



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

Interpreting Art

Author(s): H. Gene Blocker

Source: *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 29-44

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3332797>

Accessed: 29/09/2011 09:56

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Aesthetic Education*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Interpreting Art

H. GENE BLOCKER

One of the most perennially troubling questions of recent aesthetics concerns the possibility of adequate interpretations of art. Specifically, do works of art *have* meaning? Can we *know* what they mean? And, can we *say* what they mean?

Representational artworks appear to operate on two distinct levels—on the more immediate level, particular, concrete objects of sight and sound (a horse, a violet, a bird) are presented and described, but these objects are generally understood to mean something of a quite different nature which is not directly mentioned or described in the art work. On the first level, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a story of an old Cuban fisherman who finally lands the big one he has dreamed about only to have the huge fish eaten by sharks; but on another level the story is understood more universally to signify or symbolize the struggle between Man and Nature, and between Man and himself. On one level *Dover Beach* describes the action of the surf at night steadily wearing away the cliffs of Dover, but this is understood to refer to the loss of Christian faith in the modern age. Stephen Spender describes this relationship using an early draft of one of his own poems.

There are some days when the sea lies like a harp
Stretched flat beneath the cliffs. The waves,
Like wires burn with the sun's copper glow
Between whose spaces every image
Of sky and hedge and field and boat
Dwells like the huge face of the afternoon.
When the heat grows tired, the afternoon
Out of the land may breathe a sigh
Which moves across the wires like a soft hand
Between whose spaces the vibration holds
Every bird-cry, dog's bark, man-shout
And creak of rollock from the land and sky
With all the music of the afternoon.

H. Gene Blocker is Professor of Philosophy at Ohio University. He is the author of *Ethics, The Aesthetics of Primitive Art*, a chapter in *Philosophy and Literature*, and an essay in *Second Order*, and he has coedited *Contemporary Issues in Aesthetics*.

The idea of this poem is a vision of the sea. The faith of the poet is that if this vision is clearly stated it will be significant. The vision is of the sea stretched under a cliff. On top of the cliff there are fields, hedges, houses. Horses draw carts along lanes, dogs bark far inland, bells ring in the distance. The shore seems laden with hedges, roses, horses, and men, all high above the sea, on a very fine summer day when the ocean seems to reflect and absorb the shore. Then the small strung-out glittering waves of the sea lying under the shore are like the strings of a harp which catch the sunlight. Between these strings lies the reflection of the shore. Butterflies are wafted out over the waves, which they mistake for the fields of the chalky landscape, searching them for flowers. On a day such as this, the land, reflected in the sea, appears to enter into the sea, as though it lies under it, like Atlantis. The wires of the harp are like a seen music fusing seascape and landscape.

Looking at this vision in another way, it obviously has symbolic value. The sea represents death and eternity, the land represents the brief life of the summer and of the one human generation which passes into the sea of eternity. But let me here say at once that although the poet may be conscious of this aspect of his vision, it is exactly what he wants to avoid stating, or even being too concerned with. His job is to recreate his vision, and let it speak its moral for itself. The poet must distinguish clearly in his own mind between that which most definitely must be said and that which must not be said. The unsaid inner meaning is revealed in the music and the tonality of the poem, and the poet is conscious of it in his knowledge that a certain tone of voice, a certain rhythm, are necessary.¹

On the one hand, then, there is a strong tendency on the part of people who read and enjoy poetry to ascribe meaning either to the parts or to the whole of the poem. In Wordsworth's poem "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," the "violet by a mossy stone" signifies or symbolizes Lucy's shy and retiring nature despite her quiet but distinctive charm. Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," we feel inclined to say, is a reflection on death.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
 But I have promises to keep,
 And miles to go before I sleep,
 And miles to go before I sleep.

We suspect that the last part of Dylan Thomas's "A Winter's Tale" has something to do with resurrection, an idea also reflected in the lines of Yeats's poem "Death," "Many times he died, Many times rose again."

Nor dread nor hope attend
 A dying animal;
 A man awaits his end
 Dreading and hoping all;
 Many times he died,
 Many times he rose again.

A great man in his pride
 Confronting murderous men
 Casts derision upon
 Supersession of breath;
 He knows death to the bone—
 Man has created death.

