empson's example shows that a *provisional* disregard of authorial intention enables us to concentrate on written texts. And this it is that has shaped the best part of the New Criticism. In spite of the misleading slogan of the 'intentional fallacy,' the New Criticism emphasized one important aspect of the interpretive process; the close reading of texts. But it is a part and not the whole of the interpreting process—a point which will be discussed in the next section. The legacy of the New Criticism is subsumed under Hirsch's better-balanced theory of interpretation as follows:

even though *the text itself should be the primary source of clues and must always be the final authority*, the interpreter should make an effort to go beyond his text wherever possible.²² [Italics added]

III

An objection often raised by later critics against Hirsch's theory is that his notion of 'a single correct reading' is too rigid and may easily lead to pedagogical authoritarianism, admitting no room for the student's creative impulses. One source of this objection is a misunderstanding of Hirsch's theory for which Hirsch's way of exposition is partly responsible. Hirsch often illustrates his points by making reference to particular examples. One such case is his adjudication between Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson concerning the interpretation of Wordsworth's Lucy poem, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal."²³ In a limited space, his illustration could not help being rather a rough one; his adjudication has been made a little hastily and, as a result, gives an impression of an inflexible and dogmatic way of interpretation. And this was taken by many (particularly by Rosenblatt) to be an actual application of his theory, and attacked as 'the absolutism of the author's intention,'²⁴ making reading 'a chore'²⁵ or 'an exercise in research into extrinsic evidence concerning what might have been in the author's mind,'²⁶ and as establishing 'an authority that does not merely limit interpretations but tyrannizes over them.'²⁷ But this was misunderstanding. Hirsch himself later corrected his hasty conclusion about the Lucy poem:

On Authorial Intention

In a brief space I have tried to show that one kind of evidence outweighs the other, though my comparison (first published several years ago) is not nearly so detailed as it would have to be in order to carry universal conviction. A really thorough examination, bringing forward evidence which I did not consider, might reverse the verdict or indicate that the evidence does not warrant a clear choice.²⁸

A true application of Hirsch's theory will comprise a flexible and dynamic process, entailing the interpreter's active participation.²⁹

The objection has another source or motive, and that is a plea for the reader's freedom in the act of interpretation. Now, if by 'freedom' is meant the reader's active engagement with the text—such as setting up of hypotheses, entertaining of expectations as to what will follow, selection and revision, self-criticism vis-à-vis the text, and so on³⁰—then all this is comprised in Hirsch's theory, as we shall see later. But if it means freedom from authorial intention, it is the last thing that Hirsch can concede. Nor does our common sense admit it; for any freedom on the part of the reader will be valueless if it means the abandonment of that identity with the author in which alone resides, as Croce says, 'the possibility that our little souls can echo great souls, and grow great with them in the universality of the spirit.'

Louise M. Rosenblatt's reader-oriented 'transactional theory of the literary work' shows a tantalizing ambiguity as to this point. She repeatedly explains that the reader brings his personal givens, his cultural background into the text, producing there his own unique meaning:

What the reader brings to the text will affect what he makes of the verbal cues.³¹

differences in what the reader brings to the text and differences in criteria of adequacy will make possible different though equally 'acceptable' readings.³²

But along with such comments she also contends that the reader is purged of those personal givens through the transaction with the text. That is to say, she believes in the reader's identity with the author. She refers to 'the capacity of the literary work of art to enable the reader to transcend personal limitations, whether of temperament, sex, race or culture.'³³

The reader, concentrating his attention on the world he has evoked, feels himself freed for the time from his own preoccupations and limitations. Aware that the blueprint is the author's text, the reader feels himself in communication with another mind, another world.³⁴

Literary texts provide us with a widely broadened 'other' through which to define ourselves and our world.³⁵

Rosenblatt's theory is an eclecticism which might be useful for pedagogical purpose. However, it is a theoretical contradiction. The creativity of the reader and his identity with the author are two concepts that contradict each other, and any fusion of the two is impossible. Towards the end of her book she at last admits that she cannot agree with the radical proponents of the so-called *writerly* text.³⁶ So long as she differs from them, she belongs in the camp of Hirsch, whether she admits it or not; for the only alternative to Hirsch's theory is the deconstructionist notion of the *writerly* text (which overtly professes to be a challenge to common sense).

