Hermeneutics and the Role of History

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I

As a number of the contributions to this issue of New Literary History serve to illustrate, the general retreat from empiricism and positivism in recent analytical philosophy has had a markedly beneficial effect on current discussions about the theory of interpretation. Two aspects of this trend have proved to be of particular relevance. One has been the attack on empiricist epistemology, with the consequent rejection of the belief in sense data which are capable of being directly perceived and embodied in a noninterpretative observation language. It is coming to be widely accepted that Quine, Kuhn, and Feyerabend, in their different but converging ways, have all succeeded in undermining any attempt to build up a structure of empirical knowledge on a basis purporting to be independent of our judgments. The next move which a number of analytical philosophers have thus been prompted to make is to appeal directly to the tradition of hermeneutics, as revived by Gadamer, Ricoeur, and especially Habermas, and to argue for a more interpretative model of the natural, as well as the human, sciences.

The other influential development has been the abandonment, in the theory of meaning, of any positivist disposition to assert that meaningful statements must refer to facts, and thus that the meaning of a sentence must be given by its method of verification. The main challenge to this key concept of logical positivism was of course issued by Wittgenstein in the Investigations, with his famous injunction not to ask directly about the meaning of propositions but rather about how they are used in particular language games. More recently, the underlying assumption of this approach—that the analysis of meaning needs to be connected with the use of language for purposes of communication—has been refined and extended in two connected ways. First, J. L. Austin and his followers, in developing the theory of speech acts, have concentrated on the idea that, as a given utterance has a meaning, a given agent will characteristically be doing something—and may thus be said to mean something—in or by the act of issuing that particular utterance. Secondly, H. P. Grice, followed by a number of theoretical linguists as well as philosophers of language, has gone on to offer an analysis of the concept of meaning which is at issue when we speak of someone meaning something in or by saying something.
It is possible to distinguish three main ways in which these aspects of the retreat from empiricism have come to influence students of literary history and literary theory. The first is that a full and distinctive analysis of what is involved in the process of interpretation has by now been put into fairly general circulation. The significance of this development lies in the fact that, while literary theorists, intellectual historians, and musicologists have always talked rather freely about interpretation, they have habitually discussed the concept, as Aiken has complained, "with abominable looseness." They have now been provided, however, with an elaborate analysis of "interpretation" as a special kind of—or substitute for—explanation. The proper objects of interpretation, on this account, are taken to be "texts" in a special and extended sense which includes both texts in the literal sense and text analogues such as voluntary actions. The aim is said to be that of "giving a reading" of the text in such a way that its meaning is disclosed. The proper method is said to be that of tracing out the line of the so-called hermeneutic circle, by placing the text to be interpreted within a field of assumptions and conventions to which it contributes and from which it derives its distinctively meaningful character. Finally, the goal of the method is said to be that of "making sense" of the text by exhibiting the coherence between what the agent is doing and the meaning the situation had for him.

The above exposition of "interpretation" follows the accounts given by Habermas and Ricoeur, and developed by such recent expositors as Hesse and Taylor. The same basic analysis is also offered by a number of contributors to this issue—notably Fowler and White—in the course of commenting on the idea of the hermeneutic circle. So far, I have also followed all these theorists in discussing the concept at what might well be thought to be an unhelpfully high level of generality. This makes it worth pausing at this point to try to clarify the argument further by doing something which seems to be done too rarely in discussions about hermeneutics—giving a very simple example of an explanation involving the hermeneutic circle.

Consider the following imaginary but familiar social situation: a public meeting at which one delegate is repeatedly prevented from speaking by the chairman and eventually leaves before the meeting is concluded. The action constitutes the "text" we are asked to explain. Confronted with this request, we might well be tempted to theorize about the agent’s likely emotions and to explain his act of leaving the room as the outcome of anger or frustration. This account only "makes sense," however, in the light of two further assumptions about the situation which are left inexplicit in this type of motive explanation. One is that to invoke anger as the motive refers us to the general idea that this particular emotion (or something like it) constitutes a natural or fitting response by the agent to the circumstances. The other is that the agent's action constitutes a natural or fitting expression of this emotion in the circumstances. Once the dependence of our explanation on these general intuitions is made explicit, however, it becomes evident that our explanatory concepts are
moving in an interpretative circle. It is because of our confidence that the agent must have felt some such emotion as anger that we feel confident in characterizing his act of walking out as an act of protest and not as a mere act of leaving, say, because he had a train to catch. But it is because of our confidence in characterizing the agent’s action as a recognizable (and virtually conventional) form of protest that we feel confident in assuming that he must have been feeling some such emotion as anger, which then moved him to act—and so explains his action.

The second way in which literary history and literary theory have been influenced by postempiricist philosophical developments is that, with the increasing acceptance of the idea that “interpretation” refers to a distinctive type of explanatory technique, it has proved much easier to distinguish between two separable senses of the term, one of which points to the hermeneutic idea of elucidating the meaning of a text, while the other points instead to the idea of evaluating its worth. The significance of this distinction derives from the fact that the concept has often been discussed by literary theorists as if it inescapably subsumes both these processes. Wimsatt, for example, has always refused to entertain this distinction (as Fowler duly notes, p. 40) and has continued even in his most recent writings to insist that any interpretative argument will “characteristically bring in considerations of value.” It is of course true that this distinction can readily be drawn too sharply, and it is arguable that this has in fact happened in Hermerén’s article (pp. 61-65), as well as in Hancher’s recent argument to the effect that “a literary work can be properly evaluated only after it has been properly interpreted.”

If we accept that the hermeneutic idea of elucidating the meaning of a text must always involve an attempt, as Taylor puts it, “to bring to light an underlying coherence,” then it will never be possible to keep this sense of interpretation wholly distinct from the idea of evaluating the text and its literary worth. We may wish to say, for example, as a result of elucidating a text that it lacks any underlying coherence, in which case we are of course offering a description which serves to evaluate the text at the same time. Despite such inextricable linkages, however, there can be no doubt that the influence of the hermeneutic tradition has in general played a clarifying role in helping to propagate the idea of interpretation as essentially a matter of recovering and rendering the meaning of a text, and thus as a distinctive and relatively autonomous technique.

