

Mark Bevir

THE TEXT AS A HISTORICAL OBJECT

Historians attempt to understand the past through studying and reflecting on the relevant evidence. Although the evidence takes many forms, including paintings, the landscape, tools and utensils, and items of clothing, the dominant form is the text, the text as, for example, government record, newspaper, company report, diary, scientific treatise, poetry and prose, letter, and liturgy. The text occupies a place of unique importance in historical scholarship. Almost all historical claims rely on textual scholarship. Historians work with texts; they hold them, read them, contemplate them; they interact with them with different degrees of methodological sophistication and imaginative flair; they attempt to take from them, or to get them to yield-up, their secrets, their meanings; they interrogate them for the information they contain about the past. The text is the object we confront most often in our historical research. But what is a text? and how does a text possess meaning?

Perhaps there was a time when it seemed obvious how we should conceive of a text and its meaning. A text was a written document with an author whose intention in writing it fixed its single correct meaning.¹ Yet even if there once was such a time, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory have undermined any such obvious resolution of our questions. Roland Barthes dramatically

breaks the link between authorial intention and the meaning of the text, saying that “the very being of writing (the meaning of the labor that constitutes it) is to keep the question ‘who is speaking?’ from being answered.”² Michel Foucault dismisses the author as “a function” that emerged among literary critics following the Renaissance.³ Jacques Derrida argues, moreover, that once we thus sever the link between text and author, then “the text is cut off from all absolute responsibility”; the text is a site of multiple, ambiguous meanings, able “to communicate only its own inability to communicate.”⁴ Today, one might say, the text often appears in the guise of a fluid, boundless entity lacking both author and stable meaning.

Positivists and presentists might suggest that how we conceive of a text and its meaning makes little difference to our historical practice. A belief in either brute facts or the immanence of meaning within the text might encourage them to argue that texts present the past to us irrespective of any abstract analysis of textuality. Surely though we should see positivism and presentation not as neutral meta-theories but instead as particular analyses of textuality that characteristically inform certain types of historical practice. Surely we can not doubt that different concepts of the text often inspire different types of historical practice. We might point, for example, to theoretically-inspired readings of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government* as diverse as Leo Strauss’s emphasis on its place within the canon, C. B. Macpherson’s deployment of economic determinism, and John Dunn’s rigorous contextualism.⁵

The questions of what a text is and of how a text possesses meaning are worth asking both for their intrinsic philosophical interest and for their relevance to historical practice. Historians necessarily idealise texts and textual meanings in that they in part construct them through their explicit or implicit theories of textuality. It is important, therefore, that the relevant theories be adequate ones. To ensure such adequacy we need to grasp a number of conceptual distinctions. We must distinguish between a physical object, a meaningful object, a work, and a text. More particularly, we will find that all meanings are either meanings for specific people or abstractions based on such meanings. This implies that we should renounce the metaphysical concept of the text as an object that possesses an innate meaning. Physical objects become meaningful objects only be-

cause specific individuals intend or understand them to possess a meaning. The only viable analysis of the text, therefore, is of an object that acts as the site of various works: the text is an object to which various individuals have attached, probably different, meanings. This analysis of the text enables us to resolve various difficulties about the stability of texts and the relation between authorial intention and textual meaning.

On Meaning

Think of a text; think, for example, of Locke's *Two Treatises*, more specifically, think of the 1978 paperback Everyman's Library edition introduced by W. S. Carpenter. This text is physical object: it has a yellow dust jacket with a picture of Locke on it; it has 258 pages; and it is covered with black printed marks. Sometimes we can not provide such clear accounts of the physical nature of a text because it is one we postulate. We do not have, for example, a single manuscript or book that we would describe without equivocation as Locke's own text of the *Two Treatises*. Instead we postulate Locke's own version of the text, and, through bibliographic and textual scholarship, we then try to improve our knowledge of this postulated object.⁶ When we postulate texts, however, we characteristically give them a physical form. We would be unhappy with the idea that Locke's own text of the *Two Treatises* existed only in his head; if it did, we would not want to call it a text.

Think now of a physical object that most of us would regard as devoid of meaning at least in itself; think, for example, of a cloud. Straightaway we will realise that texts are never just physical objects; they are meaningful ones. Indeed, some scholars define the concept of a text broadly to cover every physical object that bears meaning, including, paintings, actions, and even tools produced by human activity. Whether we accept this broad definition or restrict the concept of a text to those objects that include words will make no real difference to what follows. The ensuing arguments will focus on written documents, but they could be extended to apply to other meaningful objects. For the moment, therefore, let us say that a text is an object that possesses meaning. What though is a meaning?