In fact, the theoretical difference between Hirsch and Rosenblatt is more apparent than real. It can be reduced to a difference in terminology. What Rosenblatt means by 'different meanings of different readers' is equivalent to Hirsch's 'different rival hypotheses about meaning.' They only disagree in the evaluation of those plural meanings or hypotheses. Whereas Hirsch believes that the correct reading is one and only one, Rosenblatt contends that there can be more than one 'correct' interpretation. But this disagreement, too, is not a substantial one. In order to see this, we must first trace the outline of the mechanism of interpretation as expounded by Hirsch.

In the process of interpretation, the interpreter (or the reader) is confronted with the 'hermeneutic circle'; namely, 'the interdependence of part and whole: the whole can be understood only through its parts, but the parts can be understood only through the whole.'³⁷ So he must have some guess about the whole, some expectation that the whole meaning must be such and such. Only when related to this 'sense of the whole,' can each particular sub-meaning be articulated. And at the same time the sub-meanings thus articulated confirm or modify in turn that initial 'sense of the whole.' This dialectics between part and whole continues till the initial expectation is fulfilled by a particular sequence of words. In Hirsch's terminology, this 'sense of the whole' is called 'genre.' It starts from the interpreter's guess or pre-understanding, and gradually narrows itself through the dialectics

between part and whole till it is shaped into a definite meaning. In this process, however, the final meaning thus attained is dependent on the initial guess or pre-understanding. Therefore, it retains the character of hypothesis, however coherent it may be. Moreover, this hypothetical understanding of meaning forms a self-confirming system: the whole confirms, and is confirmed by, its parts. The system easily degrades into a vicious circle. Therefore, the hypothesis must be subjected to testing. The testing is in two ways: 1) the hypothesis is measured against those components of the text which are least dependent on the hypothesis; and 2) it is made to compete with other rival hypotheses about the same text.³⁸

It will be clear that the first testing corresponds to the New Critical close reading of the text. On the other hand, the second one has an affinity with Rosenblatt's plea for more than one 'correct' interpretation. In order to avoid the vicious circularity of the self-confirming understanding, it is essential to have a number of hypotheses (the more, the better), which will then be submitted to competition for the survival of the fittest³⁹ in the milieu composed of every available evidence relating to the author's subjective world. Every coherent reading, however implausible it may appear at first, is valuable and should be given an equal citizenship. It is interesting in this respect to note that both Hirsch and Rosenblatt mention the occasional fallibility of 'authoritative' scholars. Rosenblatt says:

[D]o not critics and literary scholars tend to represent a rather narrow spectrum of response? [Inexperienced] Readers may bring to the text experiences, awareness, and needs that have been ignored in traditional criticism.⁴⁰

In a similar vein, Hirsch says:

[T]he beginner may on occasion arrive at an understanding that is truer than the practiced scholar's. The narrowing process of trial and error, guess and counter-guess that the beginner must go through may in rare, lucky instances save him from an overly hasty typification. His expectations may be more flexible, and he may therefore perceive aspects that an expert could miss.⁴¹

Here, one is reminded of Hugh Sykes Davies' (deliberately?) queer reading of Wordsworth's Lucy poem, where he proposes that the pronoun 'She' in

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

could well refer back to the poet's 'spirit.'⁴² This is an implausible, though strangely coherent, reading. But this queer reading has a revelatory power in widening our horizon. We are so familiar with the Brooks-Bateson controversy concerning this poem that we are apt to think of the right answer in terms of 'either Brooks or Bateson,' and never dream of the possibility that both might be in the wrong. This instance shows the value of the existence of rival hypotheses. And in this respect Hirsch's method is just as tolerant of different incompatible readings, and just as far from authoritarianism, as Rosenblatt's. There is no difference between them. A slight difference is that in Hirsch the citizenship to be given to each reading is the citizenship as a competitor, whereas in Rosenblatt it is the citizenship in an Edenic community with no competition. But such a community is a mere fiction. (Here, the metaphor may be misleading. The competition is not among readers but among readings.)

Hirsch never says that a tested hypothesis becomes the final meaning once for all. Tested no matter how many times, it still remains a working hypothesis, ready to be challenged by a new rival, and ready to admit a new revision based on new evidence. Theoretically, any definitive reading is a provisional one, and thus the survival of the fittest goes on from reader to reader, from generation to generation. And to this view Rosenblatt virtually agrees when she refers to 'communication among readers':

A reader who has been moved or disturbed by a text often manifests an urge to talk about it, to clarify and crystallize his sense of the work. He likes to hear others' views.... As we exchange experiences, we point to those elements of the text that best illustrate or support our interpretation. We may help one another to attend to words, phrases, images, scenes, that we have overlooked or slighted. We may be led to reread the text and revise our own interpretation.⁴³

Here Rosenblatt mentions the reader's urge to talk about his own reading, to hear others' views, and to exchange experiences. But where does such an impulse come from? Certainly not from an Edenic ennui of contentment.