On the other hand, there is an equally strong reaction on the part of certain critics against any such suggestion, and a very skeptical attitude on the part of the poets themselves. It was customary to ask Robert Frost on his lecture tours whether the last lines of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" were a reflection on death. Did he mean, in other words, that the desirability of death was offset by the more onerous duties in the here and now? To which Frost always replied "No." The lines, he said, described a man stopping his carriage to view a field newly filled with snow before going on into town. Picasso is similarly reported to have denied that his painting of a red bull's head depicted the dangerous emergence of Fascism. What the painting showed, he maintained, was the head of a red bull. Faulkner, who was always suspicious of academics, is said to have replied to the suggestion that the spotted horse in *As I Lay Dying* referred to the morally blemished nature of man: "Well, I wouldn't know, I never had much education."

Certainly few critics then or now would fault such a response, which seems a straightforward, if naive, support of the critics' own defense of the essential unity of poetic form and content. As the formalists and imaginationists have been saying for years, what a poem means or is about cannot be isolated from the particular way it has actually been said in that particular poem. Hence, as T. S. Eliot saw, a poem is untranslatable. To offer a translation of a poem is to propose two different expressions identical in meaning—that is, two forms of speech having the same content or meaning.

In the case of poetry, the contention is, this simply cannot be done. The meaning of a poem is unique and internal to it and cannot lie in anything outside the poem, such as Christian imagery, sexuality, death, or responsibility. As A. C. Bradley put it, a poem

should express perfectly the writer's perception, feeling, image or thought; so that, as we read a descriptive phrase of Keats's, we exclaim, "That is the thing itself"; so that, to quote Arnold, the words are "symbols equivalent with the thing symbolized," or, in our technical language, a form identical with its content. Hence in true poetry it is, in strictness, impossible to express the meaning in any but its own words, or to change the words without changing the meaning. A translation of such poetry is not really the old meaning in a fresh dress; it is a new product.²

And this is something we must all applaud. How awful for the ghost of Tolstoy for someone to put aside *War and Peace* with the remark: "Right, war is bad; now what else has he got to say?" Or to abandon Picasso's painting with a brusque: "Oh yes, the Fascists. Terrible time that was." Or worse, in the case of Frost and Yeats: "How true, how true." If it seems difficult to see how meaning can be unique to a particular utterance, how it can be internal to a particular form of words, then some critics are prepared to go the whole hog and declare with Archibald MacLeish that, in that case, poems don't mean anything, or with Susan Sontag that what is important in contemporary art is not meaning but effect.

Obviously, the problems surrounding artistic meaning are enormous—first, the meaning is never stated directly in the artwork. How then do we know a proposed interpretation is the real meaning? Might it not simply be a figment of the critic's imagination? Even if we agree there is some deeper meaning beneath the surface, the relation of the "manifest" to the "latent" content is far from clear. Finally, doesn't this idea of a latent, hidden meaning contradict the internal principle of poetic autonomy? Wouldn't such a latent content lie outside the poem? For this reason contemporary critics and poets are inclined to say, "back to the artwork," "a poem means nothing but itself." As Bradley says,

Pure poetry is not the decoration of a preconceived and clearly defined matter: it springs from the creative impulse of a vague imaginative mass pressing for development and definition. If the poet already knew exactly what he meant to say, why should he write the poem? The poem would in fact already be written. . . . The growing of this body into its full stature and perfect shape was the same thing as the gradual self-definition of the meaning. . . . This is . . . the reason why, if we insist on asking for the meaning of such a poem, we can only be answered, "It means itself."³

But it is one thing to applaud a slogan and quite another to defend its

truth as a sober proposition. "A poem should not mean but be." Good for MacLeish; but is this strictly true? "Form is inseparable from content." "A poem means itself" "The medium is the message." Again, while we agree entirely with the spirit of these slogans, we may question whether aesthetic values are strictly "unique" and "internal." What exactly do we mean when we say this? We must clarify these claims and make whatever qualifications are necessary.

With what, for example, is the internal-uniqueness criterion of poetry meant to be contrasted? With prose statements, presumably. But surely what is said linguistically always depends on the way it is said. If I change "slammed the door" to "shut the door," the meaning is different. Similarly, there are important shades of difference in the meaning of expressions like "come if you possibly can," "come if you can," "come if you like," "come if you want," "come if you really want," "come if you must," and so on. So if the meaning of poetry is internal and inseparable from its form, then the same seems to be true more or less outside of poetry.