Meanings only exist for individuals. To accept this statement of procedural individualism is not necessarily to tie the meaning of a text irrevocably to the intention of its author; after all, the meaning a text has for a reader is still a meaning for that reader as an individual even if it differs from that intended by the author. The challenge to procedural individualism does not come from the diverse ways in which a text might be read. It comes, rather, from the existence of social meanings. Principal among such social meanings are semantic meanings, defined in terms of the truth-conditions of an abstract proposition, and linguistic meanings, defined in terms of the conventions that govern usage within a community. A defence of procedural individualism might begin by reducing these forms of meaning to meanings for specific individuals.

The semantic meaning of an utterance comes from what would have to be the case for it to be true. Assuming that there are no pure perceptions, what would have to be the case for an utterance to be true must be relative to a conceptual framework. Thus, because conceptual frameworks are held only by individuals, semantic meanings can not exist apart from for individuals. Utterances can acquire a semantic meaning only within a set of concepts held by one or more individual. Semantic meanings are abstractions based on meanings for individuals. When we say that an utterance has a semantic meaning *X*, we imply that a group of individuals, usually including ourselves, share a conceptual framework within which they would accept the utterance as true if *X* is the case.

The linguistic meaning of a word comes from the concept to which it conventionally refers: thus, the linguistic meaning of “bachelor” is an unmarried man. The bond between a word and the concept that constitutes its linguistic meaning is, moreover, a purely conventional one without any natural foundation: thus, social convention could decree that the word “bac” rather than “bachelor” refer to an unmarried man.⁷ Although some words seem to be a peculiarly apt expression for a given concept, as in cases of onomatopoeia, even here there could be a convention that bound a different word to the relevant concept. Because linguistic meanings are thus purely conventional, they are given simply by what individuals do and do not accept as a convention. They exist because a number of individuals take certain words to refer to certain concepts.⁸ Linguistic meanings

are abstractions based on meanings for individuals. When we say that an utterance has a linguistic meaning *X*, we imply that a group of individuals accept certain conventions under which they understand it to refer to *X*.

Although we can reduce semantic and linguistic meanings to meanings for individuals, critics might suggest that there is another form of meaning that we can not so reduce. In considering this possibility, we can contrast an intentional meaning, defined as the meaning an utterance has for a particular individual, with any structural or innate meaning a text might possess that we could not reduce to intentional ones. We can approach utterances in one of two ways depending on which sort of meaning interests us, or better whether or not we believe in structural or innate meanings.⁹ If we want to know about an intentional meaning or an abstraction based on intentional meanings, we will consider an utterance as a historical work, that is, as a set of words written, or spoken, or understood in a particular way on a particular occasion. If we want to postulate structural or innate meanings, we will consider an utterance as a reified text, that is, as a set of words that possess a meaning given independently of all people. A defence of procedural individualism might continue, therefore, by showing that structural and innate meanings, and so reified texts, are atemporal, other-worldly objects of which we in this world can not have knowledge. In effect, there are no structural or innate meanings; we should not reify texts.¹⁰

Imagine that someone in the eighteenth century wrote an essay containing a section entitled “hallelujah lass”. If we try to study the essay as a reified text, we will abstract the words and phrases in it from the occasion of its appearance. When we do so, moreover, we presumably must allow for the fact that the phrase “hallelujah lass” can refer to a female member of the Salvation Army. The structural or innate meaning of the reified text refers to a female member of the Salvation Army. Clearly, therefore, the text does not exist in time – it must be outside of our world. After all, if we try to ascribe a temporal existence to the reified text, we will find that an essay written in the eighteenth century referred to an organisation that was not established until the late nineteenth century. We will be stuck with an unacceptable anachronism.

In order to locate a reified text in time, we would have to appeal to something outside of it, but as soon as we do this, we switch our attention from the reified text and its structural or innate meaning to a work and its intentional meaning. Imagine that we have two essays, one written in the eighteenth century and one written in the twentieth century, that contain exactly the same words and punctuation in exactly the same order. Any fact that enabled us to distinguish between the meaning of the two essays would have to refer to the particular occasion of the appearance of one or other of them. It would have to be a fact about the essays as works, not reified texts. Because the two essays are identical, moreover, they must share any structural or innate meaning they possess. Thus, if the twentieth century essay contains a section headed "hallelujah lass" so that "a female member of the Salvation Army" is part of its supposedly structural or innate meaning, the reified text of the eighteenth century essay also must include mention of the Salvation Army. Once again, therefore, we can not ascribe a temporal existence to reified texts without falling into anachronism. We can not do so because reified texts do not have a historical existence. As soon as we consider an utterance as a historical object, we necessarily focus our attention on its intentional meaning as a work. The obvious way to fix an utterance in history is to consider the meaning it had for certain people. We might say, for example, that our two identical essays have different meanings because the words they contain meant different things to people in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. To ask about the meaning an utterance had for a particular group of people, however, is to ask about the meaning of various works. To ask what the essay meant to people in the eighteenth century is to ask how they understood the essay. We can conclude, therefore, that only intentional meanings and works have a real or temporal existence.

