10/28/07 Hirsch, “Objective Interpretation”

- revisions of P1 due when? I suggest M 11/12.
- last time’s discussion of intention was good but hardly final—I sometimes had the impression that the intentionalists and anti-intentionalists might agree more than they disagree, depending on how we define terms. Let me lead in to Hirsch with some questions to try to figure out where we can come to consensus, and what we actually disagree on. I actually have two purposes in this discussion, which may to some extent contradict: first, to help you figure out what YOU actually believe, and second, to illuminate what Hirsch is trying to do. In other words, I’m going to ask leading questions, and I may ask you to TEMPORARILY adopt the obvious answer.
  - agree that people’s readings of texts vary, both over time and across the spectrum of readers?
    [so: to hang onto authorial meaning, need to make some kind of distinction between meaning/significance 1393, or inner horizon/outer horizon 1400, etc.
  - agree that we cannot get into the author’s mind, and that most of the time we don’t have direct evidence of what an author intended outside of the work itself (such as a note saying “I meant to do X“)?
    [so: reject notion of intention as “what the author had in mind”, 1398; instead, 1407 “reconstruction of relevant aspects in author’s outlook” or 1398 “horizon”]
    AND, crucial move: acknowledge that interpreter can’t be sure, 1406
  - agree that an author could be wrong about his or her own work, and furthermore might very well write something deceptive about that work? (E.g. in Eliot’s notes to The Waste Land, in which in commenting about a passage he directs our attention to an account of Shackleton’s Artic journey when in fact the obvious referent of the passage is to the journey of Jesus’s disciples to Emmaus).
    [see next]
  - agree that authors not always fully conscious of what they’re writing?
    [so: if we want to hang on to a concept of intention, we need one that is flexible enough to include such meanings; 1397 Husserlian sense of intention—more like “awareness,” or even “potential for recognizability”; verbal meaning is that aspect of a speaker’s intention [i.e. object of awareness] which...may be shared by others”; may include meanings which are not explicitly present to consciousness —> 1398 horizon]
  - agree that a large degree we would accept or reject a particular interpretation based upon the probable circumstances of the author’s writing the text? E.g. we would not accept the interpretation of “darling buds of May” as a line about Spring break beer parties, at least not in the original sonnet, because there were no Budweisers when Shakespeare was writing?
    [see next]
  - agree to extend that claim to say that we make interpretive moves such as looking for coherence, guessing probable meanings of words, and so forth, based upon the assumption that there was a mind at work in the writing of a text, a mind with particular, more or less discernible opinions, beliefs, and feelings?
    [horizon again, because 1400 “no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone”.
  - agree that an author can fail at something—intend to write one thing, and actually write something very different?
• 1405 text represents no parole at all; or, go with what the text apparently means rather than what it says.

options at this point:
• possible to distinguish meaning from significance?
• is it true that 1392 understanding is prior to criticism (remember Fish, Kolodny)?
• apply “horizon” to The Dead, see if it gets us anywhere.

IF PEOPLE GENERALLY AGREE WITH HIRSCH:
• weak move in the article: e.g. 1394 “there could be no objective knowledge about texts.” Appeals to “objective” knowledge and “correct” readings are all over the article. The obvious response is “so what? Maybe there AREN’T such things as objective or correct readings; until you’ve proven that they exist, you can’t condemn a type of reading for not supplying them.”
• But there is a much stronger move in the article: 1400 “no mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone.” If you take Hirsch’s article as being descriptive of what we DO, this is a strong point. Do you actually want to say that the “darling buds of May” is about beer at Spring Break?
• And it is possible to put forward a stronger version of the “no objective knowledge” argument. If you do NOT accept something like the “horizon” idea, then how do you expect your own meanings to be understood?
  • only applies to certain kinds of arguments. Some theorists and writers very clearly do accept the consequences of this argument in full, and deliberately create “meaning structures” which are not determinate. But if you do that, you give up the possibility of making statements with truth value.

• Other problems with Hirsch:
  • What if there isn’t much data available on author, or if data is at odds with text? 1396: H claims that verbal meaning is “unchanging and reproducible.”
  • Objective interpretation? 1394 if text changes, no objective meaning—so what? And is it really true that no one would bother to discuss such a protean object as a changing text?
  • 1392 interpretation truly prior to criticism? (Kolodny!—judgment determines whether or not one is even capable of interpreting)
  • meaning truly is unchanging? As an ideal, or in practice? Falstaff: “table of green fields”
  • an act of will here—a determination to hold onto authorial meaning as an anchor. What’s wrong with simply letting go of all that—opening up the meanings of the text—widening the horizon beyond the author’s probable intention to include public meanings as well?

IF PEOPLE GET LOST: KEY MOVES:
• defn of intention: NOT what the author had in mind 1398; explicitly conscious meanings are only one form of verbal intention; instead, 1396 relation between act of awareness and object of awareness
• distinction between meaning and significance 1394; significance of text may change, but meaning does not, else “could be no objective knowledge about texts” and text has “as many meanings as readers.”
• concept of a horizon, 1398; “horizon”—”system of typical expectations and probabilities”;
• distinction between inner horizon and outer horizon, 1400, as between interpretation and criticism, 1393
• text alone not enough: 1400 no sequence of words can represent a verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone

1396 permanent meaning is the author’s meaning
1396 intention = relation between act of awareness and object of awareness
1404 langue/parole: text is parole, therefore determinate. l/p solve various problems: what to do with revised text (different paroles), 1405 bungled text (no parole—verbal meaning—at all)
1407 unavoidable circularity in interpretation: context is derived from submeanings and submeanings are specified and rendered coherent with reference to context
1408-9 psychological reconstruction of speaking subject necessary

—> problems for intentionalists:
• how do you avoid reductionism? Work may exceed what the author intended to do.
• how do you deal with the fact that “intention,” if it is available at all, is mostly only available in the text itself?

—> problems for anti-intentionalists?
• how do you adjudicate between readings? how do you decide which connotations of words are appropriate to a particular context?

• agree that there is a difference between a reading of a conscious meaning, something we believe that the mind of the author ordered or at least was conscious of and let stand, and an unconscious meaning?
  [what do we do with, say, a feminist reading which looks at what an author ASSUMES about women in a text which is not PRIMARILY about gender? Or a psychological reading? Or a Marxist reading? 1393 meaning/significance? Or does such a reading appeal to a selected subset of meaning, in order to make a point about significance? Or is this 1400 inner horizon/outer horizon?]