It can come only from a striving after a more plausible reading. Readers can have an amicable community, indeed, where they like to hear each other, but paradoxically that is possible only when they are aware of the fierce competition going on among incompatible readings for the survival of the fittest. Rosenblatt also mentions a revision of an interpretation. But in what direction should that revision be directed, if not toward a more probable reading? And the accumulation of such revisions will ultimately lead to a single correct reading. In this respect she is a Hirschian traditionalist.

The situation is quite different, however, when we turn to the radical theories that assume the reader's creativity to be paramount. There is no way of reconciling them to Hirsch's theory. A fundamental difference lies in the concept of the pre-understanding that plays so important a role in the mechanism of interpretation sketched above. As Hirsch explains, pre-understanding is the reader's initial guess or expectation, and as such it is a product of the reader's subjectivity. Therefore, the objectivity of understanding depends solely upon the possibility that this subjective element posited at the start can finally be purged away in the process of understanding (including the process of testing). If it is not possible, then every reader's understanding is his own creation, and reconstruction of authorial intention is a logical impossibility. According to Hirsch, this is Hans-Georg Gadamer's position. Gadamer has transformed the concept of the pre-understanding into the word 'prejudice.'⁴⁴ A natural inference from this is that our interpretations are always governed by our prejudices. And this seems to have been the underlying principle of the various avant-garde theories of the last two decades. 'If any effort cannot eliminate our prejudices,' the assertion went, 'then let us avail ourselves of it: reading can be heightened into a creative activity.'

Hirsch says that theoretically we cannot decide which position is right, his own or Gadamer's, because 'there is no way of being certain in any act of interpretation that the author's meaning has or has not been reproduced.'⁴⁵ Our firm belief that communication is going on may, or may not, be an illusion. Thus the problem is not a matter of theoretical decision, but a matter of choice—rather like a Carlylean choice between the Everlasting No and the Everlasting Yea. Then, which shall be our choice? The implication of Gadamer's position is too tremendous. As Hirsch says, 'it is ultimately an argument against written communication in general.'⁴⁶ It implies not only that we cannot understand the past writers, but also that,

since there are no two identical personalities, we cannot understand each other. This is too far apart from our daily experience, from our common sense, to be accepted. Of course, it is sometimes instructive to throw doubt on our common sense. But then we should also remember that common sense often comprises in it the wisdom of ages that any individual ingenuity cannot surpass. And here is the very source of the refreshing virtue Hirsch's theory still retains in the present-day context.

IV

Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance is the most controversial, and yet the most valuable, part of his theory. It has been attacked as grounded on a misapplication of Frege's distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. Whether his distinction is philosophically sanctioned or not is a difficult problem involving an analysis of the 'meaning of meaning,' and will not be given any immediate answer. But, meanwhile, his distinction works very well; it perfectly accords with our literary experience, and is very effective in charting out a map of literary studies.

Hirsch's definition runs as follows:

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.⁴⁷

Significance can change, can widen indefinitely, while meaning is a fixed point, the unmoved mover, as it were. Meaning and significance are the two aspects of what we call literary meaning: the one centripetal, the other centrifugal. This distinction faithfully describes our literary experience, especially when we feel a particular work to be 'suggestive.' This was the very contention of A. C. Bradley's in his Oxford lecture, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake":

About the best poetry, and not only the best, there floats an atmosphere of infinite suggestion. The poet speaks to us of one thing, but in this one thing there seems to lurk the secret of all. He said what he meant, but his meaning seems to beckon away beyond itself, or rather to

expand into something boundless which is only focussed in it; something also which, we feel, would satisfy not only the imagination, but the whole of us.⁴⁸

Perhaps, Hirsch's distinction is too clear-cut to fit into our actual experience; for our actual experience is rather an organic unity, and never a divided one. But then his procedure belongs to the 'privilege' of the philosopher described by Coleridge:

The office of philosophical disquisition consists in just distinction; while it is the privilege of the philosopher to preserve himself constantly aware, that distinction is not division.⁴⁹

Or let us say that literary meaning consists of one percent meaning and ninety-nine percent significance. Even in that case, if this one thing the author meant is slurred over, the whole discussion will degrade into a day-dream grounded in nothing. That is why the clear-cut distinction is necessary.