Meanings only exist for individuals. There is only one way to avoid procedural individualism without postulating some sort of divine or supernatural realm of which we allegedly can acquire knowledge; that is, one must identify a language-*x* with a meaning-*x* that exists in history, as do intentional meanings, but that exists independently of particular individuals, as would structural or innate meanings. Although some scholars have tried to defend something akin to language-*x*, their endeavours seem doomed to fail.¹¹ Consider what is involved in aban-

doning the idea that temporal meanings exist only for individuals. When we talk of a social language, we typically have in mind a set of inter-subjective meanings shared by various people. For example, when two people talk of a female friend who is a member of the Salvation Army by saying "Jane is a Hallelujah Lass," they share a set of meanings that constitute the language they use to communicate. Although we might describe their shared language as a social structure, we would not thereby commit ourselves to the claim that it exists independently of particular individuals. On the contrary, it exists only because they, as individuals, share certain meanings. Because language-x does not embody this sort of inter-subjectivity, its ontological status remains extremely vague. It can not be a concrete entity; nor can it be an emergent entity, since if it were it would have to emerge from facts about individuals. Language-x must exist independently of human thought, since our thoughts are facts about us as individuals. Language-x must be a Platonic form; it must be an abstract entity with a real and independent existence. Although Platonic forms have had an honoured place in the history of philosophy, a postfoundational suspicion of the very possibility of self-evident truths makes a belief in them hard to defend. Besides, the opponents of procedural individualism would face special difficulties since their need to defend a language-x that exists in time would require them to ascribe a temporal existence to a Platonic form. They would have to explain how a Platonic form can exist for some time and then wither. How can a Platonic form be subject to natural processes such as those of growth and decay? Surely any theory of meaning that found itself having to answer this question would have gone wildly astray.

All temporal meanings are either meanings for individuals or abstractions derived from such meanings. This procedural individualism provides us with the beginnings of an analysis of meaning. It implies that individuals associate meanings with statements, books, films, events, and the like: statements, books, films, events, and the like, do not of themselves embody meanings. Objects come to mean something only because someone understands them so to do. Perhaps this idea of meanings being human constructs will seem uncontroversial, but even if it does, this uncontroversial idea has controversial corollaries. It implies that we can not reify texts. We can not ascribe a meaning to a text in itself.

The Stability of the Text

Earlier we found that a text is a physical object that possesses meaning. Now we have found that meanings only exist for specific individuals so texts do not possess meanings in themselves. How are we to bring these two insights together? Crucially because meanings only exist for individuals, we can not identify a single, definitive meaning, or even set of meanings, that is immanent within, or intrinsic to, a text. Texts are meaningful objects, rather than simply physical ones, solely because particular individuals attach meanings to them. We can define a text, therefore, as a physical object that acts as a site on to which individuals project various works. To define the text as a site for meanings is to accept, in the words of J. Hillis Miller, that "a text never has a single meaning, but is the crossroads of multiple ambiguous meanings."¹² Recently several scholars, including Miller, have tied the ambiguity of texts to the instability of meaning. They argue, usually influenced by deconstruction, that texts are unstable because there are no fixed meanings. Yet we have no reason as yet to accept this argument. We have found only that texts are ambiguous because they are the sites of various works, not that works too are ambiguous because meanings are unstable.

Derrida argues that texts are unstable because signification presupposes that "each so-called 'present' element . . . is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element."¹³ The rhetoric of post-structuralism and deconstruction tends to slide unnoticed, however, between a weak claim that is true and a strong claim that is false.¹⁴ The weak claim is that texts are ambiguous; they do not have innate meanings, so we can understand them in different ways. Few people would disagree. We are at liberty to understand a text as we wish rather than as the author intended. It is just that we obviously will not be doing history unless we identify the way we understand a text with the view a past figure took of it. The weak claim of the post-structuralists establishes only that we can approach texts in ahistorical ways. It does not establish that we can not approach them in historical ways. Thus, because few historians want to insist that everyone who

reads a text must do so with a historical eye, few historians need feel threatened by this weak claim. Nonetheless, the drama of the post-structuralist view of the text arises from an equivocation whereby a strong position can seem to be asserted but only this weak position appears to be defended. The strong claim is that texts are unknowable because we can not hope to identify works understood as intentional meanings. Clearly this strong claim does not follow from the fact that texts do not have fixed meanings. There is no obvious reason why historians should not be able to understand how a particular individual understood a text just because other people have understood it differently. In order to sustain their strong claim, post-structuralists would have to show that historians can not recover intentional meanings from the past. Generally they try to do this by defending at least one of the following three positions: meanings or intentions are not stable entities, we can not climb out of language, and we can not have knowledge of other minds.

