

Truth and Interpretation

The theme of the following paper is the relation between truth and interpretation. After elaborating some traditional ways of construing that relation, I argue that there is a justifiable sense of determining the truth of an interpretation or, alternatively, determining a true meaning of the object of interpretation. In other words, the paper's thesis is that there are ways of discerning truth hermeneutically, at least for a particular sort of object and given a particular conception of truth. Before taking up the main argument for this thesis and applying it to the factors of interpretation, I describe an assortment of phenomena that, falling under the heading of *understanding*, are directly related to interpretation. I review the relation between these phenomena and interpretation as a means of specifying a general sense of 'interpretation.'ⁱ

1. Understanding and interpretation

Interpretive phenomena typically emerge from phenomena of understanding. Understanding is, implicitly, an interpretation, whether we are talking about understanding a process, a tool, a sign, a language, a game, an art, a natural phenomenon, or a person. 'Understanding' may stand for grasping how something works, what something signifies, how to speak or what someone is saying in a particular language, how to use something, how to play, what something is, or who someone is.ⁱⁱ Many of these forms of

understanding are interwoven with practices, practices of participating in or at least recognizing what is understood.

The observation that understanding is implicitly interpretation is meant to convey the difference between understanding and interpretation as a difference between implicitly and explicitly taking x as y . It may be helpful to introduce 'construal' as a third, umbrella term, where 'construing x as y ' is equivalent to 'taking x as y .' Thus, understanding and interpretation are implicit and explicit ways of construing things respectively. Interpretation makes explicit what is understood, i.e., what is construed implicitly. When I understand and accordingly follow a traffic signal, I typically do so thoughtlessly yet meaningfully. My implicit construal of an object as a sign and, indeed, as a sign signaling a specific structure and directions (think of a four-way stop sign) can be made explicit and, when it is, my understanding is interpreted.ⁱⁱⁱ

With this terminology in place, we can begin to specify how interpretation emerges from and is grounded in understanding. The first aspect of this emergence is *foreunderstanding*. Whatever we interpret, we interpret in terms of some foregoing understanding, including some foregoing understanding of what we interpret and how we interpret it (i.e., a foreunderstanding of the x and of the y in *taking x as y*). Even in extreme cases where we are at a loss for words or hopelessly puzzled, the object of our ignorance or confusion is never fully opaque to us (nor is the meaning of 'ignorance' or 'confusion'). When we understand (implicitly construe)

something as befuddling or mysterious, we have some means of contrasting it with being befuddling or mysterious. Foreunderstanding extends beyond these elements of construal to the aims and projects that ground explicit construals, i.e., interpretations. These aims and projects may be deliberate or unconscious and, when made explicit, they may or may not be recognizable by the one who understands.

The second aspect of the emergence of interpretation from understanding concerns the motivation for interpretation, what moves someone to attempt to make explicit this or that construal at the level of understanding. We typically interpret or look for an interpretation because of the possibility of *misunderstanding*. Given foreunderstanding, a complete failure of understanding is no less in the cards than a completely successful interpretation.^{iv} 'Misunderstanding' here thus signifies a range of phenomena, from merely shallow and incomplete to quite faulty and misguided sorts of understanding. Given the prospect and, in some cases, the dangers of illusory, anomalous, or simply superficial understanding, clarifying interpretations are needed. A certain foreunderstanding together with the possibilities of misunderstanding usually tips us off whether something needs to be interpreted, for example, whether a passage of a text or speech calls for commentary or not, whether a painting demands an explanation, or whether the meaning of an opponent's move needs elucidation.