The distinction between meaning and significance often works well when we meet with an apparently insoluble disagreement of critical opinions. An example is that between J. M. Murry and F. R. Leavis in reading Keats's ode "To Autumn." After tracing Keats's growth of mind, Murry concludes:

[Keats] was twenty-three; and at the moment ... he was writing day after day the *Odes*, to Psyche, to the Nightingale, on a Grecian Urn, on Melancholy—poems comparable to nothing save the works of Shakespeare's maturity.... [*To Autumn*] is the perfect and unforced utterance of the truth contained in the magic words: 'Ripeness is all.'⁵⁰

And this has provoked Leavis's objection:

Such talk is extravagant, and does not further the appreciation of Keats. No one could have found that order of significance in the ode merely by inspecting the ode itself. The ripeness with which Keats is concerned is the physical ripeness of autumn.⁵¹

While fully admitting the soundness of Leavis's reading, we still feel sympathetic with Murry's enthusiasm. Why? The reason is that Leavis is primarily concerned with the *meaning* of the poem, while Murry is discussing

the *significance*, namely, the meaning of the poem *in relation to* 'Keats' poetic life' (which is, indeed, the subtitle of his book). They do not conflict with each other because they are each referring to a different level of meaning. On the other hand, the confusion of the two levels of meaning very often debilitates a critical comment. The following remark by J. R. Watson on "To Autumn" comprises the two distinct levels of meaning:

The more powerfully that autumn is brought before the reader, the more powerful is the sense of the transience of earthly beauty.⁵²

The first half of this comment is concerned with the objective entity of the poem, what the poet meant, and the latter half is Watson's response to it. And Watson does not distinguish them. The result is to blur Keats's constant theme in his odes, which is, as I believe it to be, 'A thing of beauty' that 'is a joy for ever'—a theme diametrically opposed to 'the transience of earthly beauty' as Watson names it. In fact, the Keatsian study has been a conspicuous instance in which the confusion of the two levels of meaning mars the whole situation. It will be worth trying to divide critical opinions into two groups: groups of those that refer to *meaning* and those that refer to *significance*. Watson continues his comment on "To Autumn":

The final verse, in particular, is infused with a perceptible sadness, for the day is dying, the gnats mourning, and the swallows getting ready to depart.

But another critic's comment is just the other way round:

Just as the swallows will come back next year, so another day will dawn, for the great movement of life goes on, however transient the existence of the individual.⁵³

What Keats meant (or *did*, for it is an act of intention) is to contemplate autumn, evoking it powerfully before the reader. Its power, however, inevitably beckons us away beyond it. Thus the responses to it can be various. But to confuse these distinct levels is to lose the firm point of departure, the unmoved mover from which alone our discussion can be developed. In a confused Babel, the objectivity of interpretation will be quite lost sight of.

On Authorial Intention

In Hirsch's scheme, interpretation is a discipline concerned exclusively with meaning in its Hirschian sense. As such it is a small portion of the whole literary studies. Many other things come into the field: biographical studies, period studies, the study of literary history or history of ideas, and so on. But interpretation is closely related with those large studies, for it can provide fundamental data for them. And those studies, too, can in turn supply materials for that interpretive milieu within which rival hypotheses are to compete for the survival of the fittest. Thus the various branches of literary studies go together: sometimes focussed centripetally on a reading of a single text, or of a single line, single passage in it; and sometimes expanding centrifugally into a wider range of studies and even beyond the range of literary studies toward the central theme of the humanities: man's place in the universe, his whence and whither. They are all interrelated. Moreover, most of the problems taken up along the path are given only hypothetical answers, not final ones. Thus the whole range of studies constitutes one vast complex of hypotheses constantly to be revised. And this is handed down from generation to generation, and gains the name of tradition.

In this vast scheme of hypotheses, what one can do with a single literary text seems almost infinitesimally small, especially if one's task is, as Hirsch says, submission to authorial intention. Yet it is a contribution nonetheless. The danger lies rather in the attempt to upset this organic relationship between tradition and the individual, placing undue authority on individual eccentricity.