Post-structuralists sometimes argue that we can not have knowledge of texts because intentional meanings are unstable. "Suppose," they say, "I ask what an author's intention means, and then what the meaning of the author's intention means, and so on."¹⁵ They argue that all meanings are unstable because any attempt to fix them runs into an infinite regress. We can undermine this argument by asking what exactly the post-structuralists refer to when they talk about the meaning of an intention. Intentions are behavioural or mental states that do not have meanings in the sense utterances have meanings. Intentions do not possess or instantiate meanings; rather, they establish the meanings possessed or instantiated in other objects. Thus, although we can ask what a particular description of an intention means, we can not ask what an intention itself means. If we adopt the behaviourist view of psychological states, to ask about the meaning of an agent's intention is to ask about the meaning of an agent's action; but behaviourists deny we can ask about the meaning of an action as though there were something behind it when there is not.¹⁶ Thus, behaviourism implies that meanings are fixed by intentions that do not themselves have meanings. If we adopt the mentalist view of psychological states, then when people describe a mental state they make an utterance and we can ask what they mean by this utterance, but asking about the meaning of an utterance describing a

mental state is not the same thing as asking about the meaning of the mental state itself. Imagine that passers-by overhear Peter saying “hallelujah lass” to Jane and ask him what he means at which point Peter explains that he intended to praise her suggestion. Although the passers-by can ask Peter what he means by this latter statement about his intention, they can not ask him what he means by his intention. Thus, mentalism too implies that meanings are fixed by intentions that do not themselves have meanings. Intentions seem to be unstable only because we must use language to describe them and we always can ask about the meaning of the words we so use. Although we can use various combinations of words to describe an intention, however, it remains the same whatever words we use to describe it.

Post-structuralists sometimes argue that we can not have knowledge of intentions precisely because they exist outside of language whereas we always remain within language. As Derrida puts it, there is only writing, “there is no ‘outside’ to the text.”¹⁷ Here too, however, the rhetoric of post-structuralism has an unfortunate tendency to slide from arguments for a weak claim that is true to a defence of a strong claim that is false. Few people would deny the weak claim that we must use language, conceived as a set of signs, if we are to refer to anything at all. But this weak claim does not establish the strong claim that we can not penetrate the linguistic fog to acquire knowledge of the things to which our signs refer. On the contrary, if our signs refer to reality, presumably we can have knowledge of reality. The real issue, therefore, is whether or not our signs refer to reality. The post-structuralists who argue that we can not have knowledge of anything outside of language must do so on the grounds that our language does not refer to reality. But this seems highly implausible. After all, even if we accept that our concepts do not have a one to one correspondence with reality, we still could argue that they can refer to reality within a theoretical context.¹⁸

As a last resort, post-structuralists sometimes accept that we can penetrate the linguistic fog engulfing reality only to deny that we thereby can acquire knowledge of intentional meanings. Derrida, for example, occasionally suggests that intentions are “in principle inaccessible” because we can not know anything about other people’s minds.¹⁹ Behaviourists can rebut this argument easily. Given that we

define psychological concepts by reference to actual or possible behaviour, we can have knowledge of intentions simply because we can observe behaviour. The fact that we can not know other minds is irrelevant because intentions are not mental states. Mentalists too can rebut this argument provided only that they reject logical empiricism. The post-structuralists' position derives from the twin assertions that we can know things only if we perceive them directly and that we can not perceive other minds directly. Yet the logical empiricism contained in these assertions does scant justice to our everyday notion of experience. When we say that we have experienced something, we imply that it exists and that we have had sensations we could not have had if it did not exist, but we do not necessarily imply that we have perceived it in itself. For instance, if we say that we have experienced radio waves, we imply that they exist and that we have listened to the radio, but we do not imply that we have perceived radio waves directly. We imply that we have heard the sounds the radio waves produce in our ear, not the radio waves themselves. Thus, provided mentalists accept our everyday, realist understanding of experience, they too can argue that we can have knowledge of other people's minds. They can say that we have knowledge of other people's minds because we encounter their minds indirectly in their behaviour. So, we can accept that a text is ambiguous, being the site of various works, without thereby concluding that it is unknowable.