The third way in which the retreat from empiricism has exercised a direct influence on students of literary history and literary theory is that it has enabled them to arrive at a clear analysis of the concept of meaning which underlies the fundamental hermeneutic suggestion that interpretation consists of decoding the meaning of texts. The main inspiration for this development has been the theory of speech acts developed by Austin and refined by Searle, both of whom have been repeatedly cited and discussed by recent literary theorists. The central contention which the literary theorists have taken from their work is that any agent, in issuing any serious utterance, will always be doing something as well as merely
saying something, so that an understanding of what the agent is saying presupposes a grasp not merely of the ordinary sense and reference of his utterance, but also of what Austin dubbed its illocutionary force, corresponding to what the agent saw himself as doing in issuing that particular utterance. One of the most elaborate invocations of this theory is contained in Iser's contribution to this issue, with its stress on what he calls "the pragmatic nature of literary texts" (p. 8). Iser is only one amongst a large and growing number of literary theorists, however, who have written in the past few years about the significance of speech acts for the theory of interpretation—others have included Savile, Eaton, Martland, Ohmann, Walsh, Close, Hancher, Olsen, and Loewenberg,¹¹ as well as several other contributors to New Literary History, including Black, Ricoeur, and Searle himself.¹²

According to a majority of these writers, the relevance of speech-act theory lies in the fact that the idea of treating a text as a form of social action, and seeking to understand it by way of recovering what the writer saw himself as doing in writing it, serves to yield a two-stage analysis of the sense of meaning which appears to be at issue in discussions about hermeneutics. First, the notion of a text as a set of linguistic actions makes a certain sense of intentionality central to the business of interpretation. This follows from the suggestion that to understand the illocutionary force of an utterance is to recover what the agent saw himself as doing in issuing it, since this process is clearly equivalent to recovering the primary intentions with which the given utterance was issued.¹³ Secondly, the invocation of these intentions to communicate in turn points to a certain sense of the meaning of the speaker or writer's utterance. A number of literary theorists (notably Close and Hancher) have gone on to invoke Grice's theory of "non-natural" meaning at this point, and to connect it (in the manner originally proposed by Strawson) with Austin's theory of illocutionary acts.¹⁴ The suggestion is that to understand what the agent saw himself as doing, and so to grasp the intended illocutionary force of his utterance, is equivalently to understand what he must have meant by what he said. A certain sense of intentionality thus comes to be equated with a certain sense of the meaning of the text. As Hancher puts the crucial conclusion, when someone recognizes the intended illocutionary force of a given (linguistic) action, what he grasps is "an intention that the thing one has made means (and be taken to mean) something or other."¹⁵

II

I began by remarking that the influence of these philosophical considerations has been markedly beneficial in relation to current discussions about the interpretation of literary texts. I should now like briefly to indicate two closely related and very important areas of debate amongst
literary theorists—which are both considered at length in this issue—where these benefits can I think be clearly discerned.

The first is the perennial question of the relations between intentions and the interpretation of texts. The classic position in this long-standing and by now somewhat repetitious debate was originally taken up by the group whom Fowler describes (pp. 39-40, 52) as the Yale formalists and their various philosophical allies. The analysis they have given of the concept of intentionality is remarkably confused, but they have generally agreed that a writer's intentions must be contingently connected with his works, and have thus tended to concentrate on one of two main types of mental state. One is the intention to create a work of a certain character, a view which equates the study of intentions, as Wimsatt has recently and unrepentantly emphasized, with a search for those factors which "might in any sense have caused" the appearance of the work.\(^{16}\) The other sense of intention isolated by the formalists is the intention to bring about a certain result by writing in a certain way. This view scarcely distinguishes intentions from motives, since the most frequently cited examples have been the intention "to achieve fame" by one's works or to write "primarily in order to make money."\(^{17}\) Working with these two paradigms, and frequently confusing the one with the other, it has not proved difficult for the formalists to conclude that all such intentions must be "completely irrelevant" to the interpretation of literary texts.\(^{18}\)

One confusion, however, which recent philosophical discussions have helped to reveal in this classic position is that of failing to distinguish adequately between the alleged irrelevance of such intentions for the elucidation and for the evaluation of texts. We might concede (as I do) that it is impossible for intentions in either of these senses to bear on the meaning of a text while wishing at the same time to insist that they may nevertheless affect our sense of its worth. We might well wish to make this distinction in the first place in relation to the idea of an intention to create a work of a certain character. As I. A. Richards pointed out long ago, and as Hermeren stresses in this issue (pp. 61-62), it is surely essential to know what type of work an author was intending to create in order to "estimate the measure of his success."\(^{19}\) The same seems to apply in the case of an intention to bring about a certain effect. As Cioffi has emphasized, the discovery that a writer intended, say, not to amuse us as we had at first supposed, but simply to score off an opponent, seems almost certain to engender a different response to the worth of the work itself.\(^{20}\)

Even if we concede, however, that both these senses of intention are irrelevant to the evaluation as well as the elucidation of texts, it still does not follow, as the formalists have characteristically concluded, that the study of intentions has no contribution at all to make to the theory of interpretation. We still need to consider the further sense of intentionality which has been clarified by recent philosophy of language, the sense in which we speak of an author's intentions in saying what he says, the sense which Austin distinguished when he asked about what one does
with words and went on to designate by speaking of the intended illocutionary force of all serious utterances.

It is at this juncture that the background of philosophical analysis I began by sketching has had its major clarifying effect on recent discussions about the alleged intentional fallacy. There are two points at which this influence can readily be seen. The first is that most literary theorists have recently taken greater care to distinguish between the elucidation and the evaluation of texts, and to make it clear that they are asking specifically about the relations between the author’s intentions in writing and the meaning of what he writes. Eaton, for example, isolates the idea of elucidation and even subdivides it;21 Close singles out the process of elucidation as the critic’s fundamental business;22 and Savile similarly distinguishes the “location” of a given work from what he takes to be the logically subsequent task of “passing judgments of value” on it.23 The second influence is that most of these theorists have gone on to make an explicit appeal to the theory of speech acts, using this concept to isolate what a writer may have been aiming at in saying something intentionally, and in this way seeking to recover the characterization which a given utterance may have had for the agent who issued it. This is not of course to say that this approach and these resulting distinctions have been universally adopted. Hermerén’s contribution to this issue, for example, still shows a tendency to hover confusingly between intentions and motives and between the different senses of intention (pp. 63-64, 67-71). The general trend, however, has been to appeal to the concepts of nonnatural meaning and illocutionary force in order to isolate a sense of intentionality which is not contingently but logically related to the meaning of what is said. This is a major concern in the articles by Eaton, Hancher, and Close,24 as well as in the contributions by Iser and Ricoeur to New Literary History, in which the close analogies between traditional theories of hermeneutics and recent developments in analytical philosophy of language have been explicitly emphasized.25