Conversely, we can turn the argument round and ask if the meaning of *poetic* language ever is or can be strictly "internal." Bell says we must bring nothing of our own experience of the world to the poem. But the poet's comparison of old men to spaniels who mumble the game, "So well-bred spaniels civilly delight/In mumbling of the game they dare not bite," will mean little to one who doesn't already know, outside the poem, that spaniels are game dogs noted for the care they take in retrieving birds without mangling the flesh. Similarly, assuming the lines "Many times he died,/Many times rose again," have some implied reference to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, this will mean little to the ordinary Burmese Buddhist. And one totally unfamiliar with snow or English violets will scarcely understand much of the poems of Frost or Wordsworth mentioned above. Nor are these examples exceptional. The poet, like any writer, must rely on a wealth of common experience and understanding that are completely general and external to the poem.

Indeed, the point is so obvious it would scarcely need mentioning were it not for the tendency to embrace extreme slogans when their time is ripe. In reaction to a generation of critics probing beneath the surface of the poem for its hidden "inner" reality of psychoanalytic, religious, or Marxist meanings, we are only too happy to rally round the banner "back to the work of art." But in the first excited blush of enthusiasm there is a tendency to make assertions that are plain nonsense in the sober light of day. Consider again Fry's remark, "Now I venture to say that no one who has a real understanding of the art of painting attaches any importance to what we call the subject of a picture—what is represented."⁴ Right in spirit; wrong in fact. Once again, today, we are hearing the strident pleas of the opposite

sort of extremists, this time urging us to discount any intrinsic quality of the work of art in favor of its contextual meaning in its entire socio-political-economic setting. Between this extreme of broad social context and the opposite extreme of the artwork itself works of art exist in every possible intermediary context—within the context of the other work of that artist, of other work of that genre, in that art-historical period, and so on. It is pointless to try to determine which of these contexts is *in general* most appropriate; each can and is appropriate in a defined area of interest. The fact that paintings or film can shed light on prevailing social and economic conditions of the time does not preclude the possibility of critically analyzing the structure of the artwork or discussing its relation to other work by the same artist, or its relation to other work in the same genre or geographical-temporal type. Part of the task of the philosophy of art is to separate out the obvious falseness of such extreme positions from the sound basis on which they rest and to reformulate the latter in a clear and unambiguous way.

So, in this case, while we must accept in principle the idea that the meaning of a poem cannot be given entirely in some other, say, prose statement, we must reject the suggestion supposedly implied by this, that it is always wrong to discuss the meaning of a poem or that poems don't mean anything. Rejecting in a strict or literal sense the distinction between meaning which is "internal" and unique to a work of art and that which is external and generalizable outside that work of art, we might begin by trying to define and defend this distinction in a looser and relative sense.

Let us say that if understanding a line of poetry or the poem as a whole requires no more common experience or understanding outside the poem than what we could reasonably expect any educated adult of that society to possess (the boundaries of which are admittedly much open to question), and if the meaning of these lines is not exhausted by the "external" meaning presupposed for any qualified reader, then we will say that the meaning is "internal" and "unique." If understanding a line of Pound's "Cantos" depends on an extensive knowledge of ancient Indian or Chinese philosophic thought, then I think we can safely assume that this meaning lies "outside" the poem. And if there is no more, or little more, to be got from a poem than some commonplace moral or religious sentiment with which we are all too familiar outside the poem, then we are surely justified in withholding our approval on the grounds that this meaning is extraneous to the poem. But if the common meaning already understood "outside" the poem is only presupposed, is only necessary but not sufficient to an understanding of the poem—if the poem's meaning is "filled in', 'rounded out' . . . by the act of perception,"⁵ then we can say that the meaning is "internal" and "unique" to the poem in our new, more cautiously defined sense.

