

Interpretation

Attention to historical method encounters the problem of historicism, in separating method from matter. Historicism concerns the circular nature of an interpretation of the past in terms of the present, and the difficulty of drawing a line between the two. The tendency is to ascribe to history laws or forces that are really instruments of method rather than facts of the matter, and to unfairly extend the evidence in this way. But how or where to draw the line between facts and opinion or theory is notoriously difficult. It has led some theorists to radically relax the distinction, to propose that historical method need do no more than expand upon current social and cultural concerns, by way of weaving a coherent story from accepted facts, and to simply repeat the exercise when it no longer satisfies. In short it is a full and frank admission of historicism, and proposes rather that everything is to be taken historically or is open to reinterpretation in light of emerging or future facts and interests. The problem now is not one of reconciling history to the present, but of simply arguing for one story over another or of accepting multiple stories.

This is broadly speaking, the existential view, that gained currency in the work of Martin Heidegger and inspired the hermeneutical method of Hans-Georg Gadamer and others.¹¹² In hermeneutical interpretation there is no pretence that historical interpretation establishes ‘the whole and nothing but’ the truth in regard to what ‘really’ happened, or what past intentions may have ‘really’ been. Truth is now taken as relative to current concerns. The hermeneuticist rather constructs a persuasive argument, or simply a good story in support of such concerns, through selection of accepted facts or texts. Citation is then paramount, argument reduced to links from one text to another. But links often struggle between extending one text and inviting another, must seesaw between method and matter. Then there is the

¹¹² Martin Heidegger, *Being And Time*, (1927) Oxford, 1962. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London/ New York, 1975.

problem that the facts or texts themselves may still be disputed, that varying interpretations can share nothing, but simply amount to further texts, all trading in degrees of consensus.¹¹³ For a theorist such as E. D. Hirsch Jr for example, intention is an indispensable part of interpretation, but is taken as almost a platonic ideal, it guides a story, even as it recedes from it.¹¹⁴

In contrast with the existential immersion in history, structuralism offers a kind of isolation from it. For the structuralist, the problem is not one of drawing a line between history and the present, but between history and the field of study. Briefly, structuralism derives from Ferdinand de Saussure's studies in linguistics, their broader application to the social sciences, generally referred to as semiotics, and less prominently, from group theory in mathematics, and its application to symbolic studies in the work of Ernst Cassirer, and to physics in the work of Sir Arthur Eddington.¹¹⁵ Structuralist analysis is a closed or strict system of elements, uses functions and rules to explain the production and permutation of an object or issue. Typically structuralism emphasises synchronic relations between elements, at the expense of diachronic or historical development. The rules of the system permit certain changes and these changes simply amount to the object or topic, rather than requiring history to explain how one arrives at the set of changes or elements. The problem here is that relations are reductive and tend to subsume variations under a general rule of change. Structures tend to overwhelm their objects and history. Structuralism finds application in art history in the work of Louis Marin and Hubert Damisch for example, and Gombrich's emphasis upon schema and correction is sometimes viewed as structuralist.¹¹⁶ But structuralism is noted here mainly for its sharp contrast with existential approaches.

Post-structuralist theorists reject the emphasis upon change as a given and the reductive tendency that ultimately finds all structures an echo of the structure of the

¹¹³ For moderate hermeneutic approaches see Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* Boston, 1971 and more recently, Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical but not Unruly*, Berkeley/London, 1995.

¹¹⁴ See for example, E. D. Hirsch Jr, *The Aims of Interpretation*, Chicago, 1976.

¹¹⁵ For a general survey and history of structuralism see Peter Caws, *Structuralism: The Art of the Intelligible*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1988. Also, Goodman acknowledges the influence of Cassirer in both *Ways of Worldmaking* and *Languages of Art*.

¹¹⁶ See for example, Mitchell, 1994, p. 342.

mind, as Claude Levi-Strauss famously speculated (somewhat after Kant).¹¹⁷ They draw upon Heidegger, and Nietzsche, and adopt a sweeping relativism of metaphysics as well as Freudian notions of the Id and Libido in constructing language and The Subject. For theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, or Jean Baudrillard no one story or grand narrative will do, interpretations cannot even argue for common ground, for they pursue knowledge on different terms.¹¹⁸ In other words, their relativism rules out any commensurability or points of agreement between interpretations. Understanding and knowledge are consequently taken as a matter of influence, of institutions and power in some versions.¹¹⁹ For Derrida, the text or work is to be ‘deconstructed’, by playing upon the ambiguities or ‘differences’ in syntactic construction, and generating ‘slippages’. Interpretation becomes a kind of whimsical improvisation on the rules of grammar. Again the results tend to seesaw, now between poetry and academic discourse. But the radical relativism adopted in many of these theories draws grave objections concerning a lack of consistency or coherence.