The outcome of these developments has been the emergence of a new orthodoxy which has challenged the formalists by insisting that there is at least one sense of authorial intentionality which it must be essential to grasp in order to understand the meaning of a text. It is true that this conclusion has not been invariably endorsed even by those who have appealed to the theories of Austin and Grice for a clarification of the concepts involved. The articles I have cited by Loewenberg and Walsh, for example, both invoke the theory of speech acts while remaining skeptical about the alleged influence of intentions on the interpretation of texts. The general trend, however, has been to insist that, since the understanding of what a writer is doing in saying what he says is equivalent to understanding both his primary intentions in writing and a certain sense of the meaning of what he writes, it follows that a knowledge of such intentions must be indispensable to interpreting the meaning of texts. Eaton concludes that the study of intentions must for these reasons be “of extreme importance in the interpretation of literature.”26 Hancher agrees, for the
same reasons, that there must always be an "immediate bearing" of a writer's intentions on "the meaning of what he has written." Close goes even further, claiming that "the full definition of 'meaning' in literature" is equivalent to "the author's intentions in writing his works." And the same conclusions, for the same reasons, are endorsed by several contributors to this issue, in particular by Hermerén, Fowler, and Iser.

III

The other topic in the theory of interpretation which has been clarified by recent philosophical analysis is closely connected with the above issue, but is arguably of even greater importance. The debate in this case—again a somewhat venerable and repetitious one—has been conducted between "the scholars" on the one hand and "the critics" on the other, and has centered on the question of how far (or even whether) it is essential to understand and refer to "the background" or "the context" of a literary work in order to attain an adequate interpretation of it.

Here again the classic position has been the one adopted by the formalists, the New Critics, and their various philosophical allies. They have generally assumed that, when one asks whether there is any "context" which may help to explain a given text, one is asking in effect about "the social context" and its power to cause (and hence to explain) certain features of the text. This is clearly evident, for example, in the classic debate between Bateson and Leavis over what Bateson called "the discipline of contextual reading." It is perhaps not surprising, given this somewhat crude analysis of what constitutes the context of a text, that the formalists and their allies have found little difficulty in establishing the orthodoxy that, as Leavis puts it in his reply to Bateson, the attempt "to reconstruct a postulated 'social context'" of this character must be "gratuitous, and worse," and that in most cases "the text, duly pondered, will yield its meaning and value to an adequate intelligence and sensibility."

One reason, however, why it has not proved difficult to uphold this classic position is that its proponents have commonly been concerned at least as much with the idea of interpretation as a matter of evaluating the worth of a text as with the idea of establishing what its author may have meant. We can see this clearly in Leavis' reply to Bateson, and even more clearly in the sort of protest a critic like L. C. Knights feels inclined to enter when asked to carry a heavy load of "context" in setting out to interpret a text. His complaint is that this tends "to make particular works of art, such as Shakespeare's plays, less potently available and fructifying than they ought to be." While we may well feel able, however, to endorse the scorn registered by a critic like Leavis at the idea of setting out "to evaluate works of literature" in terms of their contribution to the class struggle, we might still wish to concede that, if we were pri-
arily concerned instead with the *meaning* of the work, it might make much better sense to suppose that a knowledge of its social context might help us to recover it. As White is able to show, for example, in his discussion of Goldmann's theories (pp. 101-03), it is far from obvious that this approach is wholly misconceived, as long as the relationships proposed between the social context and the meaning of the text are not presented in too crudely reductionist a style.34

Even if we concede, however, that a knowledge of the social context will in general be irrelevant to elucidating the meaning as well as evaluating the worth of a given text, it still does not follow, as the formalists and their allies have repeatedly assumed, that this decides the dispute between the scholars and the critics in favor of the latter group. We still need to consider the possible relevance of the quite different sense of "context" which has been clarified by recent hermeneutic analysis—the sense in which the text is seen, not in causal and positivist terms as a precipitate of its context, but rather in circular and hermeneutic terms as a meaningful item within a wider context of conventions and assumptions, a context which serves to endow its constituent parts with meaning while attaining its own meaning from the combination of its constituent parts.

It is at this point, as in the related debate about intentions, that the influence of recent philosophical discussion has had its most salutary effect. First of all, it has become much more usual amongst literary theorists to begin by distinguishing the different senses in which one might inquire into the "background" or "context" of a given text, and to make it clear that their main concern is with a context of meanings rather than a context of causes. It is true that some critics still seem content to talk about "context" in a confusingly undifferentiated way, as happens, for example, in Pelc's article (p. 90). If we turn instead to the other articles in this issue, however, and in particular to those of Hermerén and Jameson, we find the distinction between these two senses of context being clearly and consciously marked.35

The next and major influence exerted by recent philosophical analysis has been that, with this distinction clearly made, a number of literary theorists have gone on to insist that there must be at least one sense of context—the idea of a context of prevailing conventions and assumptions—which it will always be essential to recover in order to interpret the meaning of a literary text. The argument in favor of this central conclusion generally begins with the claim that we need to recover an author's intentions in writing in order to understand the meaning of what he writes. It is then pointed out that, in order to recover such intentions, it is normally taken to be essential to surround the given text with an appropriate context of assumptions and conventions from which the author's exact intended meaning can then be decoded. This yields the crucial conclusion that a knowledge of these assumptions and conventions must be essential to understanding the meaning of the text.
It is true that this argument has recently been challenged by a number of literary theorists—for example by Olsen and, most interestingly, in an important article by Savile. They concede that the study of an author’s intentions in writing must be essential to understanding the meaning of what he writes. But they do not agree that this commits us to studying a context of assumptions and conventions as a way of decoding these intentions and thus the meaning of the text, since they insist that the fundamental guide to an author’s intentions in writing must be provided by the text itself. All “literary intentions,” as Olsen concludes, must “be identified only through the literary work.”36 The same conclusion is endorsed by Savile as the outcome of a bold general theory about the intentionality of artists. Any artist or writer, he claims, will normally assume that his audience will take (and will perhaps be obliged to take) his work as a sufficient guide in itself to what he meant. So an interpreter may normally take the artist to have had the intention that what he means should be adequately embodied in, and capable of being elicited from, what a lawyer would call “the objective meaning” of his words, and thus from the evidence of the text itself. The author’s intentions in his work (and thus what he means by it) are on this account assimilated into the objective meaning we can find simply by studying the work itself.37