This is one example of the general problem of reconciling aesthetic autonomy and heteronomy. We start from a common basis of understood

meanings, meanings that ordinary objects have in daily life independently of art and aesthetic experience. There is an enormous range of meanings which ordinary objects suggest or connote in everyday life. Take an ordinary styrofoam cup, for instance. What kind of cup is it? What does it suggest about the quality or style of life of which it is a part? It is cheap, disposable, polluting, anonymous, belonging to no one in particular. The cup says a lot about the society in which it has a natural place, a society of fast-food chains, environmental pollution, frozen dinners, interchangeability, alienation, lack of identity, and so on. But is this what the cup means? Do physical objects have meaning?

In ordinary English "means" signifies a variety of different things besides the more familiar meaning of words and sentences. Sometimes meaning signifies purpose and intention, as in "I mean to help him if I can," "What is the meaning of this?" or "It was meant to be a footstool." Sometimes "meaning" refers to the interrelationships between things, as "Passage of this bill will mean the end of second-class citizenship," "Dark clouds mean rain," "Buzzing means bees and bees mean honey," or "Little things mean a lot." In addition to these kinds of meaning, every object in our environment has a recognizable identity, a class or category to which it properly belongs (a cup, a table, a tree, etc.). In addition to linguistic meaning, then, there are at least three other kinds of meaning—purposive, contextual, and identity meaning. There is nothing strange in a cup having meaning in the sense of its purpose or function, its recognizable identity as a cup, or, most important, its place in our ordinary world. In its contextual sense a single ordinary object can call to mind the entire world or environment to which it belongs. In this sense there is no familiar object which is without meaning.

This rich source of ordinary meaning becomes a potential pool of material to be incorporated in an artwork. As we have seen, the ordinary object is transformed by its new context within the work of art, although this new context is in part the product of what each particular object contributes to the work from its ordinary context. In fact, the rich associative meaning of objects is enhanced, as Schopenhauer first discovered, by its dislocation from its ordinary utilitarian role.

The cup, for example, taken out of its ordinary context and placed, say, in a piece of sculpture, retains an aura of its ordinary contextual meaning. But now this meaning can be strengthened and reinforced through its combination with other everyday objects. So, for example, an empty TV dinner container or a paper milk carton can reinforce the sense of the artificiality, interchangeability, and cheapness, not just of these particular objects, but of modern life in general. Indeed this sense or meaning becomes much more pronounced in art than it is in everyday life, because of the disinterestedness of aesthetic perception which invites reflection on the general sig-

nificance or essence of things. When this is combined with its contextual reinforcement within the art object, its sharp clarity can produce a striking, dramatic effect.

Thus, the ordinary purposive, identity, and contextual meaning of objects is external and heteronomous, while the meaning created by the new context of the artwork is autonomous, internal, and unique to that artwork.

The conception of meaning underlying this view of poetry is obviously not the ordinary sort of conceptual or classificatory meaning. Somehow, the meaning we find in poetry works in just the opposite way from our usual conceptual, classificatory understanding of things. Ordinarily we start with the general concept or category and then see if the particular item in question falls within that category. As I stand on the corner, I know precisely what I am waiting for—namely, a bus. The general nature of the bus is clear in my mind; my only concern is correctly to sort the particular items I find into the right category—bus or nonbus. As Kant pointed out long ago, in his distinction of determinate and reflective judgments, the process appears to operate in just the opposite way in the case of poetry. Here I begin with what I am presented—a concrete particular, a line, a color, a violet, a bus, a clock, and work my way as best I can toward the general but indeterminate manner. The poem presents me with an image of snow—a particular, not a universal; and the image of snow does connote (quite independently of this poem) an indefinite range of general ideas—death, quiet, softness, purity, and on and on. As Kant put it, the imagination here stimulates the understanding to reflect on an indefinite string of associated notions but which can nonetheless never be completed and so determined by the understanding. An important function of the poetic conventions governing the medium is to release this deeper level of meaning and to lead it in a certain direction.

Consider as an example the special sense of resurrection internal to the last stanza of Dylan Thomas's poem "A Winter's Tale."

For the bird lay bedded
 In a choir of beings, as though she slept or died,
 And the wings glided wide and he was hymned and wedded,
 And through the thighs of the engulfing bride,
 The woman breasted and the heaven headed
 Bird, he was brought low,
 Burning in the bride bed of love, in the whirl-
 Pool at the wonting centre, in the folds
 Of paradise, in the spun bud of the world.
 And she rose with him flowering in her melting snow.