A claim such as Gadamer’s “all knowledge is historically conditioned” is by definition ahistorical or an open contradiction.¹²⁰ To place history outside the rest of the body of knowledge is only to beg the question how such a statement can then be claimed, or known? In the case of intention conceived ideally, the question arises where does the interpreter draw the line? In what ways is the text or style real or ideal? From where do we start to construct the notional, nominal author’s intentions? The implied duality brings in its train a distinguished body of philosophical debate. If grammatical construction is to provide a starting point, then why are not its constructions also taken to orchestrate ambiguity, or slippage as well? Poetry would seem to trade precisely in this aspect of language. Fitting deconstruction to construction in this way begins to look a little too constructive. Lyotard’s rejection of a ‘metanarrative’ tying together the world then leaves the

¹¹⁷ Levi-Strauss, ‘Reponse a quelques questions’, *Esprit*, n.s. 11, 1963, pp. 596-627.

¹¹⁸ See for example, Derrida *Writing and Difference*, (Paris, 1967) Chicago/London, 1978, Lyotard, *The Post Modern Condition*, (Paris, 1979) Minnesota, 1984, and Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, (Paris, 1984) New York, 1987.

¹¹⁹ For a seminal post-structuralist analysis of power and knowledge see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (Paris, 1969) London, 1972. Foucault is often also taken as a structuralist, particularly in France.

¹²⁰ Gadamer, 1975, p. 483.

constitution of narrative disturbing open; no narrative is then humble or small enough not to contain others. Similar objections are levelled at Goodman's 'constructional' philosophy, but while Goodman shares many of these convictions for relativism and pluralism, one of the reasons for adopting his aesthetic is its ability to meet such objections more successfully than has elsewhere been demonstrated.

So far this aspect to Goodman's theory has only been glimpsed in his rejection of synonymy and intention concerning stylistics. This is a suitable point at which to appreciate it more fully. Synonymy of styles amounts to versions of a shared content or object, as ways of depicting the same thing. But reconciling versions thus also reduces content – takes all differences as only a matter of style. In Goodman's view where versions share too little or reduce content too much for ease or purpose, in finding the common denominator, we do better to treat versions not as sharing a common content or world, but as simply making different content, ultimately dealing in different worlds. Then again, when too many worlds make the going confusing, we do better to find some shared versions and simplify matters. This is Goodman's pluralism and it is distinctive for its 'irrealist' attitude; that switches back and forth between versions and worlds. Before considering an historical method consistent with this view, some measure must be taken of objections to irrealism.¹²¹

The objection is mainly that two sets of rules or two levels of rule are confused or inconsistent within the theory, on one level there are rules for relativism of all terms, while on a second level there is the term of rightness as an absolute, governing relativism, and holding for all worlds. On one level the theory claims an incommensurability of worlds, while on a second, it tacitly acknowledges a commensurate world-scale in rightness, by which worlds are organised and navigated. If rightness is absolute, then the worlds made are according to one rule, and amount to one world, if rightness is taken as relative on the other hand, then there can be no rightness or rule for all worlds, nor reason to advocate them.

¹²¹ See for example, Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, Dordrecht, 1987, pp. 153-154. See also interesting commentary in James F. Harris, *Against Relativity*, La Salle, Illinois, 1992.

A short defence is that the objection itself makes the mistake of demanding an absolute relativism of rightness and pluralism of worlds that makes no sense. To assume there is rightness beyond worlds is to ask for rightness of nothing. To want worlds not measured by worlds, or as worlds, is simply not to want worlds. A longer defence is that Goodman allows that varieties of rightness arise supplementing truth, in tests for truth, in categories necessary to truth but as often are indifferent to it and beyond declaration or proposition (and so truth) to fair or right sampling and depiction.¹²² Controversially, Goodman claims that both truth and beauty are subordinate to rightness or are only some of the ways or parts of rightness that go to deciding what makes a world. So rightness assumes an unusual prominence in Goodman's philosophy, certainly.

The point is to appreciate that versions are right or wrong (even when not necessarily true or false, beautiful or ugly) in establishing reference to a diverse world or some world in a diverse universe. Whether one accepts diverse right versions of a single world or diverse worlds is not that important to irrealism. The one world common to all right versions reduces itself to nothing; all right worlds only make some versions of others. Goodman wittily concludes that 'the philosopher, like the philanderer, is always finding himself stuck with none or too many'.¹²³ The oscillation between versions and worlds equally rejects monism and dualism. 'The realist will resist the conclusion that there is no world; the idealist will resist the conclusion that all conflicting versions describe different worlds.'¹²⁴ Irrealist pluralism is thus effectively constrained by nihilism and requires no conflicting or double standard.