The more usual view amongst recent literary theorists, however, has been that the need to recover an author’s intentions in writing commits us to focusing above all on an appropriate context of conventions and assumptions from which his intentions can be decoded. One of the strongest statements of this emergent orthodoxy has been provided by Close, who argues that the key to understanding a text must always lie in setting it “against a background of human conventions, expectations, practices, and procedures,” and “redescribing it in terms of the function it has by its conformation to that wider context.” His conclusion is thus that the attempt to relate a work to this “wider context of conventions and procedures” represents “the central function of literary criticism.” 38 The same general commitment informs a great deal of recent literary theory, and can be found in a number of the most interesting contributions to this issue, including those of Hermerén, Fowler, and Iser. Fowler’s hero is the “scholar-critic” who seeks to reconstruct historically “all that can have been intended” in a text (pp. 50, 47). Hermerén concludes that the clearest route to elucidating “the intended meanings” of a text must be to engage in what Lotman calls “cultural semiotics,” surrounding the text with the “linguistic, stylistic, and symbolic conventions (traditions, etc.) at the time and place where the work was created” (pp. 75-76). And Iser reaches the same conclusion by way of focusing on what he calls (p. 21) the “repertoire” of the text—that is, the range of “conventions, norms, and traditions” which enable us to recover “the precise nature of the illocutionary force” of any given utterance, and in this way to initiate “the process of building up the meaning of the work” (pp. 21, 28).
IV

I now turn to comment on these two new orthodoxies. It scarcely seems necessary, however, to offer any extended comments on the first—the view that an author's intentions in writing are crucial to the meaning of what he writes. This seems by now to be a matter of general agreement amongst literary theorists and literary historians, and my own view is that the arguments which have been advanced in favor of this conclusion are perfectly correct. This belief will doubtless have emerged from the above account, and since I have already given my reasons for holding it in an earlier issue of *New Literary History*, there seems no need to rehearse them here.39

There seems a great deal more to be said, however, about the second and more fundamental view I have examined—that if we are concerned with recovering an author's intentions in a given work, we must make the contextual study of its surrounding assumptions and conventions the pivot of our interpretative procedures. As I have indicated, this is an issue on which current literary theorists are sharply divided. My own view, moreover, is that neither side has succeeded in producing a persuasive argument, since both have equally made use of partial and hence misleading examples. Since this allegation appears to raise a number of issues which are central to any discussion about the relations between history and the problem of interpretation, I shall devote the rest of this commentary to attempting to substantiate it.

I have no quarrel with the basic premise from which both the prevailing schools of thought have derived their arguments. I accept, that is, that "the basic form of significant propositions in literary criticism," as Close puts it, will amount in effect to statements about what we think a writer is doing in saying what is said in a given text.40 It is, however, necessary to qualify the acceptance of this doctrine in two ways. First, in focusing on what a writer is doing with words, we are of course confining ourselves to the idea of interpretation as the elucidation rather than the evaluation of texts—a limitation which applies throughout my ensuing discussion. The other qualification is that the idea of studying what a writer is doing is a crucially and I think a fruitfully ambiguous one—ambiguous as between the study of what the writer has done intentionally and what we may correctly say he has achieved, whether or not all the effects were intentionally brought off.

The first of these qualifications is commonly stated, as we have seen, in current literary theory, but the second is often deliberately ignored. It is often assumed, that is, that when we ask about what a given artist or writer is doing, this must be *equivalent* to asking about his intentions, since we can assume that all the features of the text were "meant." This seems to be the spirit equally of Close's and Savile's otherwise contrasting arguments, and it is frequently stated by iconographical theorists as the governing assumption of their criticism.41 This seems to be an overstatement,
however, for at least two familiar reasons. First, an artist or writer may always achieve less than he intended. He may fail to say what he means, so that the study of what he is doing becomes something other than—something less than—a study of his intentions in the text. Secondly, we may sometimes wish to insist that an artist or writer has achieved far more than he can possibly have intended or may be disposed to say he meant. We may wish to argue, in the case of avowed intentions, that he seems uninterested or incompetent in giving a full or accurate characterization of what he has done. Or we may wish to invoke the well-known fact that, in the case of any complex action, an alert and dispassionate observer may often be in a better position than the agent himself to discern the subtlest patterns of meaning underlying what has been done. Again, this makes the analysis of what the artist or writer is doing something other than—in these cases something more than—the study of his intentions in the text.

I concede, however, that all these refinements are parasitic on the basic task of trying to recover how we think a given writer intended us to take his text. I accept, that is, both that our main focus of critical attention needs to be on what the author is doing, and that this commits us—essentially if not exclusively—to recovering the intentions with which the text was composed. It seems important, moreover, to begin by stressing and defending this basic commitment, since a number of recent hermeneutic theorists, including Ricoeur in his contribution to New Literary History, have shown a curious tendency to revert (as Fowler shrewdly observes, pp. 40-41) to the formalist assumption that the basic concern of the interpreter is not with recovering the writer's intended meaning, but rather with analyzing what Beardsley has called "the public meanings" of the text.42

Perhaps the simplest way to clarify and defend the idea that we ought, on the contrary, to focus essentially on what the writer is doing is to consider an example. Consider the sort of question which used to be central to interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy: the question of what we should think of the tragic hero's character. I deliberately choose this somewhat old-fashioned and unpromising case, since it looks at first sight so far removed from any fashionable talk about illocutionary acts. If we ask this question of a particular play—asking, say, how we should judge the character of Brutus in the light of his assassination of Caesar—we find that the best recent critics offer a spectrum of examples. Some see it as the act of a virtuous republican protesting against the dangers of Caesarism; some as the tragic mistake of an essentially upright man; some as a more equivocal act by a man who is basically noble but prone to self-deception; some as a criminal act by a man who is ultimately motivated by vanity. (We may say that Dover Wilson inclines to the first of these answers, L. C. Knights to the second, Norman Rabkin to the third, and J. Palmer to the fourth.)

Now it may at first sight seem pretentious and even absurd to try to
render this sort of discussion in terms of the illocutionary acts which we
may take Shakespeare to have been performing in his presentation of
Brutus' character. It is surely clear on examination, however, that it not
only makes sense to think of the issue in this way, but that this is in
effect what each of these critics must have been doing in offering his
reading of Brutus' character—trying to work out how he thinks Shake-
spere intended us to take the character, and in this way to establish the
precise nature of what D. W. Harding calls "the bond with the author." 43
This can readily be substantiated by considering in a little more detail
how Rabkin arrives at his particular answer. He finds the key in con-
sidering what Shakespeare is doing in presenting the figures of "the slayer
and the slain" in the scenes just before the assassination. Shakespeare is
above all emphasizing the parallels: both are steadfast and noble, but
in each case there is also "a suggestion of vanity" and of "self-adulation."
Rabkin next asks, as his central question, "What can be Shakespeare's
meaning in so carefully identifying Brutus with Caesar?" He first
rejects one possibly illocutionary redescription by insisting that there can
be no question of "cynically deriding a great man for his weaknesses" in
either case. He then proceeds to argue that what Shakespeare is in fact
doing is criticizing and discrediting Brutus' picture of the significance of
the assassination. 44 By attending in this way to the exact illocutionary
acts which we may take Shakespeare to have been performing at this
point (identifying and paralleling, criticizing and discrediting), we attain
an answer to the question of how Brutus' character and action are to be
judged. We cannot see the conflict as a case of virtue and honor against
evil and tyranny; we can only see it as a collision between one ambiguously
good man and another who is no less ambiguously seen. To recognize that
this is what Shakespeare is doing at this point, Rabkin concludes, is to
grasp "the key to the meaning of the play." 45