Reception theorists suggest that the ambiguous nature of texts renders them unstable in the sense of being indeterminate rather than unknowable. Yet we have no reason as yet to accept this argument either. We have found only that texts are ambiguous because they are sites of various works, not that they are indeterminate because we can not identify the works of which they are composed. Reception theorists argue that we can not determine the content of a text because the historicity of our being precludes our escaping from our particular historical horizon. Many reception theorists refer us here to Hans-Georg Gadamer's analysis of historical knowledge as dependent on "the inner historicity that belongs to experience itself," an analysis that itself points back to Wilhelm Dilthey's belief that a historical event "gains meaning from its relationship with the whole, from the connection between past and future."²⁰ However,

whereas Gadamer's followers often take him to have proven the irrelevance and futility of any attempt to fix a text, he himself focused on the implications of human ontology for understanding as such. His concern lay less with the specific methodological problems we face in acquiring knowledge of texts than in general issues about the nature of all our understanding.²¹ Anyway, reception theorists argue that later historical events or works alter the context of earlier events or texts so we always understand history from a wider perspective than our ancestors but a narrower one than our heirs. When Locke wrote the *Two Treatises*, for example, he and his contemporaries did not have our modern concept of liberalism in terms of which to understand his ideas, but today we recognise his text as one founding such liberalism. Reception theorists argue that the current meaning of a historical event or text depends on a grasp of history as a unity culminating in the present. Thus, because the nature of the present constantly changes, to determine the content of a text, we would have to see history as a whole, which we can not do.

Reception theory confuses two aspects of indeterminacy. On the one hand, reception theorists correctly recognise that the future fate of a text remains unknown and open-ended: we can not say what works individuals will attach to that site in the future. On the other hand, reception theorists wrongly imply that the open-ended nature of a text's fate means we can not determine its current historical content. The current historical content of a text consists of all those works that individuals have attached to it as a site, where because the meaning of a work does not depend on its later significance, historians can determine the content of these works and thus the text. We can fix the current content of texts because the meanings they had for specific individuals in the past will not alter with later events. Historians can determine, for example, what the *Two Treatises* meant to Locke, and what it has meant to other people in the past, without knowing anything about its future fate, let alone its final significance. We can not predict the future, so we can not know how our heirs will react to texts. But we can discover what an author meant by a text, what another person has taken a text to mean, and what particular consequences a reading of a text has had.

The open-ended nature of a text's future in no way makes it a peculiarly indeterminate object. We do not know who will form fu-

ture governments of the UK, but we can write histories of previous governments. We might not know when a volcano will erupt in the future, but we can write a natural history dating its previous eruptions. The inability of historians to predict the future does not prevent their knowing the past. Once we distinguish the future significance of a text from its current content, we no longer have any reason to deny that texts are determinate historical objects. There is a fixed historical reality: an author did mean such and such by a text and others have understood it in this and that ways. Of course, future events might lead historians to revise their view of this fixed historical reality: new evidence or a new climate of opinion might prompt historians to adopt a new understanding of a work. But then in all areas of knowledge, the future might cast new light on objects, encouraging further reflection, and leading us to revise our beliefs. In no area of human knowledge does the likelihood of our thus revising our beliefs imply that the objects we currently postulate are unstable. A text is a physical object that acts as a site at which one or more individual locates a work. So defined, a text is an ambiguous but stable entity with, at any given moment, a determinate content available for historical study.

Texts and Authors

Our definition of a text also enables us to resolve difficulties in the concept of an author and the relationship of authorial intention to textual meaning. Alongside post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory, there has arisen an increasing awareness of the difficulties of postulating, let alone identifying, authors for texts such as the *Iliad* or a “keep off the grass” sign. In our view, a text is a physical object that people transform into a meaningful one by attaching works to it. This analysis of the text points to distinctions between the creator of the text as a physical object – that which causes it to come into being – the author of the text as an utterance – the person who first ascribes meaning to the relevant physical object – and readers of the text – those people other than the author who come to ascribe meanings to the relevant object. Once we grasp these

distinctions, we surely will conclude that although any text will have a creator and an author, the two need not be the same.

Our definition of the text, with its implicit distinction between creator and author, enables us to postulate authors for problematic texts such as the *Iliad* or a “keep off the grass” sign. Consider texts with a composite author or multiple authors. In these cases, we can distinguish the creators of the individual bits of the text from the author who first collected these bits together in a single text. We can distinguish the numerous people we suppose played an active role in the oral tradition out of which the *Iliad* emerged from the author or authors who first wrote down and attached a meaning to the particular version of concern to us. Of course, if we are interested in a component part of a text, we might turn our attention to an author other than the author of the whole. No doubt, for example, the author of St John’s Gospel was not also the author of the *Bible*. Similarly, although we standardly ascribe the meaning of a co-authored text to all the authors, we might focus on a component part that we ascribe to just one of them.