The interpretation of something can be described as a reconstrual of it. The interpretation, in other words, changes the understanding, the implicit construal of something, leading to a new understanding or re-understanding of it. But via this re-understanding, we also come back, not to the identical thing from which we began, but to a version of it. Herein lies the familiar principle of the hermeneutical circle, so entrenched in biblical and juridical practice of interpretation.^v This *re-understanding* is the third relevant aspect of the relation between understanding and interpretation. Interpretations can be transforming; they can transform the understandings of things and the practices interwoven with those understandings. As already noted, the interpretation need not be recognizable by the one who understands. Indeed, the acceptance of a reconstrual, a new understanding, may only come quite begrudgingly. Understanding has the weight of tradition, constituted by *préjugés légitimes*, as Gadamer puts it.^{vi}

Given the foregoing notion of re-understanding, two different types of interpretation, what I dub 'internal' and 'external' interpretations, present themselves. If an interpretation makes explicit A's understanding (A's implicit construal of something as such-and-such) such that A is subsequently able to recognize that construal as her own, the interpretation is internal; otherwise it is an external interpretation. Every successful self-interpretation, i.e., where someone makes explicit to herself how she in fact understands matters, is an internal interpretation. But so, too, is an interpretation made by someone other than the person with the

understanding that is being made explicit. For example, a psychotherapist might interpret a patient's attitude toward her husband, i.e., her way of construing her husband, as an attitude of fear. The psychotherapist says to the patient: "You construe your husband as threatening." If the patient is capable of recognizing that the psychotherapist is right, the interpretation is internal. If she in fact accepts the psychotherapist's analysis as true, she may be said to have a second-hand self-interpretation.

Once an understanding has been made explicit via an internal interpretation, the respective understanding undergoes a change. In the just depicted scenario of the patient, she may continue to understand, i.e., implicitly understand her husband as this-or-that, but now with an interpretation in mind, namely, that to take him as this-or-that is to take him as a threat to her. That interpretation changes the dynamics fundamentally, even if she cannot stop understanding her husband as she did before. Moreover, interpretations often become habitual and, when or if they do, they become "sedimented," contributing to a re-understanding.^{vii}

A fourth aspect of the relation of understanding and interpretation falls under the category of *self-understanding*. In the course of interpreting anything, we understand-and-realize ourselves.^{viii} This fourth principle links up with the others (*foreunderstanding*, possibilities of *misunderstanding*, and *re-understanding*). The self-understanding in interpretation is no less implicit than the foreunderstanding and, thanks in part to its implicitness, we are all too capable of misunderstanding ourselves. Our re-understanding of

something in the wake of interpretation contributes to a new self-understanding, though, of course, the latter should not be confused with self-interpretation. The understanding generally and self-understanding in particular always involve a level of opacity that interpretation attempts to remove, at least to some degree. Just as we typically do not know what we mean, until we hear what we have to say, so our self-understanding only becomes perspicuous in the course of interpretation. Accordingly, we might distinguish the pre-interpretive self-understanding, the interpretation-driven self-understanding, and self-interpretation where the interpreter turns her attention to her interpretation as such.

2. True interpretation

Truth is often distinguished from meaning, and verification from interpretation. Meanings are interpreted, truths are verified. Yet there are not only different truths but different accounts of truth and different accounts of what constitutes a verification. Since these differences are differences of interpretation and since the discrepancies among them call for interpretation, they put in question – at least *prima facie* – any sharp distinction of truth and meaning, interpretation and verification. The point here is not simply that truth and meaning are in some sense parasitic on each other, i.e., that truth is always the truth of what is meant by something said (or done) and that meanings are expressed because some meanings are true. The conclusion to the opening argument is rather that determination of what

is true is itself a matter of interpretation and thus fully ensconced within the sphere of meanings.

My aim here is not to defend the foregoing argument or its conclusion. But the conclusion is useful because it states in no uncertain terms that truth is superfluous in matters of interpretation. The reduction of truth in this unqualified way to interpretation effectively eliminates any constraints on interpretation, based upon considerations of its truth. For the sake of future reference, it will be helpful to state formally and name the thesis of this unqualified reduction of truth to interpretation.

The unqualified reductive thesis (UR): the truth of an interpretation is nothing but

the interpretation itself.

By not allowing for any means of determining truth that escapes the vagaries of interpretation, UR amounts to a denial of correspondence theories of truth. Whatever is said to be the truth about any subject matter falls fully within the scope of meanings and their interpretation. In other words, there is no uninterpreted phenomenon to which the interpretation can be said to correspond.