It is true that this sort of approach has recently been criticized on the
grounds that any attempt to found the process of interpretation on the
recovery of illocutionary acts will always be inadequate because the re-
results will be so "schematic and generalised." 46 This criticism seems,
however, to involve the misconception that such an interpreter would
only ever be concerned "to identify the illocutionary act performed by
a text," so that his interpretation would be bound to consist of little
more than a meager characterization of a work as, say, a satire. 47 As
I have now tried to indicate, however, the attempt to recover the exact
intended force of any given section of a work will require an examination
of a great deal of its structure of effects, including such features as patterns
of dialogue, placing of scenes, and so on. The aim of such a detailed
examination, moreover, will of course be to present, with as much subtlety
and accuracy as possible, an account of all the things the writer may have
been doing at that particular point of the work. With this proviso, there
is I think nothing necessarily quaint or crude about the idea that—as
Iser expresses it—"the language of literature resembles the mode of the
illocutionary act" (p. 13).
Even if it is accepted, however, that the notion of illocutionary re-description lies at the heart of literary-critical procedures, we are still left with the main question of whether it follows that it will be equally necessary in every case to surround a given text with an appropriate context of conventions and assumptions as an indispensable key to decoding the meaning of the text itself. As we have seen, we are confronted at this point with two strongly opposed contentions in the current literature. The increasingly orthodox view, embodied in several of the contributions to this issue, is that this procedure is in fact essential; the contrasting view of Savile and others is that the author's intentions in writing can and must be decoded simply from the text itself.

As a preliminary to considering these rival theories, it will I think be helpful to try to draw a rough distinction between two different ways in which a given literary work may relate to a background of general assumptions and conventions. It will be true in the first place of any literary work that it will inescapably be the product of its times in various ways we can spell out. First of all, it will be bound to bear some relation to the prevailing genres and styles of the period. This is not to say, of course, that these may not be varied or even totally transformed in the hands of individual writers. It is only to say that the manner in which they are altered or transcended will still be bound to bear some relation to a common background. Any literary work will also be bound, if only in a similarly loose-limbed way, to bear some relation to the values of its age, to its prevailing assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes, and hence to its ways of proceeding and modes of argument. There will also be a number of other and more obvious connections between the work and its times. It will be bound to include some degree of local allusion or reference to the ideas (and perhaps also the literary works) of the age, and possibly also to some of its personalities and events. Finally, it will be bound to employ the local meanings, idioms, and usages of its time. Again, this is not to say that it may not be highly inventive in its range and use of language. It is only to say that, as an intended act of communication, it will be committed to employing the language in such a way that it can be satisfactorily understood.

While the above range of considerations applies in varying degrees to any literary work, however, there is also a subclass of cases in which it will form a deliberate part of the author's aim to comment on the prevailing handling of certain ideas or events, such that a grasp of these relationships will be intrinsic to recognizing the essential point or purpose of a part or the whole of his work. The range of polemical things a text may be doing can most readily be represented schematically by following up a hint from Iser's article, and trying to set out the range of illocutionary acts which might characteristically be performed in such works in the form of a sliding scale stretching, in Iser's formula, "from the dominant through the virtualized to the negated" (p. 35). The dominant end of the spectrum would be filled by works in which the author has it as part of his aim to affirm a prevailing set of values or attitudes. This might,
as in Hooker’s *Laws*, be a matter of defensively upholding, maintaining, and reminding people of certain beliefs; or it might, as in Spenser’s *Fairie Queene*, be a matter of celebrating or extolling certain values or attitudes. The middle part of the spectrum would be filled by works in which the author had it as part of his aim to submit the ideas or the events of the age to discussion and debate. This might take the form of challenging, questioning, or criticizing certain prevailing beliefs, as in the case of much Augustan satire; or it might take the form, in a similarly oblique style, of pleading, advising, or warning about certain current policies, as in most early stage allegories from the time of *Gorboduc*. Finally, the negative end of the spectrum would include all those works in which the author’s aim is fundamentally to reject some cherished value or assumption of the age. The chosen method might be sheer invective, as in some of Dickens; or ridiculing and parody, as in much of Cervantes; or it might more straightforwardly take the form of discursive argument, as in the work of a moralist (Machiavelli is a good example) whose aim is to challenge some of the basic moral assumptions of his age.

We might express this broad distinction between two ideal types of literary production in terms of the extent to which the range of illocutionary acts being performed in the text might be said to point inwards towards the structure of the text itself rather than outwards towards some other points of reference. Consider, for example, the range of illocutionary acts which, in Rabkin’s reading of *Julius Caesar*, are said to direct us to the center of the play’s meaning. Shakespeare is said to be identifying the killer with his victim, praising Brutus’ nobility, criticizing his vanity, and finally discrediting his own picture of his actions. The account of what Shakespeare is doing is decoded at each point from a study of other elements within the structure of the play and from an interpretative theory about their intended relationships. It appears, that is, that *Julius Caesar* falls decisively on one side of the distinction I have indicated—the side occupied by works I shall hereafter describe as having a relatively autonomous character. Now contrast this with the case in which the critic, in order to give an account of what the author is doing, will be obliged to seek his points of reference outside the structure of the work. Close has recently offered an extended example in his discussion of *Don Quixote*. He sees the basic intended effects of the work as including those of mimicking and so ridiculing the romances of chivalry, the aim being that of “discrediting the chivalric romance.” 48 Iser gives a similar and even clearer example in discussing *Tristram Shandy*. He sees it as crucial to an understanding of Sterne’s work that we should grasp its polemical relationship to “a prevailing system of thought,” that of “Lockean empiricism.” What Sterne is doing is “thrusting into relief” a number of “possibilities of knowledge” which this system has “rejected or ignored.” The aim is that of “casting doubt” on these dominant norms, thereby “demanding a recodification of the whole basis of the empirical system” (p. 26). These accounts of what Cervantes and Sterne are doing are both deduced from a study of the relationships between their texts and
a wider context of conventions and assumptions which they are taken to have had it as their primary intention to discuss and criticize. It appears, that is, that both Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy fall decisively on the other side of the distinction I have indicated—the side occupied by works I shall hereafter describe as having a relatively heteronomous character.