To return to the issue of interpretation, it might seem the pluralist is content to accept all interpretation as simply describing different works in different worlds, that there can be no right or wrong interpretation. For the irrealist this is not the case. Interpretations share an identified work or object, are right in so far as validly derived from identification or the facts of the matter, are necessarily plural in disputing implications for a given identity. In this regard pluralism of interpretation is obviously less controversial than pluralism of worlds. It is commonplace, after all,

¹²² Goodman, 1978, pp. 109-140.

¹²³ Ibid. p.119.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

to accept that interpretations are necessarily various. Wrong interpretation may incorrectly identify a work or object, or falsely derive implications. For example Michelangelo's *David* may be interpreted as a giant nudist bully, but the interpretation is wrong because scale and the biblical character of David are misidentified, and custom of undress does not follow from Old Testament Judah and Israel.¹²⁵ If right, the interpretation is not of *David*, if of *David*, the interpretation is wrong. In accepting that many interpretations may be right, the irrealist does not accept that any and every interpretation is right, or that rightness imposes no criteria for interpretation. Plural right interpretation also complements the proposed theory of art, where circumspective meaning requires just this diversity. To simply allow each interpretation a separate work, would defeat the purpose of art; reduce interpretation to identification.

Yet plural right interpretation is not quite trivial either. Right interpretations trace broader implications for work or object in a variety of directions, and if implications are valid then are counted as right but do not necessarily agree with each other or add up to the one big right interpretation. Michelangelo's *David* may rightly be interpreted as a) a personification of the civic spirit of Florence, b) a revival of classical heroism, c) an ideal male physique, d) a subversion of Christian piety and modesty, for example. Yet Florence is hardly personified by an ideal male physique or subversion of Christian principles; a classical hero surely deserves an ideal physique, but is uncomfortable personifying a devoutly Christian city, the ideal physique is compromised by the tasks of a teenage shepherd and the skills of a slingshot. Combined, all look variously wrong although are only one such combination in any case, while each alone seems right up to a point. Some combine certainly, might usefully simplify the clutch of interpretations, some compromise may allow others combination, then again the cost of compromise may rob interpretations of too much; mean less, if more consistently. So the irrealist, as indicated, juggles too many against too few in preserving rightness.

¹²⁵ Actually, the relevant Biblical text (1 Samuel 17) mentions David's possession of a cloak and pouch at least, in which he carries five smooth stones for his slingshot, after discarding the armour and weapons offered by King Saul. The all-nude combat stance perhaps owes more to Greek traditions, taken up below, but neither source sanctions codes of undress for casual intimidation.

Also, plural right interpretation does more than maintain a singular identification at its source. Identity is as much decided by rival interpretation as decides them. The irrealist thus uses methods to make matter, adjusts each for rightness. Beyond this, irrealism makes no conditions for any one right history. Still, the historian is perhaps confronted with a different set of priorities for ‘what really happened’ where a) many versions are equally right but b) wrong versions are still to be avoided and while c) better versions are still to be had, even though d) there is no best version (or none is better than all). Not all or any right versions will do. Only the most comprehensive or efficient are preferred, yet some right implications do not easily combine with others, lessen effectiveness in so doing. The irrealist historian is torn between methods, must balance improvement of past versions against introduction of merely different versions. The irrealist historian’s method - in as much as it allows just one – trades between better and different versions.

Art historical interpretation comes with more baggage. The artwork is not only identified by a source but also style. Stylistics rests upon a theory of reference and the irrealist art historian here appeals to a taxonomy of exemplification. Such structure obviously suggests structuralism in its fixed or absolute terms yet the structure here does not subsume too great a variety of features or applications under a general rule, nor eliminates diachronic differences in favour of synchronic ones. On the contrary, stylistics here has drawn further distinctions between the expressive and the stated, the literal and metaphorical, depictive and material exemplification. Breadth and nuance of meaning only gain from this stylistic structure. Diachronic or historical change is gauged by variations on these routes of reference, on what history does *with* them, rather than what it does *to* them. For, to historicize them thus would be to rob art history of any stable measure or meaning, to fall into an absolute historicism that, as indicated earlier, is not strictly coherent.

An art historical method thus emerges for irrealism. Contrasts with other radical approaches to interpretation have pointed to dangers in too much relativism or the folly of absolute relativism. The study now compares an irrealist approach with that of a realist, in the following chapter looks at what story or stories of art an irrealist might tell.