If this thesis is unsettling, it is no doubt due to two common beliefs that together make it compelling to insist on distinguishing verification from interpretation. The first belief concerns the difference in the make-up of

interpretation and verification. Meanings and interpretations are largely of our individual and collective making, a product of thinking, imagining, and opining, limited only by our ability to entertain various ideas and concepts. By contrast, truth and verification (as the distinctive mode of determining which meanings expressed are true) restrict the scope of our thoughts and imagination, suggesting constraints that cannot be simply self-imposed, like a poet's adoption of meter or a representative government's tax structure. In short, according to this first belief, meanings and interpretation are subjective, truth and verification are objective.

The second belief stems from the fact that arguably the most unambiguous sorts of verification are those typically associated and, in some case, even identified with iterable sensory experiences that we can expect normal human perceivers commonly to have. We verify assertions through perception, through direct sensory acquaintance with their references. To be sure, sensory perception without interpretation is blind, if we may paraphrase Kant's famous dictum. The warrant for the assertions supposes a common interpretation in the form, at the very least, of descriptions in a shared language. (In other words, those "normal human perceivers" must also have acquired certain normal abilities to use language.) Yet, in contrast to interpretations, expressed in assertions or other linguistic descriptions, the colors that we see and the sounds that we hear are at some level not of our making or choosing, and, while part of the *interpretandum*, they also mark a limit to interpretation. Hence, at least when it comes to assertions

about experiential objects or states of affairs, we rely upon the ways they present themselves in perceptual experience in order to ascertain the truth or falsity of those assertions. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to add that this second belief cuts two ways; that is to say, truth and verification are largely a matter of assertions and perceptions. The second belief underlying the usual distinction between interpretation and verification is a belief in the paradigmatic status of sensory perception as a means or even part of the criterion of determining the truth in contrast to the meaning or, better, a true meaning in contrast to a merely possible meaning of an assertion.^{ix}

However, whatever the merits of these two beliefs when it comes to statements about perceivable, physical objects, matters are far murkier if one supposes, on the basis of those beliefs, that the truth or a true meaning can be assigned to intended, human creations (such as artistic and cultural works). How do we verify an interpretation as objective and true (the first belief) when the object of interpretation is no less a product of human subjectivity than interpretation itself? Moreover, even if we acknowledge that sensory experience is necessary to gain access to artworks, media, or communication (gestures, speech and writing), it is hardly sufficient to determine their true meaning(s). In other words, the paradigm of a truth-making, observable object or state of affairs simply does not transfer without further ado to human products (thus, limiting the import of the second belief).

The foregoing considerations suggest a more qualified statement of the thesis of the reducibility of truth to meaning, along the following lines:

The qualified reductive thesis (QR): the truth of an interpretation is the coherence of

its overriding meaning with the meanings of the *interpretatum* or *interpretata* (the thing or things already interpreted) that are part of the constitution of the *interpretandum*

If UR amounts to a denial of truth as correspondence or, at least, the superfluousness of considerations of truth as correspondence, QR affirms that truth as a form of coherence provides a criterion of interpretation, such that it is not merely redundant to speak of 'true meanings' and 'true interpretations.' Truth here is always *in medias res* and the *res* are interpretations. There are three patent ways in which QR delimits UR. First, it restricts the subject matter of interpretation (and thus a possibly true interpretation) to those things whose make-up already involves interpretation. The most obvious such things are *works*, i.e., intended, human creations (literary, artistic, cultural). Second, QR supposes an overriding (primary) meaning distinct from other, subsidiary and presupposed meanings. An "overriding meaning of an interpretation" stands here for an

interpretation of the main elements of a work, taken as a whole.^x This qualification leaves some room for the input of factors that, while underdetermining the overriding meaning, are not themselves directly subject to the interpretation that produces that meaning. For example, the experience of a shade *as* Poussin blue need not determine the overriding meaning and interpretation of Poussin's *Arcadia*. Moreover, if there is a compelling account of the truth of the claim that someone looking at the painting perceives blue rather than some other color in its top left corner, that verification and truth may be relatively independent of perceiving it *as* Poussin's blue or perceiving the painting in terms of some allegedly, overriding interpretation of it.