With this distinction in mind, let us revert to the two opposing views in current literary theory I have set out: the version of the purely critical approach adopted by Savile and others; and the contextual approach presented, for example, by Iser in this issue.

Let us begin by setting an exponent of Savile's approach the task of interpreting a strongly heteronomous text. The question we need to ask in this case is how far he will find himself at a disadvantage—as compared with an exponent of Iser's approach—through his resolute refusal to surround the text with any context of assumptions and conventions in the attempt to interpret what the author may have meant.

The answer is that something absolutely crucial seems liable to be missed, since the critic will be in danger of missing the essential point or purpose of the work concerned. If he makes no attempt, for example, to understand the chivalric code which forms part of the context of Don Quixote, he will be liable to misunderstand the nature of the caricature and hence the extent of the parody intended by Cervantes. This in turn means he will almost certainly misdescribe much of what is going on in the work. Close gives an important example in his historiographical account of Don Quixote's reception. One tradition of interpretation insists that, since the protagonist's aims include the righting of wrongs and succoring the oppressed, we must think of him as having "a noble half and a comic half." His aims are admirable, and it is only "the means he employs to further them" which are to be regarded as comically absurd. As Close points out, however, this is to miss the point—which any contemporary reader would have been sure to pick up—that "the aims, like the acts, are a madly literal mimicry of the stereotype behaviour of the heroes of chivalric romance." This strongly suggests that the parody is intended to cover not just the Don's behavior but his aspirations as well.

These considerations culminate in a particular view of the relationships which seem to obtain, in the case of a strongly heteronomous text, between the "correct," the "best," and the various "good" readings which might be given of it. It is commonly claimed that "the best interpretation" of a literary work "can, and often does, differ from the correct one," where the correct interpretation is defined as the one which most successfully recaptures what the author saw himself as doing in the text. This seems almost inconceivable, however, in the case of a strongly heteronomous text. This is not to deny, of course, that even in this type of work the author may not be in full control of what he is doing, so that he may achieve either less or more than he may have intended. It is only to insist that we are dealing in such cases with an author whose work is centered on a definite polemical point or purpose. It seems essential that
this purpose should be one which the author has consciously formulated to himself, since the idea, say, of an unintended parody sounds like a category mistake. And it seems correspondingly essential that the critic should find the means to recover this purpose, on pain of failing to understand much of the work's intended effects. It seems in short that with strongly heteronomous texts it must be a necessary condition of any purportedly good reading that it should also be a correct one, in the sense that it begins by correctly identifying the polemical purposes of the work, pivoting the rest of its analysis around that central point.

Suppose, however, we now set an exponent of Iser's approach the task of interpreting a strongly autonomous work. The question to be asked in this case is how far he will gain any advantage—as compared with an exponent of Savile's approach—from deploying all his contextual aids to interpretation, rather than simply treating the text itself as a self-sufficient guide to what its author may have meant.

The answer seems to be that such a critic will of course gain some advantage even in the case of a strongly autonomous work. As I have already indicated, it is true in a certain restricted sense of any literary work that it must be regarded as a product of its context. If we now revert to the various ways in which, as I have argued, this dependence is inevitable, we can readily gauge how far a complete refusal to consider this type of evidence will be liable to weaken an interpretation even of this type of work.

A pure exponent of Savile's approach will be liable in the first place to lose any sureness of touch in handling the two main ways in which, as I have suggested, any literary work will inescapably be related to the age in which it was produced. He will lack any clear sense of how the literary genres and conventions are being handled and perhaps transformed. A good example of the greater exegetical gains which might result from following Iser's approach at this point, even in the case of a strongly autonomous text, is suggested by Rabkin's analysis of Julius Caesar. He emphasizes how, after the assassination of Caesar, the play suddenly "calls up the world of revenge tragedy." 52 Shakespeare's aim in invoking these conventions, Rabkin argues, is to reveal to the audience how the second half of the play is to be taken, and in particular to suggest that, since blood has been shed, it is right and inevitable that the killer's blood should be shed in turn. We are thus intended to see, by "a brilliant manipulation of convention which no member of the first audience would have missed" that the assassination was wholly "unwarranted," and in this way to see "the meaning of Brutus' crime." 53

A pure exponent of Savile's approach will also be liable, even in the case of a strongly autonomous text, to fall into a certain insensitivity in attempting to deal with the relations of the work to the general values, beliefs, and assumptions of its age. A good example of the greater exegetical gains to be derived from following Iser's approach at this point can again be taken from Julius Caesar. We might well feel inclined to ask—it is in fact strange that recent scholarship on the play has not asked—
what theories and beliefs about tyrannicide were available and familiar to Shakespeare and his original audience. They had in fact inherited three main assumptions from the early Protestant tradition: that "the powers that be are ordained," so that tyrannicide is almost always damnable; that a ruler must unquestionably be a tyrant if his killing is ever to be justified; and that the act of killing can only be justly performed by a specially chosen magistrate. If we now return to the play with this information, it may begin to seem important that, in contrast to his cycle of English history plays, Shakespeare gives us no account of Caesar's rule, and hence no opportunity of suggesting that an accusation of tyranny might be justified. It may also seem important that Cassius has to appeal to Brutus' sense of his own importance to persuade him that he is the right man to lead the conspiracy. And it may seem particularly important that, in his famous soliloquy about his reasons for killing Caesar, Brutus makes no attempt even to persuade himself that Caesar is a tyrant. The history, in fact, begins to enter the interpretation: we may now feel less inclined, say, to favor Dover Wilson's reading, and more inclined perhaps to lean towards Rabkin's more equivocal treatment of Brutus' character and more straightforward denunciation of his crime.