Consider next simple texts that recur as, for instance, with common public notices. Some scholars have argued that signs such as “keep off the grass” do not have authors.²² We might allow that public notices often are created by machines: after all, there is something odd about the idea that they could be created by someone who never sees them nor touches them, such as the person who first put up a sign saying “keep off the grass” or the person who programmes a machine to produce a hundred such signs. Because printing machines can not ascribe meanings to objects, moreover, we might allow also that the creators of public notices often are not their authors. Nonetheless, we still need not conclude that such notices do not have authors. We can say instead that the author of such a notice is the person who first ascribes meaning to it, even when this implies that the notice existed as a physical object for sometime before its author constituted it as a meaningful text. The case of apparently accidental texts, such as the imagined example of the monkey who types *Hamlet*, closely resembles that of public notices.²³ We have the monkey who creates the *Hamlet* manuscript as a physical object and Shakespeare who first made any such utterance, but neither seems suitable as the author of the manuscript.

Rather, we can say that the author is the person who first ascribes meaning to it.

In many cases, the author of a text is also its creator. Sometimes, however, the creator does not ascribe any meaning to the creation and so can not be the author of a meaningful text. The author of the text in these cases is the person who first ascribes meaning to it. This separation of author and creator would seem paradoxical only if we wrongly reduced the meaning of a text to the conscious, prior purposes of its author. If we did this, we would set up a rigid distinction between author and reader in a way which would encourage us to equate authorship with creation. In contrast, once we recognise that a text is just a site at which various individuals locate diverse meanings, we can allow that authors and readers ascribe meanings to texts in similar processes. Doing this, moreover, encourages us to distinguish the ascription of meaning from the act of creation. There is nothing paradoxical, therefore, in the idea that the author of an utterance might be, not its creator, but rather the first reader to ascribe meaning to it.

In our view, texts do not possess innate meanings but rather are given meanings by authors and readers alike. This pragmatic theory of the text resembles that of the reception theorists. Although the author first assigns meaning to the text, its meaning is not restricted to that its author intended or even could have intended. Rather, its future meaning is established in the act of its being read. The author locates the first work at the site of the text, but later readers can locate entirely different works at the same site. The text comes to bear various meanings as a result of being read by different people in different places and at different times. Thus, we can talk of the meaning of a text going beyond the intentions of its author or of the author having little control over its meaning. Similarly, because every time people read a text, they ascribe meaning to it, we can talk of each reading being a creative act; we can talk of the gradual unfolding of a text's significance, the constant proliferation of its meanings, and the impossibility of pinning down every meaning it might bear.²⁴

Some historians have long been interested in how a text has been read or how a thinker's reputation has waxed and waned. A pragmatic theory of the text clarifies our conceptualisation of such issues. It provides the historian with helpful heuristic hints based on a

greater methodological sophistication.²⁵ More particularly, a pragmatic theory of the text draws our attention to the processes through which beliefs and texts acquire authority. Historians might examine how beliefs and texts are established, neglected, and promoted within public discourses and social practices. By doing so, moreover, they might undertake a genealogical critique of a received canon of texts or a social ideology.

Consider first how a pragmatic theory of the text encourages historians to explore the changing horizon of expectations within which people placed various works at the site of a text. Any received canon or dominant ideology probably will appear here as one gradually established and modified through changing readings inspired by diverse interests, concerns, and criteria of excellence. Canons and ideologies are not natural, self-evident, or given phenomena, but rather created objects open to contestation.

Consider next how a pragmatic theory of the text encourages historians to explore the synchronic and diachronic relationships between works. Texts, traditions, and even social practices are composed in part of works that draw on, mimic, and contest one another in a variety of ways. Often received canons and social ideologies can be shown to rest on grotesque over-simplifications of the relationships between various works. In political thought, for example, the canon suggests that Locke intended the *Two Treatises* as a response to Hobbes in a way he simply did not.²⁶

Consider finally how a pragmatic theory of the text encourages historians to explore the social contexts in which works and texts are produced and distributed. Intellectual historians have not paid sufficient attention to questions of format, pricing, and other publishing and retail practices all of which effect who reads, what, how, and why. Equally important here are cultural and social institutions, including reviews, advertising, universities, churches, and political parties, all of which promote or hide certain works from various audiences. Historians who explored such matters might show us how received canons and social ideologies are given authority and institutionalised not solely in reasoned debate but also in political struggles characterised by unequal relations of power.