3. Discerning truth through the factors of interpretation

The preceding section contains a formal statement (QR) of a theory of true interpretations, i.e., a way of maintaining a sense in which truth can matter to interpretation and serve as a criterion, whether delivering a true interpretation is the main task of the interpreter or not.^{xi} The aim of this final section is to argue for the cogency of this thesis through closer consideration of the factors involved in interpretation. If, as supposed by QR, the object to be interpreted includes elements that have already been interpreted, there are plainly three distinct factors of interpretation in general.^{xii} The three factors are:

3.1 the *interpretandum* in itself, i.e., what is to be interpreted and its distinctiveness;

3.2 the *interpretandum* as effect, i.e., its relation to the conditions (*fons interpretandi*) responsible for it, e.g., in the case of a work, its producer (artist, author, sculptor, director, etc.); and

3.3 the *interpretandum* as cause, i.e., its relation to the interpreter.

Strategies for refuting UR typically consist in construing one or more of these factors as entailing a true meaning and a possibility of verification that marks the closure of interpretation. Various reasons why these strategies fail have already been suggested and, in what follows, I further elaborate these reasons with respect to each factor of interpretation. At the same time I hope to show how these three factors can be incorporated into a useful conception and practice of true interpretation, based upon QR.

Some caveats, however, are immediately in order. First, these factors are by no means always clearly isolable from one another but each can be taken as supplying an avenue to a true meaning in contrast to a mere interpretation. Second, the references to cause and effect here are not intended in the sense of supplying necessary and sufficient conditions. For the purposes of this analysis, it suffices for a painting, for example, to be taken as an effect if a painter can be identified (or even if it is the sort of object requiring a painter). So, too, it suffices to take it as a cause if it has an effect on the interpreter such that that effect enters in some way into the interpretation. Third, as already signaled in the first part of this paper, I take

'interpretation' in a broad sense (in keeping with ordinary usage) to signify any instance of explicit construal (explicitly taking x as y). In other words, to interpret is to determine the meaning (y) of some phenomenon (x), including artificial and natural things, i.e., things that can be traced to human and/or non-human causes or conditions. However, in what follows I focus principally on the interpretation of works, as I attempt to explain the sense in which truth can and cannot be a criterion of their interpretation. My aim again is to establish, on the basis of QR, the possibility of true interpretations.

3.1 The *interpretandum* in itself

In regard to the first factor, the *interpretandum* necessarily corresponds at some level to the modes of access to it. For example, the access may be visual or aural and the *interpretandum* might be a natural object (e.g., clouds, a weather pattern, a forest), natural or artificial images (e.g., a reflection in a lake, a photograph, a portrait) and sounds (e.g., a loon's yodel or a piece of music), written or spoken words, or a combination of some or all the above (as in sculpture or opera). Given such access and the capacity for it to be shared, there may be levels of common acquaintance or even understanding of the *interpretandum*. At a staging of *Hamlet*, for example, everyone in the audience sees the skull in Hamlet's hands; everyone understands the same sentence "Alas, poor Yorick"; everyone recognizes Hamlet's staging of "The Mousetrap" as a play within a play, and so on. As in everyday experience and discourse, we have an acquaintance with things and an understanding of how

to talk about them that allow for what are commonly accepted to be uncontroversially true, infeasible descriptions. Indeed, insofar as discourse is communication about something at all, it necessarily supposes truthmakers (objects, facts, events) and the capacity to refer to them. This supposition, moreover, is one with the old insight that illusion and deceit presuppose veracity.