V

Robert Scholes says that Hirsch's approach is the most conservative one.⁵⁴ Of course, much depends upon what we mean by the word 'conservative.' But there are things in literature which sometimes force us to be 'conservative.' In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge has inserted an amusing episode into a footnote to a statement about the problem of literary taste:

I was conversing on this subject with a friend, when the servant, a worthy and sensible woman, coming in, I placed before her two engravings, the one a pinky-coloured plate of the day, the other a masterly etching by Salvator Rosa, from one of his own pictures. On pressing

her to tell us, which she preferred, after a little blushing and flutter of feeling, she replied—why, that, Sir! to be sure! (pointing to the *ware* from the Fleet-street print shops) It's so *neat* and elegant. T'other is such a *scratchy* slovenly thing.⁵⁵

The narration ends at this point with a Sterneian aposiopesis. The surprise is not, of course, the servant's lack of taste, but the fact that there is no rational standard or rule by which one can persuade her of Salvator Rosa's superiority. She felt the Fleet Street piece to be better, and theoretical reasoning has no power before the Tennysonian 'I have felt.' Nor is that all; for what we call good taste, too, is nothing but another version of 'I have felt.' With an artistic masterpiece before us, we can enumerate and analyze many components that go to make it a masterpiece. But we cannot reverse the process and prove its greatness from those components. Greatness is a thing entirely to be felt, and for that matter intuition precedes evidence. Nor can anyone evade this mystery lying at the core of literature, as Brian Wilkie says in a similar context:

[T]he psychology of the creative process is still almost completely a mystery. One might argue that the real, latent point of Plato's *Ion*, especially if understood in the light of Gestalt psychology, is that works of art draw on resources in the artist's mind and experience that are immeasurably more complex than anything explainable in terms of finite acts of perception, will, and overt consciousness. For that matter, the same is true of the audience's response to works of art.⁵⁶

To return to the *Biographia*: after the episode with the servant Coleridge continues his meditation on taste with a quotation from Sir Joshua Reynolds, and this leads him to what is now a topical subject—the problem of canon:

An artist, whose writings are scarcely less valuable than his works, and to whose authority more deference will be willingly paid, than I could even wish, should be shewn to mine, has told us, and from his own experience too, that good taste must be *acquired*, and like all other good things, is the result of thought, and the submissive study of the best models. If it be asked, "But what shall I deem such?" the answer is; *presume* these to be the best, the *reputation* of which has been matured

into *fame* by the consent of ages. For wisdom always has a final majority, if not by conviction, yet by acquiescence.⁵⁷

Here the wording is Coleridge's own, not Reynolds's. The distinction between reputation and fame is a typical Coleridgean desynonymization, and like other desynonymized terms this distinction works very well in clarifying arguments. Reputation is local and temporary, while fame is universal and lasting. However, it will be easily seen that the boundary between the two is a fluid one. In most cases it will be difficult to know which of the two has been gained by a particular work of art. Moreover, as Coleridge says, fame is not built on a final conviction, but merely on the provisional acquiescence of the majority. And this tells us much about the nature of the so-called canon.

From the purely rationalistic standpoint, there is nothing so chimerical as a canon. It has no theoretical basis, nor any visible evidence. Therefore, it is very easy to deny its existence. But as soon as we discard it wholly, we lose the very basis of our literary talk—'the best models' by which alone we can hope to acquire and cultivate good taste, and without taste anyone's talk of literature is a nonsense. The situation will become clearer if we go back to the episode of the servant. She has reason to claim that the Fleet Street piece should be admitted into the canon because she felt it to be superior to *Salvator Rosa* and no one can refute her. And she might be right; for we cannot be absolutely certain in matters of taste. But the possibility will be small; her claim would have little power over us. The reason is obvious. It is not on account of her social status, nor her education or her ability to think. It is only this: that she has not sufficiently undergone the submission to the canon so essential to the acquisition of taste. And here is the crux of the problem. A canon is made up of everyone's 'I have felt,' submitted to the majority principle, but at the same time everyone's 'I have felt' ought to be cultivated by the same canon. Such is the organic relationship between tradition and the individual I mentioned above. Just as, in Hirsch's theory, submission to the author's subjectivity is the only way to objectivity in interpretation, so here, too, any contribution to a new horizon is possible only through submission to tradition.