The particular, unique meaning of this work is strictly dependent on every part of the poem and the particular way in which these parts hang together. And aside from the background of common experience presupposed for

understanding the general meaning of the objects referred to, this meaning does not depend on anything else. The meaning is determined solely by the impact of each part on every other. In fact the precise meaning of practically every word and phrase is determined by its relation to every other word and phrase in the poem, and it's not until we imaginatively reconstruct the totality of these relationships that we get the particular sense of the poem.

Just to indicate a few of these relationships, the "bird" of the first line is a bird in the ordinary sense, but in conjunction with the "choir of beings" in the second and the notion of "hymned" in the third, the bird also takes on the meaning of the heavenly angels and the Holy Spirit as represented in the Christian symbolism of the dove. This amplified meaning is reinforced and further modified by the expressions "bedded," "slept," "thighs," "bride," "breasted," "bride bed of love," and others that, in their obvious suggestions of love, sex, and marriage, connote further the quasi-sexual relation of the dove of the Holy Spirit and Mary, the mother of Jesus. The meaning of this bird is amplified further by the expressions "burning" and "melting snow" which suggest the image of the phoenix bird arising from its own ashes. This forms the transition to another set of relationships. The notion of "bud" and "flowering," taken in conjunction with the phoenix image and the expression "rose" in the last line, suggests the idea of resurrection, though a very special sense of resurrection which we have never encountered before. The unique meaning internal to the poem is determined contextually by the organic form of the work.

This is true even of individual words in the poem. What does "rose," for example, mean? First that she got up from this sexual union with the bird (which may also suggest the myth of Leda raped by the swan), second the resurrection, and finally a flower, now conveying all the overtones of the bud-flowering image, and especially of a particular kind of flower, one intimately related to the passion of romantic love, a "red, red rose." The poem, we may surely say, has something to do with resurrection, but a kind of all-encompassing, life-renewing resurrection which we can only learn from the poem, and to which the word "resurrection" does scant justice—though it is probably as good as any other. Thomas has managed to integrate in a tightly knit poem normally disparate images of spring, sex, and religion into a total imaginative vision, comparable in its richness perhaps only to mythology.

In many ways this type of meaning resembles what we call "symbolic" meaning, at least in some of the standard uses of that word. But there are also enormous differences between the way we understand symbols in poetry and outside of poetry which should make us cautious in characterizing poetic meaning as symbolic. Because of the conventional nature of symbolic meaning, as it is ordinarily understood, the symbol itself is

transparent. If I am reading a book, I do not notice the letters themselves; they are a mere vehicle for me to the underlying meaning of the passage. I seem to see through the symbols, as it were, focusing, not on the marks on the page, but on their meaning. The poem, by contrast, is not like this at all. Here our attention is riveted on the icon itself. Our focus is on the image, on the concrete presentation of objects for our imagination. In Roger Fry's language, we don't just *see* the concrete image before us, we *look* at it.

Secondly, poetic images are unlike other types of symbols in that while the latter can be very definite and precise in their reference and meaning, the former are not. In Van Eyck's painting we know that the bleeding lamb refers to Christ. But in Frost's poem, there is no definite sense of what the poem is about; there is no direct, obvious, well-known, conventional connection between snow and death. It is indeed debatable whether the poem is about death at all. Frost denied that it was. The poem evokes a feeling of many things, including death, but also of stillness, quietness, peace, tranquility, and so on. And our understanding of what the poem is about is therefore much more closely tied to that particular poem and the way it constructs those particular images. We say in the tradition of the "aesthetic" that the transformation of the image as given is a product of imagination, but this is primarily a way of contrasting the poetic construction of meaning with the ordinary. Despite its indefinite range and nonconceptual nature, we are not individually free to imagine whatever we like in reading this or any other poem. It is only the *range* of associations which cannot be pinned down, or restricted in advance, not the question of which images belong and which do not. The meaning is closely controlled, though in a special, poetic way, by the ordinary, though normally suppressed, secondary associational meanings of words, and by the conventions governing poetic manipulations of the medium.