The distinction often made in ordinary discourse between description and interpretation issues from a certain level of confidence assigned to descriptions of experience, as elaborated above. To be sure, these descriptions, like the languages in which they are formed, are historical, cultural, and environmental (think of the pre-Copernican descriptions of planetary motion or the variety of descriptions of 'snow' in different cultures). They are part of the re-understanding that, as noted in part one, ensues from previous interpretations. Nevertheless, like the facts and experiences they describe, those descriptions are reliable and iterable, providing a secure foundation for common sense. Against the background of such descriptions, interpretations become necessary only when the possibility of misunderstanding presents itself, for example, when we are confronted with optical illusions or erratic behavior, or when the curiosity of a restless mind gets the better of it.

Yet the appeal to true descriptions, while certainly supposed in many a practice of interpretation, does not suffice to salvage a sharp distinction between truth and meaning. Thus, they cannot be the basis for refuting UR.

The main reason the appeal to true descriptions in this regard fails is that descriptions are not themselves free of interpretation. True descriptions are interpretations that correspond with some *foreunderstanding* and that foreunderstanding, it bears iterating, is an implicit way of taking something – implicit with respect to what we take it as and why. In this connection one is reminded of Heidegger’s critique of Husserl’s project of a presupposition-less phenomenology, one that merely describes. As Heidegger points out, since those phenomenological descriptions are for the sake of grounding science and, indeed, a certain conception of science, they fail to be neutral, as would any other sort of description.^{xiii}

Something analogous occurs in interpretation of literary works and visual arts. Here there are at least four levels of foreunderstanding and re-understanding typically at work in such interpretations. Consider the following ways of categorizing a work, embedded in the following claim:

“It is a work of art, a powerful tale of tragedy, but woefully sentimental.”

The claim supposes a foreunderstanding on four distinct levels or categories:

- (a) artistic or literary (e.g., “a work of art”)
- (b) type of work (e.g., “tale,” “painting,” “book,” “poem”)
- (c) genre (e.g., “tragedy,” “drama,” “comedy,” “Romantic,” “Realist”)
- (d) aesthetic, expressive, or metaphorical (e.g., “powerful,” “sublime,” “sentimental”).

Each level of foreunderstanding is not simply an implicit construal, but also a re-understanding, the product of a foregoing interpretation that is subsequently ingrained and taken for granted. The debates over the proper application of the predicates listed from (a) to (d) amply illustrates their interpretive character.^{xiv}

Controversies surrounding (d) in particular – i.e., what constitutes the aesthetic, expressive, or metaphorical – often stem from the fact that in ordinary discourse there are descriptions commonly accepted as indefeasible and, indeed, without recourse to interpretation. In these cases, we carry over into the interpretation of the work the distinction between ready-made, indefeasible descriptions and controversial ones, in need of interpretation. To take a celebrated example, Lessing and Winkelmann agree that Laöcoon's face in the famous sculpture by that name does not express the pain that one would expect in such a situation; they only differ on why the expression is softened.^{xv} But sometimes even descriptions are controversial (is Mona Lisa's smile a smirk? Is the woman in Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* pregnant? Is the Washington Monument a building? Is the Sissinghurst Castle Garden an example of an English garden, a French garden, or both?).

The controversy, moreover, need not be about the fittingness of the description so much as the vagueness or ambiguity of the terms of the description. For example, what precisely does Coleridge mean when he speaks of "the sense of sublimity" that arises from Hamlet's unhealthy, constant preoccupation "with the world within"? Or when Iago is described

as “motiveless malignity” (Coleridge), “a moral pyromaniac” (Harold Goddard) or the “ontotheologian” of evil (Harold Bloom)? Or consider the ironic praise given to “non-post-modern” critics for being “old fashioned.” There are no shortage of such examples of phrases and words of interpretation that, while clearly not devoid of meaning, cry out for interpretation themselves.^{xvi}

In all the cases cited in the last two paragraphs, the question of the controversial description makes sense only against the background of a shared acceptance – to be sure, no less a matter of interpretation – of the subject and the terms in which it is described. Such debates about the *interpretandum* at these different levels undermine the notion of a true interpretation based upon appeals to correspondence. Yet they also demonstrate that considerations of truth as coherence are often, indeed, not merely germane but necessary to interpretation, thereby lending support to QR. For even if truth is not the aim of interpretation (and there is no reason that it need be), the interpretation must suppose the identity of the *interpretandum*, something that can typically be ascertained or determined through canons of coherence.