Recently, Marilyn Butler has developed an argument for a total revision of the canon of English Romanticism by introducing Robert Southey into our consciousness.⁵⁸ Her argument is persuasive, indeed. But we feel it to

be both provocative and persuasive just because we have been nurtured by that canon. Otherwise, we would not be able to appreciate the argument at all. And as for the need of revision, it is rather a thing taken for granted, in so far as a canon is not a fixed conviction, but a mere provisional acquiescence, a hypothesis. Norman Fruman, in a recent essay on Coleridge and the New Criticism, says, 'Evidence mounts daily that the active lifespan of a literary theory is shortening, drastically.'⁵⁹ If such is the present-day situation, it is remarkable that Hirsch's theory, propounded more than twenty years ago, should still retain its initial impact, its refreshing tone. And it does so just because of its submission to tradition, that is, its 'conservatism'.

Notes

- 1 E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1967). The book includes as appendices two previously published papers: "Objective Interpretation" (1960), and "Gadamer's Theory of Interpretation" (1965).
- 2 Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 178, where Lentricchia points out this potentiality inherent in Hirsch's theory, which he thinks, however, was ignored by traditionalists.
- 3 As a remedy for the present-day 'hubbub of competing critical "systems"', Robert Crosman has proposed that 'we return to the level at which all literary experience begins—the act of reading' (Robert Crosman, *Reading Paradise Lost* [Bloomington & London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980], p. 2).
- 4 Hirsch, pp. 188, 198.
- 5 Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1944), p. 148.
- 6 Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell & W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), II: 16-17.
- 7 Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader the Text the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 112-13.
- 8 Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistics*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 121.
- 9 John F. Danby, *The Simple Wordsworth: Studies in the Poems 1797-1807* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 15.
- 10 Hirsch, pp. 19-23, 223.
- 11 Hirsch, p. 242.

On Authorial Intention

- 12 A. E. Powell, *The Romantic Theory of Poetry: An Examination in the Light of Croce's Aesthetic* (London: Edward Arnold, 1926), pp. 29, 137.
- 13 G. H. R. Parkinson, *Georg Lukács* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 134-35.
- 14 Hirsch, p. 223.
- 15 Hirsch, p. 237.
- 16 Hirsch, p. 238.
- 17 Hirsch, p. 242.
- 18 W. K. Wimsatt, "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited," in *The Disciplines of Criticism: Essays in Literary Theory, Interpretation, and History*, ed. Peter Demetz et al. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), p. 214.
- 19 Robert Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven & London: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), p. 15.
- 20 William E. Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 64, 81-83.
- 21 *Biographia Literaria*, II: 11.
- 22 Hirsch, p. 241.
- 23 Hirsch, pp. 239-40.
- 24 Rosenblatt, p. 113.
- 25 Scholes, p. 9.
- 26 Rosenblatt, p. 111.
- 27 Cain, p. 29.
- 28 Hirsch, pp. 182-83.
- 29 I actually attempted such an application in my paper: "Wordsworth's 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal' Re-examined" *Shiron* XXV (1986): 45-67.
- 30 Rosenblatt, pp. 137-38.
- 31 Rosenblatt, p. 83.
- 32 Rosenblatt, p. 129.
- 33 Rosenblatt, p. 142.
- 34 Rosenblatt, p. 86.
- 35 Rosenblatt, p. 145.
- 36 Rosenblatt, pp. 168-71.
- 37 Hirsch, p. 76.
- 38 Hirsch, p. 261.
- 39 Hirsch, p. 169.
- 40 Rosenblatt, p. 142.
- 41 Hirsch, p. 103.
- 42 M. H. Abrams ed., *English Romantic Poets* (2nd edition; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 186.
- 43 Rosenblatt, p. 146.

- 44 Hirsch, p. 259.
- 45 Hirsch, p. 256.
- 46 Hirsch, p. 256.
- 47 Hirsch, p. 6.
- 48 A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909; London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 26.
- 49 *Biographia Literaria*, II: 11.
- 50 John Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1925), pp. 143, 189.
- 51 F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation* (1936; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 215.
- 52 J. R. Watson, *English Poetry of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (London & New York: Longman, 1985), p. 289.
- 53 Robin Mayhead, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), p. 101.
- 54 Scholes, p. 8.
- 55 *Biographia Literaria*, II: 35.
- 56 Brian Wilkie, "The Romantic Ideal of Unity", in *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today*, ed. Cristine Gallant (New York: AMS Press, 1989), p. 45.
- 57 *Biographia Literaria*, II: 35-36.
- 58 Marilyn Butler, "Repossessing the Past: the Case for an Open Literary History", in *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History*, ed. Marjorie Levinson et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 72-84.
- 59 Norman Fruman, "Ozymandias and the Reconciliation of Opposites", in *Coleridge's Theory of Imagination Today*, p. 61.