Although our pragmatic theory of the text resembles that of the reception theorists, there are important differences here. Reception

theorists often divorce the meaning of a text entirely from the intentions of its author. Sometimes they draw on a phenomenological scepticism to suggest that historians understand the past only in a dialogue with it and that this precludes a focus on authorial intentions.²⁷ According to phenomenological sceptics, the way in which readers understand a text reflects their presuppositions.²⁸ Reception theorists imply that this phenomenological scepticism shows that we can never recover the authorial intention behind a text, so we should concentrate on the meaning of the text as it has been produced by a continuous stream of creative readings. Yet phenomenological scepticism can not do the job reception theorists here ask it to. If we could not have access to past meanings, we could not recover the ways in which readers responded to texts any more than we could authorial intentions. There are only two viable responses to phenomenological scepticism. The first is: if we believe that the limitations of human understanding make history impossible, we will focus solely on what texts mean to us, knowing full well that we can not recover either the intentions of the authors of these texts or the meanings these texts have had for past readers.²⁹ The second is: if we think that the limits of human understanding make history difficult but not impossible, we will try to recover the meaning of texts to authors and readers alike.

Reception theory seems to be on firmer ground when it relies solely on the suggestion that the study of texts can not just be a study of authorial intentions. Even here, however, reception-theory is lopsided. Imagine that historians want to write a study of the various ways in which readers have understood Locke's *Two Treatises* through the ages. When historians want to know what someone took the *Two Treatises* to mean, they will study the writings, or possibly the actions, of that person. They still will focus on authorial intentions; it is just the relevant authorial intentions now will lie in the texts in which the readers of the *Two Treatises* expressed their understanding of it. In this way, whenever we shift our focus away from the author, we turn our attention to another work, and presumably another text, so we can talk of the meaning of a work being bound by the intentions of its author. Again, because every time people read a text, they create a new meaning, we can talk about every reading of a text producing a new work with a meaning composed of the intention of

the reader. Reception theorists are far too ardent in their attacks on the author.

Even if our pragmatic theory of the text does not quite restrict the role of the historian to the recovery of authorial intentions, it definitely allows us to declare some ways of approaching texts to be ahistorical. Procedural individualism requires a historian who wants to ascribe a meaning to a text to specify for whom it had that meaning. Because texts do not have structural or innate meanings, any claim that a text had a meaning must entail a claim that it did so for one or more individual who at least in principle could be specified. Thus, the ascription of a meaning to a text is ahistorical if the individual for whom it had that meaning is not a historical person. There is nothing wrong with scholars saying that a text means something to them or their contemporaries: it is just that these meanings are not properly historical. There is nothing wrong with scholars finding interesting ideas in a text and writing about these ideas: it is just that unless they give evidence to suggest a historical person understood the utterance to convey these ideas, these meanings too will not be properly historical. As historians, we must study meanings that actually existed in the past; we must study works even if we do so to uncover the diverse meanings that a text has been made to bear.

Conclusion

Texts are the main source of our knowledge of the past. Yet recent debates, inspired by post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory have shown the concept of a text to be highly complex and contentious. Against the background of these debates, we have defended an analysis of the text as a site at which individuals locate diverse meanings. Texts are meaningful objects, not purely physical ones. Objects are never intrinsically meaningful, however; rather, they become meaningful by virtue of individuals attaching meanings to them. Every time people attach a meaning to an object, they create a work, that is, a meaningful object they associate with the relevant physical one. The text is the site at which the individuals locate their works.

Our pragmatic theory of the text overlaps with, but also differs from, those associated with post-structuralism, deconstruction, and reception theory. Consider first the question of the stability of the text. Here we accepted that the text is ambiguous while denying that it is unknowable or indeterminate. Because the text can be the site of very different works, it has no single correct meaning or even set of meanings. Yet at any moment the text consists of a given set of works the meanings of which are fixed by the intentions of their authors. Consider next the question of the relationship of textual meaning to authorial intention. Here we echoed several insights reception theory derives from a recognition of the creative nature of the reading process. We encouraged the exploration of the changing horizon of expectations surrounding texts, the synchronic and diachronic relationships between works, and the social and cultural processes through which works and texts are produced, distributed, and accorded authority. Nonetheless, we did not follow reception theory, or post-structuralism and deconstruction, in preaching “the death of the author.”³⁰ Because the content of a work is given by the mental activity of its author, the content of a text at any moment in time is defined by the mental activity of those individuals who have associated works with it. In a sense, therefore, to study the historical meaning of a text is always to study authorial intentions.