3.2 The *interpretandum* as effect

Particularly where we do not immediately understand a work of art and thus recognize the possibility of misunderstanding it, nothing would seem to make more sense than to ask the artist why she created it. In other words,

we look to an artist's intentions in creating a work to determine its meaning. Since the artist's intentions are plainly external to the critic's, the appeal to the artist's intention introduces an element of objectivity into the interpretation. Assuming the parallel of this non-subjective input with that provided by the sensory experience of a physical object, theorists of interpretation have repeatedly argued that the artist's intention provides a criterion for true interpretations where, indeed, truth is a matter of correspondence with a state of affairs (what the artist or writer intends or intended). In other words, these theorists contend that the path to a true interpretation consists in considering the *interpretandum* as the effect of its creator or, in other words, looking to the *fons interpretandi*, the conscious or unconscious process responsible for the work. If this cause is independent of the effect and if determination of this cause yields the true interpretation, then this strategy amounts to a denial of UR.

Yet the identification of a work's meaning with its creator's intentions cannot be right without further ado since the work can mean things that the creator did not mean. A work has more than one meaning. Moreover, how often do we find ourselves trying to find the right words or apologizing that what we said was not what we meant? The problem with this strategy, however, is not simply the fact that we misspeak or that what we said fails to capture what we meant. After all, in a polished work in contrast to everyday discourse, the author or artist may present the work to the public, confident that the work expresses her intention. But even if we acknowledge that the

work is precisely what its creator intended, its meaning cannot be confined to that relationship. For whenever we speak, write, or otherwise express ourselves, we also always say, write, or express more than we mean because the saying, writing, and expressing – however carefully crafted – say more than we can thereby intend.^{xvii} Meanings proliferate and, with them, truths.

A further, practical problem with this strategy is the issue of access to the creator's intentions. This problem, at times no doubt insurmountable, lends legitimacy to what Wimsatt and Beardsley dub "the intentional fallacy." To be sure, these theorists of interpretation plainly overstate matters with their contention that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard of judging the success of a work of literary art."^{xviii} While a work's meanings, including its true meanings, are not reducible to its creator's intentions, a work depends upon a creator, its meanings depend upon its creator's intentions, and those intentions may be relevant, even highly relevant, to giving a true interpretation of the work. For example, the work may exhibit personal qualities and a style that are fully understandable only by consideration of the artist or writer.^{xix} However, incorporation of considerations of the author's intentions in determining a true interpretation of that author's work is consistent with QR (where, of course, 'artist' may substitute for 'author'). Indeed, depending upon the purposes of interpretation, determination of those intentions may be not simply coherent with some overriding interpretation, but may themselves constitute the overriding interpretation itself.

3.3 The *interpretandum* as cause

The earlier discussion of the problems surrounding (d) – describing the *interpretandum* in aesthetic, expressive, or metaphorical terms – anticipates some of the problems involved in identifying a true interpretation with the *interpretandum's* effect. Bringing a distinctive perspective to the *interpretandum*, each critic experiences it differently and may describe it in ways that, even if not idiosyncratic, demand interpretation in turn. In practice, to be sure, a critic is often deemed successful for having the knack to capture elements of the *interpretandum* in words or other words that resonate or suitably provoke those who have also experienced the *interpretandum*. But this mark of success introduces a particular problem besetting the strategy of looking to the *interpretandum's* effect for a true interpretation. The problem can be expressed in a single question: its effect on whom? Demographics, it turns out, are not irrelevant to understandability, interpretation, or truth.^{xx} But the determination of whose aesthetic point of view is relevant accords with the conception of true interpretation outlined in QR.