Finally, if the exponent of Savile's approach is unlucky, his touch may fail him in relation to the more trivial senses I mentioned in which any literary text will inescapably relate to its age. He will scarcely be in a good position to recognize the force of local allusions and references of the kind that Iser analyzes, for example, in discussing Spenser's Eclogues (pp. 30-31). And he will obviously go astray if he refuses all scholarly help in decoding archaic meanings and usages. For as Leavis remarks, even the purest critic cannot fail "to be aware of period peculiarities of idiom, linguistic usage, convention and so on, and of the need here, there and elsewhere, for special knowledge." 54

The relative advantages to be gained in this case, however, from following Iser's approach seem to be of a very much more marginal character than in the case of a strongly heteronomous work. Even if our imagined exponent of Savile's approach were so unlucky (not to say lacking in ingenuity) as to miss all these aspects of meaning and nuance, his loss would still be qualitatively less serious than in the case of a heteronomous work. The essence of the difference is that there seems to be no question in this case of needing to engage in Iser's type of contextual study in order to be sure of not missing the fundamental point or purpose of the work. Since it will have been no part of the author's aim to offer any explicit or polemical commentary on the ideas or events of his time, it follows that the text will not in that sense have any overall point or purpose which needs to be correctly identified as an indispensable part of interpreting it. This in turn means, in strong contrast to the potential difficulty we noted in discussing Don Quixote, that there will be far less danger that, unless the critic engages in an extensive contextual study, he may be betrayed into misidentifying the force of individual passages or character-constructions in the given work. We may compare Close's
example of Don Quixote in this connection with the example from Julius Caesar. In the former case a failure to grasp the intended application of Cervantes' parody is shown to generate a complete misrepresentation of the Don's character. But in the latter case we might well find that, even if a critic following Savile's approach were to miss the intended force of Shakespeare's invocation of revenge tragedy conventions, he might still be able to build up a convincing picture of Brutus' character simply by working from the clues to what Shakespeare is doing contained in the text itself.

These considerations suggest that the relationship between the best, the correct, and the various good readings of a strongly autonomous text may be quite different from the relationships we noted in the case of a strongly heteronomous text. It seems in particular much less obvious that the best reading must in this case be the same as the one which is historically the most correct.\textsuperscript{35} One reason is that the idea of using historical techniques to arbitrate between rival good readings seems to have a much less powerful application in the case of strongly autonomous texts. Since there is no polemical point or purpose to be correctly identified, the use of these techniques will tend to become confined, as I have suggested in the case of Julius Caesar, to the far more marginal business of questioning or corroborating particular aspects or details of a reading initially built up from the text itself. A second reason is that there seems to be much more scope for arguing in the case of strongly autonomous texts that, in various ways which may be of importance in relation to our interpretation, the writer may not have been fully in control of his own creative processes. The nature of the disjunctions which may in consequence arise in this case between the best, the correct, and the various good readings of the text can readily be illustrated by reverting to the example from Julius Caesar. Suppose—to entertain a favorite fantasy of literary theorists—that we knew exactly how Shakespeare intended the character of Brutus to be taken. Suppose it was in fact his intention (as Dover Wilson believed) to portray a virtuous republican protesting against the dangers of Caesarism. Then it follows that Dover Wilson's is the correct interpretation, and the other three readings I have cited must all be incorrect in various ways. It does not follow, however, that the Dover Wilson interpretation now becomes the only good reading of the text. We might concede, for example, that Rabkin's more equivocal view of the play's meaning has now been falsified, while still wishing to maintain that it continues to offer us a plausible and challenging vision of Brutus' character. The status of the one uniquely correct reading, in short, can only be that it represents one good reading amongst others—in the example I have taken, amongst at least three others. It does not even follow, moreover, that once we have been made privy to Shakespeare's intentions in the way I have imagined, we are thereby provided with the best reading of his text.\textsuperscript{56} We might argue, for example, that even if the Dover Wilson interpretation of Julius Caesar happens to be correct, the more equivocal analysis favored by Rabkin not only continues to
provide us with a good reading alternative to the correct one, but even with a better reading than the one we know to be correct, in the sense that it offers, say, a fuller and more coherent account of the patterns to be found in the play's imagery and dialogue, the sequence of its scenes, and so on. Taken together, these arguments tend to suggest that, even though there may be a necessary unity between the best and the correct interpretation in the case of a heteronomous text, the same does not seem to apply in strongly autonomous cases.

V

I shall conclude by underlining what I take to be the significance of the distinction I have drawn between autonomous and heteronomous texts. It serves I believe to establish that both the theories of interpretation I have been considering are equally founded on a mistake. Consider again the type of contextual approach recently advocated by Close, Iser, and others. It will be clear by now that this is based on a misleading overstatement which consists (in effect) of assimilating all works of literature to the category of strongly heteronomous texts.\(^{57}\) The result is that the significance of literary history in relation to interpretation comes to be overestimated in two ways. First, there is an exaggerated emphasis on the extent to which it is genuinely useful, in the case of strongly autonomous texts, to bring to bear the full apparatus of contextual criticism. This will obviously be essential in a work like Don Quixote, but it seems revealing and misleading that a work of parody should have been cited as such a central example. Secondly, there is a tendency, even in the case of strongly heteronomous texts, to exaggerate the significance of surrounding the text with a context of conventions and assumptions. Close, Iser, and other exponents of this approach sometimes write as if they believe that, once we have established the precise background of assumptions and conventions which are said to bear on the meaning of a given work, we need only place the work up against this background in order to read off our interpretation of it.\(^{58}\) This is to forget that, before we can hope to identify the context which helps to disclose the meaning of a given work, we must already have arrived at an interpretation which serves to suggest what contexts may most profitably be investigated as further aids to interpretation. The relationship between a text and its appropriate context is in short an instance of the hermeneutic circle, not a means of breaking out of it.

These conclusions may seem very hostile to the idea that literary history has a role of any importance to play in relation to the interpretation of texts. This is by no means my conclusion, however, as will become evident if I turn finally to the purely critical approach which Savile and others have recently advocated. It will by now be clear that this is based on a no less misleading overstatement, the mirror image of the one I have just examined. It seems, that is, to consist in effect of assimilating
all works of literature into the category of strongly autonomous works. The result is that the exponents of this approach have gone on to underestimate the role of literary history in relation to the interpretation of texts in two corresponding ways.

They have failed in the first place to recognize that there are certain types and even genres of literature in which it is excluded in principle that the author should have had the intention that all his intentions should be embodied in the objective meaning of the text. As I have already hinted, we may discriminate two main types of case in which this will always be impossible. One is where the text refers outside itself in a systematic way, such that the objective meaning fails to disclose some of the author's principal aims in writing it. The other is where the author employs some form of oblique strategy—irony and parody are the chief examples—so that the objective meaning of the text may be systematically misleading as a guide to what the author meant. It is (or ought to be) obvious that these are specialized cases, but it is equally obvious that here at least we are bound to call on a range of extratextual aids in the attempt to reassure ourselves that we have in fact grasped how the point of the work was intended to be taken.