Another major difference between poetic meaning and "symbolic" meaning is that symbols, in some senses at least, are, within a given community, consistently bearers of fixed meaning, whereas the secondary meanings of the images we utilize in poetry come into prominence only by being placed in a poetic context. Whereas symbols of the first sort are understood because of long-established conventions, the only conventions which appear to operate in the poetic context are that the object will be treated symbolically when it appears in the context of a poem, along with the additional and very general convention that we interpret the generalized significance of objects in a poem in terms of the overall harmony or context of the poem. If I write home to my mother that I stopped to look at some newly fallen snow, the secondary meanings associated with snow (quietness, purity, death) remain submerged, suppressed, overwhelmed by the more ordinary matter-of-fact meaning of cold weather in this part of the country recently, and this is primarily because mine is a letter and not a

poem. As soon as we know it is a poem, then, through the conventions of modern poetry, the whole range of secondary meanings associated with snow begin to predominate. This broad range of associations is controlled and focussed by the contextual considerations within the poem itself. It is because of the context Frost establishes with "deep" and "sleep" that the quietness of the snow allies itself with the notion of death, virtually removing at the same time the association of snow with purity, which is given no chance within the contextual arrangement of words within the poem.

Sometimes poems, plays, and stories are based on actual events, and the differences between the context of the poem, play, or story, on the one hand, and the context of a letter or newspaper report can be easily and starkly observed. *The Old Man and the Sea*, for example, is based on an actual event reported in a Havana newspaper, just as Peter Shaffer's *Equus* was based on an actual event reported in Great Britain. But when these events appear in a newspaper, they are not "symbols," that is, they are not bearers of generalized meaning of profound significance. When we read in a British newspaper that a young teenager blinded some horses in a stable where he worked, we are merely intrigued, titillated by this bizarre behavior. But merely by appearing in a play, this same event suddenly takes on profound significance. Of course, Shaffer does not merely take the newspaper report and place it in a play; he transforms the reality within the confines of his media, and here the structuring of events in the play certainly does much to reinforce the almost Romantic meaning Shaffer wishes to attach to this unusual event. We see clearly from the construction of the play the contrast between the doctor and the boy, for example, the doctor interested in primitive magic power, but from an intellectual, adult perspective, while the boy is immersed in the prerational, mythical vision and cannot stand back from it to gain a philosophical insight into its general cultural meaning. Nonetheless, the mere placement of an ordinary mundane event in an art context by itself is sufficient to transform that object from a mundane particular into an aesthetic image or symbol of vast significance, as has been amply shown in the work of certain minimalists, Dadaists, and Concept artists.

An interesting experiment would be to take the same newspaper story and reproduce it, *as is*, as a short story, in a documentary style. Or a piece of news film, say from a war zone, as an art film, or an ordinary snapshot as an art photo. The results would be somewhat limited due to the lack of media manipulation by the artist; but the object would nonetheless be transfigured, to use Danto's phrase, from an ordinary event to an aesthetic image, a transformation which necessarily involves a shift from a particular, classificatory meaning to an image of broad and quite profound meaning.

There is often confusion in the literature as to whether the poetic mean-

ing is particular or general. As contrasted with conceptual, classificatory meaning, the image presents itself as a unique individual; but in the range of associational meanings conjured up by the image, many of which are allowed to operate contextually within the poem, the image has very generalized meaning. As Schopenhauer said, when the ordinary classificatory, conceptual meaning is blocked in aesthetic perception, we see the individual before us, both as a unique particular and as Idea.

Here again, this ability of the poetic context to release and to control the range of secondary meanings associated with the image is a major difference between poetic meaning and what is often understood by "symbolic" meaning. What gives a symbol meaning is a conventional rule adopted by members of a community agreeing to let that symbol stand for that categorical meaning. What gives an image universal meaning in a poem is a much more general rule which has nothing to do with that particular image but which tells us in a very general way to treat concrete objects and events in poetry in generalized terms, that is, to release the string of secondary associations as controlled by poetic conventions.