So, too, the emotional impact of the *interpretandum*, insofar as it is shared, conveyable, and even further shaped by an interpretation, can indeed be central to the task that the interpreter sets for herself. But whether consideration of the emotional expression of a work is central to the overriding interpretation or only subsidiary to that overriding interpretation,

it is not sufficient by itself. In order to capture the expressiveness of a work, an interpretation must be about the work and not about something else. In other words, it must not fail to sustain the identity of the *interpretandum* and it does so by cohering with other descriptions of it (regardless of whether these are infeasible or not). Herein lies the basis for legitimate complaints against the so-called “affective fallacy” where the interpretation confines itself to describing the emotional effect of a work, as though the work (as the cause of that effect), were itself superfluous.^{xxi} Yet considerations of truth in the sense of QR can certainly be applied to these and other effects of a work (on a possible audience, viewership, readership, etc.).

Concluding remarks

The aim of the foregoing paper has been to outline a conception of the relation of truth and interpretation in general and to show that truth, so conceived (namely, in the form of the coherence of interpretations) serves a legitimate and, in some respects, even essential function in interpretation. This conception of truth and interpretation does not preclude a variety of aims of interpretation but suggests how the truth of the interpretation remains significant, regardless of the aim. A further virtue of the view glossed here is that QR, the qualified reduction of truth to interpretation, is compatible with taking all three factors of interpretation seriously and, indeed, interactively.^{xxii}

A final qualifying remark concerning the limitations of the analysis given in this paper is in order here. The foregoing meditation on the relation of truth and interpretation has suggested that truth as correspondence must give way to truth as coherence, at the very least in regard to the interpretation of works. There is, however, a third way of understanding truth, namely, in terms of the historical ground of the ways that the *interpretandum* presents itself to and absences itself from the interpreter. Truth, so construed, is the truth of an interpretation but an interpretation that (a) concretely supposes untruth and errancy and (b) cannot be reduced to any single one of the factors of interpretation (e.g., author, work, interpreter) but instead involves them all – and more. This way of understanding truth, inspired by Heidegger, provides a necessary corrective to a potential tendency to collapse meanings and their coherence into something for which human subjectivity is solely responsible or into some ahistorical, transcending identity. For if truth is a matter of the coherence of interpretations, that coherence and the incoherence it supposes are grounded, not in those interpretations, but in an unfinished history of interpretations.

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ⁱ I am grateful to Jeremy Butman and Nolan Little for their critical readings of early drafts of this paper.

ⁱⁱ For some examples of the uses indicated, replace the variable x in 'Joe understands x ' with the following words: 'thermostats,' 'traffic signals,' 'French,' 'planes,' 'chess,' 'dance,' 'earthquakes,' 'his wife'.

ⁱⁱⁱ Something analogous happens when I speak and thus understand a language, but have not begun to reflect upon the rules according to which I speak that language and use its terms accordingly. The semiotic component obviously complicates the interpretive structure, such that we take x as y for z , where ' y ' is a sign or word for z .

^{iv} This claim by no means discounts genuine novelties in need of interpretation. The notion of novelty, as the notion of being different from anything preceding it, obviously supposes a foreunderstanding in at least two senses, a foreunderstanding of what precedes it and a foreunderstanding of difference. I am grateful to Nolan Little for calling my attention to this issue.

^v Since we do not return to the identical theme from which we began, it may be useful, adopting a metaphor from Hegel, to refer to this pattern as an interpretive helix. For more on this vital dimension of interpretation, see Dahlstrom 2010.

^{vi} Gadamer 1972, 255.

^{vii} Husserl, Hua VI, 72f, 380.

^{viii} Dilthey, 1979, 191, 214.

^{ix} Whether the meaning of a sentence is equated with the possibility of its truth (Davidson) or with the empty, signifying thought that awaits identification with a fulfilling intuition (Husserl), the task of interpretation is frequently construed as determining meaning not truth. In the main body I have been suggesting that we find these considerations compelling to the extent that we take our bearings from the way that ordinary perceptual experiences provide access to the truthmakers, the objects or states of affairs that make certain sentences true. The access in such cases involves, by some accounts, a component of sensation, some non-conceptual content necessarily marks the end of conception and, with it, interpretation. Even for outright conceptualists, declared enemies of the so-called "Myth of the Given" like Sellars, Davidson, and MacDowell (at least at times), the task of interpretation ends where perception begins, even if the content of perception is said to be thoroughly conceptual.