The other way in which the approach commended by Savile and others underestimates the importance of literary history is that, even in the case of a strongly autonomous text, it will always to some extent be desirable to follow a contextual approach as a means of collaborating with, and helping to question or corroborate, whatever interpretations we may basically arrive at from studying the text itself. We may sometimes find that such a process of checking adds little to our original sense of the text. But this is in itself an historical rather than a critical judgment, and it will surely have been wise to go through such a process of contextual analysis in order to ensure that such a judgment can in fact be offered with confidence. We may well find, however, as I have tried to show with the example from *Julius Caesar*, that even in the case of a strongly autonomous work such a process may help us to test and perhaps to refine an essentially internal analysis of the text.

The literary historian must I think concede that he can never hope, however much he works with these contextual aids, to arrive simply by this process at the best reading of what a given writer may have meant. It is always for us, bringing our own experience and sensibility to bear, to say finally how we think a work must be taken. This is the strength of the purely critical approach. As we engage, however, in the pursuit of true judgments, we can scarcely afford to neglect any aids which may genuinely help us to refine or reflect on those judgments. This is the strength of the contextual approach, and the fundamental reason why the study of literary history can never be sensibly divorced from the business of interpreting literary texts.

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NOTES

1 For criticizing the draft of this commentary, I am extremely grateful to Michael Black, Stefan Collini, John Dunn, Heather Glen, Martin Hollis, Susan James, and John Thompson.

2 For a recent account of scientific theory which recognizes the need to do justice to the insights of the postempiricists, see Mary Hesse, *The Structure of Scientific Inference* (London, 1974), pp. 1-8. For a similar account, concerned with the philosophy of the social sciences, see Charles Taylor, “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 25 (1971), 3-51.


7 For Hesse’s and Taylor’s accounts, see the articles cited in nn. 2 and 3.


10 Taylor, p. 3.


13 For a statement of these claims, see for example Eaton, “Intentions,” p. 168 and “Interpretations,” p. 230.

14 See Close, p. 32; Hancher, pp. 831-40. For Strawson on Grice, see P. F.
Strawson, *Logico-Linguistic Papers* (London, 1971), pp. 149-69. Grice's analysis is of course offered as a theory of meaning in the widest sense, not just a theory of illocutionary acts. Black and several other philosophers (whom he discusses in his article cited in n. 12 above) have denied that the whole of "meaning" can be accommodated by a theory about the intentions of speakers. They have not shown, however, that Grice's theory fails to yield an analysis at least of the intentions which go into the performance of linguistic acts. It is possible to criticize both Grice's original presentation of this case and Strawson's refinements of it, as I have sought to show in my article "Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1970), 118-38. But there seems no doubt that, at least in this restricted way, the theory works well. This is important for my argument, since it is only in this way that the theory has generally been taken over by literary theorists. This is of course misleading as an account of what Grice is doing—which not all the literary theorists appear to recognize—but it does mean that the application is not subject to the criticisms of the theory's wider ambitions leveled by Black and others.

15  Hancher, p. 831.


18  Kemp, p. 150.


20  Frank Gioffi, "Intention and Interpretation in Criticism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 64 (1963-64), 104-06.


22  Close, pp. 32-33.

23  Savile, p. 164.

24  See Eaton, "Intentions," p. 168. Both Hancher, pp. 836n and 842n, and Close, pp. 24 and 29, cite my own attempts to formulate these issues. See esp. the article cited in n. 39 below.

25  For the essay by Ricoeur, see n. 12.


27  Hancher, pp. 834-35; 850-51.

28  Close, pp. 24, 32.


30  F. R. Leavis, "The Responsible Critic or the Functions of Criticism at any Time," rpt. in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, ed. F. R. Leavis (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 11, 281, 292.

31  Leavis, esp. pp. 11, 295, 297. See also the essay on Rosemond Tuve by R. G. Cox in *ibid.*, pp. 1, 305, 310.


38 Close, pp. 25, 28, 29, 33.

39 See my article, "Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts," *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 393-408.

40 Close, p. 29.

41 For a recent example, see Julius S. Held, *Rembrandt's Aristotle* (Princeton, 1969), which speaks (p. 39) of "accepting, as I think we must, the notion that with a master like Rembrandt nothing is entirely accidental."

42 Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit, 1970), esp. pp. 31-37. See Ricoeur, esp. p. 95, on "what the text now says matters more than what the author meant to say."

43 D. W. Harding, "The Bond with the Author," *The Use of English*, 22 (1971), 307-25. It is of course true that strictly speaking we ought not to speak of the things Shakespeare is doing in the text as illocutionary acts, for reasons originally given by Austin himself, p. 104, and discussed at length by Iser, pp. 000-000. This does not affect my argument.


45 Rabkin, p. 95.


47 Hough, pp. 81, 82; my italics.

48 Close, pp. 21, 25, 37.

49 Close, p. 37.


52 Rabkin, p. 105.

53 Rabkin, p. 103.

54 Leavis, pp. 11, 281.

55 For the idea of attaining the historically correct reading as the goal of criticism see, e.g., Close, pp. 25-26, 34. Some critics argue that "there are in principle several correct" readings of a text. For this claim see John F. Reichert, "Description and Interpretation in Literary Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 27 (1968-69), 281-92, at 290. It is hard to see, however, how more than one interpretation could be correct, though I think easy to see how several might be equally good.

56 There is an excellent discussion of this issue in Eaton, "Interpretations," pp. 228, 231.

57 This charge can readily be substantiated if we consider the general remarks about the aims of literature which Iser recklessly offers at pp. 000-000. He thinks
any work may be said to be reacting, in a deliberate and evidently polemical manner, against the prevailing thought system of its time, seeking "to counter-balance the deficiency of that system" (p. 000). A similar commitment informs Jauss's contribution cited in n. 35 above.

58 See, e.g., the end of Close's article, esp. pp. 37-38.

59 I have tried to give an example of this character in discussing Machiavelli in my article "'Social Meaning' and the Explanation of Social Action," rpt. in The Philosophy of History, ed. Patrick Gardiner (London, 1974), pp. 106-26, esp. pp. 114-15. I have been taken to say that any text is bound to have this character. See, e.g., B. Parekh and R. N. Berki, "The History of Political Ideas: A Critique of Q. Skinner's Methodology," Journal of the History of Ideas, 34 (1973), 163-84. I certainly think, pace Parekh and Berki, that this will be true of any text of discursive argument. I hope this present article, however, may help to show that in other cases there may be other considerations involved. For the case of philosophical texts, I have attempted a reply to Parekh and Berki, and to various other critics, in "Some Problems in the Analysis of Political Thought and Action," Political Theory, 2 (1974), 277-303.

60 Here I am applying the vocabulary used in my own article "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," History and Theory, 9 (1969), 3-53, where these issues are discussed at greater length, esp. pp. 32-35.