Notes

- 1 Such a view has been defended, though with a degree of textual indeterminacy, by E. Hirsch (1967): *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- 2 R. Barthes (1975): *S/Z*. Trans. R. Miller. London, J. Cape, , p. 140.
- 3 M. Foucault (1977): “What is an Author?” In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Trans. D. Bouchard & S. Simon. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 121.
- 4 J. Derrida (1977) “Signature Event Context”, *Glyph* 1, 181.
- 5 L. Strauss (1953): *Natural Right and History*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press; C. Macpherson (1962): *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; and J. Dunn (1969): *The Political Thought of John Locke*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

- 6 A noteworthy example of such scholarship is the critical edition P. Laslett (1960): *John Locke's Two Treatises of Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- 7 The classic exposition of this point is F. de Saussure (1966): *Course in General Linguistics*. Eds. C. Bally & A. Sechehaye. Trans. W. Baskin. New York, McGraw-Hill .
- 8 That linguistic conventions are the products of individuals adopting them has been emphasised by, among others, J. Searle (1969): *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, partic. pp. 16-24.
- 9 A similar, but not identical, distinction between works and texts is drawn by W. Iser (1974): "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach". In R. Cohen (ed.): *New Directions in Literary History*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 125-45. For a very different use of these two terms - one which ascribes an undue agency to texts and identifies works solely with authorial meanings - see R. Barthes (1977): "From Work to Text". In *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. S. Heath. London, Fontana, pp. 155-64.
- 10 Contextualists rightly complain of the dangers of assuming otherwise. See, most famously, Q. Skinner (1988): "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas". In J. Tully (ed.): *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics*. Cambridge, Polity Press, pp. 29-67.
- 11 For something very like a language-x, see Foucault's account of epistemes as "historical aprioris" that exist in time in a world free of subjectivity. M. Foucault (1989): *The Order of Things*. London, Routledge, partic. pp. xx-xxii.
- 12 J. Miller (1972): "Tradition and Difference". *Diacritics* 2, 12.
- 13 J. Derrida: "Differance". In *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. A. Bass. Brighton, Harvester Press, p. 13. Examples of reception theory inspired in part by post-structuralism, include S. Fish (1980): *Is There a Text in this Class?* Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; and D. LaCapra (1983): *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- 14 So, interpreters of Derrida, for example, fall into two main camps. Either we take him literally, in which case he seems to make strong but arguably implausible claims, which, if correct, would dramatically undercut all philosophy. Or we take him metaphorically, in which case he seems to make weak, but arguably bland, claims that entail little that had not already been suggested by philosophers such as the pragmatists and Wittgenstein. For favourable and hostile literal interpretations see respectively J. Culler: *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge, 1983); and J. Ellis, *Against*

- Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). For a metaphorical one see B. Harrison, "White Mythology Revisited: Derrida and His Critics on Reason and Rhetoric", *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999), 505-34.
- 15 T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 69. On the instability of intentions also see Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context".
- 16 Compare W. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), partic. pp. 26-79.
- 17 J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158.
- 18 For a detailed defence of this suggestion, see M. Bevir, "Meaning, Truth and Phenomenology", *Teorema* 16 (1997), 61-76.
- 19 See, for example, J. Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. B. Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 125.
- 20 H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. W. Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed & Ward, 1979), p. 195; W. Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, ed. & trans. H. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 235-36. Examples of reception theory inspired in part by phenomenological scepticism include J. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1979), partic. pp. 110-26; and P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), partic. pp. 89-95.
- 21 See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 267-68. A similar distinction is suggested by R. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), partic. p. 46. Moreover, Gadamer himself explicitly drew on Heidegger in order to shift the hermeneutic tradition from an epistemological orientation to an ontological one. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, partic. pp. 214-34.
- 22 For the claim that texts have authors only if they can be interpreted in numerous ways, see A. Nehamas, "What an Author Is", *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), 685.
- 23 Accidental utterances also would include the computer-generated ones invoked against intentionalism by G. Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), partic. p. 112.
- 24 See LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History*; and Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*.
- 25 A pragmatic theory of the text inspires, for example, the seven heuristic theses listed in H. Jauss: "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory". In Cohen (ed.): *New Directions*, pp. 11-41.

- 26 See Dunn: *Political Thought of John Locke*. More generally, see Skinner: "Meaning and Understanding".
- 27 Critiques of intentionalism based on this argument, include LaCapra: *Rethinking Intellectual History*; and J. Keane: "More Theses on the Philosophy of History". In Tully (ed.): *Meaning and Context*, pp. 204-17.
- 28 Gadamer: *Truth and Method*.
- 29 See Fish: *Is There a Text in this Class?*
- 30 Contrast R. Barthes: "The Death of the Author". In *Image, Music, Text*, pp. 142-48; and Foucault, "What is an Author?".