^x By "overriding meaning or interpretation," I do not mean to suggest that something that necessarily takes the form of a single assertion or, for that matter, the form of an assertion at all. It also seems to me that we should resist the compositional view of true interpretations, i.e., the view that what is true about an interpretation can be broken down into the truth of single assertions, as though their conjunction were simply truth-functional, e.g., ' $p \wedge$

q'. While I am not confident that I have a good argument for this intuition, my hunch is that just as a meaning of a poem, a painting, or a novel often resists reduction to a single assertion, so, too, it resists reduction to a mere string or conjunction of assertions.

^{xi} The defense of QR in this paper is, I suspect, consistent with Pol Vandavelde's account of the act, as opposed to the event, of interpretation; see Vandavelde 2005, 4: "By act, I mean an act of consciousness: someone interpreting a text makes a statement or an utterance and through his or her act is committed regarding the truth of what is said, his or her truthfulness, and the rightness or appropriateness of what is said, so that, if prompted, the interpreter must be ready to defend the interpretation made regarding these three claims."

^{xii} Vandavelde 2005, 8f; see, too, Livingston 2005, 136-174 and the essays in Iseminger 1992.

^{xiii} M. Heidegger, *Einführung in die phänomenologische Forschung*, GA 17: 2: "Die Meinung, kein Vorurteil zu haben, ist selbst das größte Vorurteil"; *Phänomenologie der Anschauung und des Ausdrucks*, GA 59: 102f, 171, 194. See, too, Paul Feyerabend on interpreting Galileo's findings from his telescope and Bellarmine's position in Feyerabend 1993, 87f, 110, and 124-134.

^{xiv} For a sampling of the diversity among theories of art, see Parts One and Two of Dickie et al. 1989; for diverse views on aesthetic concepts and the

“aesthetic/non-aesthetic distinction,” see the articles by Frank Sibley, Ted Cohen, and Kendall Walton in Dickie et al. 1989, 356-414.

^{xv} Lessing 1972, 10f: “Die Bemerkung, welche hier zum Grunde liegt, daß der Schmerz sich in dem Gesichte des Laokoon mit derjenigen Wut nicht zeige, welche man bei der Heftigkeit desselben vermuten sollte, ist vollkommen richtig. Auch das ist unstreitig, daß eben hierin, wo ein Halbkenner den Künstler unter der Natur geblieben zu sein, das wahre Pathetische des Schmerzes nicht erreicht zu haben, urteilen dürfte; daß, sage ich, eben hierin die Weisheit desselben ganz besonders hervorleuchtet.” Ibid., 20: “...er [der Künstler] mußte Schreien in Seufzen mildern; nicht weil das Schreien eine unendle Seele verrät, sondern, weil es das Gesicht auf eine ekelhafte Weise verstellt.”

^{xvi} Further complicating matters, of course, is the role that irony may play, in the object of interpretation as well as in the terms of the interpretation, though this issue overlaps with 3.3 below.

^{xvii} See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275c-d, translated by R. Hackforth, in Plato 1971, 521: “Anyone who leaves behind him a written manual, and likewise anyone who takes it over from him, on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent, must be exceedingly simple-minded; he must really be ignorant of Ammon’s utterance, if he imagines that written words can do anything more than remind one who knows that which the writing is concerned with.” See, too, the Seventh Letter, 341b-345a, translated by L. A. Post, in Plato 1971, 1588-1590.

^{xviii} Wimsatt and Beardsley, 431. In order to invoke a version of this strategy, while recognizing the inaccessibility of the author's intention, some theorists distinguish between "actual" and "hypothetical" intentionalism; see Carroll 2000, 75-95.

^{xix} See the essays by Lyas and Robinson in Dickie et al. 1989, 442-454 and 455-468.

^{xx} Common sense can obviously be common nonsense and a true interpretation one that only a few can understand.

^{xxi} Wimsatt with Beardsley 1954, 21.

^{xxii} Vandavelde 2005, 11f.