Granted that works of art may be said to *have* meaning, how do we *know* what that meaning is? That is, how objective and intersubjective is our understanding of the meaning of a poem, for example, and how subjective and idiosyncratic? If the theory I have sketched above is correct, we can see that interpretations of artworks may be objective first in the sense that the associative meanings of individual elements borrowed from the world external to the artwork have reasonably fixed meaning, at least among members of a particular social community, and second in the conventions that dictate how those meanings are to be combined, again, at least relative to a particular social group familiar with the conventions peculiar to a specific art genre. Interpretations are therefore subjective only in the individual freedom to range within these fluid boundaries. Within these boundaries we may reasonably argue whether the last lines of Frost's poem are about death, quietude, or nihilism, but we can be reasonably certain that these lines are *not* about political assassination.

But granting that one can make out the distinction between "inner" and "outer" meaning along these lines, can one *say* what the internal meaning of a poem is? As we have seen before, if the internal meaning of the poem is unique, while words for saying what it means are general, how can we say what it means? As Collingwood puts it,

The reason why description, so far from helping expression, actually damages it, is that description generalizes. To describe a thing is to call it a thing of such and such a kind: to bring it under a conception, to classify it. Expression, on the contrary, individualizes. (Expressed) anger . . . is no doubt an instance of anger, and in describing it as anger one is telling truth about it; but it is much more than mere

anger: it is a peculiar anger, not quite like any anger that I ever felt before, and probably not quite like any anger I shall ever feel again. . . . The poet, therefore, in proportion as he understands his business, gets as far away as possible from merely labelling his emotions as instances of this or that general kind, and takes enormous pains to individualize them by expressing them in terms which reveal their difference from any other emotion of the same sort.⁶

And if we can't say what it means, does it make any sense to speak of the meaning of a poem? "If the poem has a meaning that is unique to it, then tell us what the meaning is!" This seems a reasonable demand. Either we can't say what it means and thereby demonstrate our acceptance of an apparently vacuous philosophical position, or else we say what the meaning is and tacitly contradict our previous assertion that the meaning is truly internal and unique.

How to get around the dilemma? Can we say what a poem means? It all depends on what we mean by "saying" what something means. If saying means providing an alternative form of words identical in meaning, then we cannot say what a poem means. But neither can we "say" what anything means in this sense. But if by "saying" we mean something like suggesting, indicating, or illuminating, then we surely can say what a poem means. We can at least place the meaning within certain limits on which most of us can agree. Frost's poem has to do with death, nihilism, quietude, or something of the sort. "Resurrection" brings out the meaning of the last stanza of "A Winter's Tale" in a way "assassination" does not. Opinions will vary as to the precise meaning of Yeats's poem, but most of us can agree that its meaning falls within a closely knit group of related attitudes toward death. While we may disagree among ourselves as to which of the possible interpretations within this limit is best, we can agree more or less on what the range of meanings should be. The poem has something to do with a sardonic or realistic attitude toward death. This expresses fairly well the range of more or less adequate interpretations. For example, the poem can be seen to describe an attitude typical of Hemingway's heroes, of a person who lives in such constant danger, where fear and anxiety have so thoroughly pervaded everything he does and thinks that he has learned to live with and in a sense to overcome the ordinary man's fear of death. Or it could be read to fit the sort of hero in Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, seeing there is no final hope and coming to terms with this. Either interpretation could be useful in pointing to the unique meaning internal to the poem, but of course neither "just is" that meaning.

The theme of *Howard's End* is the synthesis of the opposites represented in the Wilcox and Schlegel families. But what are these opposites, and can we say what they are? We can suggest what they are by means of a series of related contrasts: materialism and spiritualism, practical and romantic, real-

istic and idealistic, scientific and artistic, imperialism and socialism, and so on. Each of these points in the right direction, though none pinpoints that sense of opposition precisely. More important, the items in the list are complementary rather than competitive. Together they form a coherent group focusing, from different standpoints, on different aspects of that single and unique vision of social opposition E. M. Forster achieves in *Howard's End*. From a historical point of view we see the relationship as one of imperialism versus socialism, but this does not rule out the contrast of scientific versus artistic way of life, nor the philosophical opposition of realism and idealism. These represent parallel expressions on compatible levels of meaning. Most of us, for example, if given the first three pairs, could go on to name the others, and this is because materialism, for example, is associated in our minds with a scientific and realistic temperament, while the spiritualist will tend to be lumped with romantic and idealistic attitudes. Just as an actual society is an intricate web of social, political, historical, temperamental, philosophical, and religious strands, so the fictional re-creation of that society can be analyzed on similarly complementary planes.

In this sense, then, there seems no reason to deny that one can say what a poem means. The anxiety of the poet and the hostility of the critic stem from the other sense of "saying," i.e., providing a complete and exact translation identical in meaning. But can one ever say what anything means in that sense? After a generation of "language philosophers" we are inclined to say no. We are accustomed now to disparage the view that language, even ideally, just "states facts" or "mirrors the world." Meanings, we are now prepared to say, are ways of understanding things, words being the tools we use to illuminate, suggest, point out aspects of things which interest us in one way or another—and this is no more true of poetry and criticism than of science and everyday speech.

Wittgenstein claimed in the *Tractatus* a clear distinction between what could be "said" in language and what could only be "shown." What could be said simply reported or pictured the facts and was strictly true or false; what could only be shown or suggested was strictly nonsense, being neither literally true nor false. But in the attempt to refine and clarify this distinction it became increasingly clear that one couldn't just "say" what one meant, as opposed to "sketching" or "showing" it. And this collapsed the distinction, undermining the implied view of language, no longer considered, even ideally, as naming or registering facts, reading off the world's labels; but rather as a tool we use for our own ends, on the descriptive side, to display, point, elucidate, or indicate.

So the fact that works of art have no meaning in one sense does not imply that they have no meaning in some other sense, just as the fact that a poem is untranslatable in one sense does not mean that we cannot say what it means in some other sense. In the same vein, we can put into words,

roughly and with a clear sense of inadequacy, thoughts which are in another sense inexpressible. Those who complain that their thoughts are inexpressible usually go on at great length to put those very thoughts into words. "Language is incapable of expressing the union of man and nature." But language has already been used to express this idea. "Union" is already used to suggest a kind of relation; there is already the suggestion of things being joined together in a certain way. To say that X is inexpressible, then, is not to be understood as disallowing any talk about X, but as a warning about the sort of meaning which "cannot" be given. It serves to mark a recognized inadequacy of language and to caution against confusing what we can and cannot do with words.

Similarly, the assertion that a poem is untranslatable should not be understood to mean either the impossibility of translating a poem into a prose statement or the inadvisability of such. The assertion that a poem is untranslatable should be taken as a warning not to mistake a suggestion of the meaning of a poem, which we can give, for an exact equivalent of its meaning, which we cannot. What, for example, do writers like Sontag mean when they say that in contemporary art it is the "effect" rather than the meaning which is important? If they mean that the interpretation of a poem is never an adequate substitute for the poem, that one can never say exactly what a poem means, that the meaning of a work of art is internal to it, or that the meaning of art is inseparable from the organic structure of that particular work of art, then, of course, they are right, though all of this has been said before. But if they mean that works of art, even the most contemporary, have no meaning at all, then they have been misled by an oversimplified view of meaning. Just as Robbe-Grillet's "no-comment" is itself a comment, so an artist may be concerned to strip away "heavy" or "deep" layers of social or romantic meanings to get down to some more fundamental level. But this in itself constitutes a meaning, signifying the artist's concern for what is "basic" and what is "real"—some of the more powerful meanings in the New Realist vocabulary. The worry over saying what a poem means, then, is an implied rejection of a naive view of language as applied to criticism. It is primarily a statement of the limitations of critical discourse, an attempt to define the boundaries between what critical discourse can and cannot do. Once we acknowledge these limitations and the dangers involved in ignoring them, then we are free to go on using language in this admittedly limited and potentially dangerous way, though now aware of its dangers and limitations.

NOTES

1. Stephen Spender, "The Making of a Poem," *Partisan Review* 13 (1946): 297-98,

reprinted in *Creativity in the Arts*, ed. Vincent Thomas (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 38-39.

2. A. C. Bradley, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake," from *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1909).
3. Ibid.
4. Roger Fry, "The Artist and Psychoanalysis," from *The Hogarth Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924).
5. Arnold Isenberg, "Critical Communication," *The Philosophical Review* 58 (1949).
6. R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

Parts of this paper have previously appeared in "The Meaning of a Poem," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 10, no. 3 (1970), *Philosophy of Art* (New York: Scribners, 1979), and "The Medium of Poetry," *Philosophy and Literature*, ed. J. Bolling (New York: Haven, 1987).