

**Words and the World:  
Reflections on the Possibility of Hermeneutical Realism**

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*“Here is what we know. We are a community of bemused acolytes to Metaphor. We are celebrants of Misreading and inheritors of an indecipherable Scripture... We write the history we make, the selves we are, and the criticism we publish.... Mediums of metaphor and madness, we are not responsible, except perhaps for our will to power over texts and for our presumption in writing. Carnilvalesque, our criticism should be entertaining and colorful: we need haunted houses, rollercoaster rides, distended balloons, seductive come-ons, and promising gambles.”*

– Vincent Leitch

### *An Invitation to the Dance*

Amongst the melee of colorful and divergent opinions expressed in post-structuralist literary theory there is one unflagging position around which much appears to coalesce: the absence of the author. Gone are the days when one could naively assume that the one who produced a text was responsible for, and in an important way, determinative of its meaning. In the current literary world this assumption has largely evaporated and has caused many to return to the fundamental question of meaning and authorial intent. The answers have tended in two (for the purpose of this paper) different directions. The Deconstructionist school, represented by Derrida, De Man, Foucault and others, has forcefully rejected the author as a stable source of meaning for any text. For Derrida, faith in the “strength” of an author’s intentions is ultimately faith in a chimera that has been traced by logocentric philosophy for so long that the chimera has taken on flesh and appears to dwell among us. But the security granted by authorial intent is just that, a chimera. Against the idea that there is any inherent stability in a text (in an author’s intentions or otherwise), Derrida has consistently attacked the very concept of meaning itself. This is especially evident in Derrida’s three-fold attack on what Kevin Vanhoozer calls the “idols of the sign: the idol of reliability (the sign corresponds to reality), the idol of determinacy (the sign has a single, fixed sense), and the idol of neutrality (the sign is a

descriptive, not prescriptive or political, instrument).<sup>1</sup> In order to “undo” these fixed pillars of Western philosophy, Derrida focuses instead, as a radical nominalist, on the sign’s instability, undecidability, and partiality. Traditional attempts to secure a stable, universal meaning in a text are merely an imposition of arbitrary power that serve to constrain and enslave the interpreter.

On the other side of the debate, E. D. Hirsch in his important work, *Validity in Interpretation* takes up the cause of authorial intention by contending vigorously for a form of hermeneutical realism. For Hirsch, meaning is inseparably tied to the conscious acts of the author and the interpreter that are translated into the linguistic expression of a text. Words mean something because someone intends their meanings. As Hirsch notes, “there is no magic land of meaning outside the human consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, an author has control over his work because it is his conscious intentions that determine its meaning. Rather than being an arbitrary assertion of power, a “correct” interpretation of a text is merely a faithful exposition of its author’s intentions.

In this paper I will examine both of these positions with regard to question of authorial intention and the possibility of hermeneutical realism. Specifically, I wish to investigate the question: Can authorial intention serve as a reliable guide to hermeneutics? In answering this question, I will begin by looking at E. D. Hirsch’s arguments for a realistic and stable “center” of meaning located in conscious acts of the author. Secondly, I will turn to the poststructuralists’ answer, elaborating Derrida’s attempt to overthrow determinate meaning of any kind. From these two positions I will turn, finally, to reflections that will take us in a third direction. I will analyze the

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<sup>1</sup> Vanhoozer, Kevin. *Is There Meaning in this Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 39.

strengths and weaknesses of both schools and point toward the ways in which a biblically informed hermeneutic can synthesize both the objective realities of the text and the subjective concerns of the interpreter.

### E. D. Hirsch: Objectivity and Authorial Intention

*“He is a slave to a sign who uses or worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies.” – St. Augustine*

Simply put, Hirsch’s concern to validate the objective meaning of a text can be defined as seeing the author’s intention as the ground, goal, and guide of interpretation. In this section we will explore how each of these three elements contribute to Hirsch’s attempt to define how hermeneutics can discover a stable “center” of meaning in a text.

### The Ground of Interpretation

For Hirsch, the meaning of a text *is* the intention of its author.<sup>3</sup> However simple and straightforward this claim appears, it represents the foundation of Hirsch’s hermeneutical project. Without the reality and accessibility of the author’s intended meaning, a text’s objective meaning is lost in the labyrinth of time and interpreters. It is important to note however, as Vanhoozer points out, that Hirsch’s idea of authorial intention is not the same as the psychologistic accounts of the Romantics.<sup>4</sup> Hirsch is not saying that in writing a text an author deposits some metaphysical reality into it that requires a “living reading” in which a reader becomes one with the author’s consciousness. Additionally, it is also important to point out that Hirsch is not stating (as

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<sup>2</sup> Hirsch, E.D. *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967) 4. As cited by Vanhoozer, 77.

<sup>3</sup> Vanhoozer, 74.

his opponents do) that a text has a meaning of its own. Because Hirsch insists that a text's meaning is bound up essentially in the intentions of the author, it can be said that there really is no meaning *in* a text that can change over time. For Hirsch there is not meaning in a text *and* meaning in the mind of the author. If there is meaning at all in a text it is *only* the meaning intended by the author and no other. Vanhoozer notes that in making this equation, "Hirsch is claiming something about the nature of texts as well as about meaning, namely, that there can be no texts without authors."<sup>5</sup>

In defining what an intention is, Hirsch relies very heavily upon the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Husserl analyzed consciousness by showing that the mind (in the acquisition of knowledge) displays an "aboutness" or a "directedness" toward the object of knowledge. Thus, to be conscious is always to be conscious *of* something. As Vanhoozer relates,

Husserl makes what for Hirsch is a critical distinction between an *act* of consciousness and an *object* of consciousness. It is of the essence of consciousness that it is always consciousness *of* something. One cannot simply be conscious. Even when we first awake in the morning, we are conscious *of* our being awake, *of* it being a new day. That consciousness is always *awareness of something* is, moreover, what separates mental from physical phenomena. Mental phenomena – the acts of consciousness – are always directed at something (e.g., a thought, a belief, a hope, a perception). An "intention" is the act by which consciousness aims at something. Every intentional act of consciousness has an intentional object, that towards which consciousness aims.<sup>6</sup>

The essential connectedness, and yet distinctness, of the consciousness and that which it intends is crucial here. Hirsch maintains that the meaning of a text is not to be found in

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 75. Vanhoozer points to the Geneva School as an example of this. As Poulet says, "When I read as I ought...I am thinking the thoughts of another...My consciousness behaves as though it were the consciousness of another."

<sup>5</sup> *Vanhoozer*, 75. Thus, he notes that Hirsch would deny that stones arranged by the sea to read "to be, or not to be" would be a text. It does not contain any authorial intention and is thus devoid of meaning.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the subjective mental act of the author or the reader, but rather in the object *intended* by a willful act of the author. Thus, it is the author's will, as contained in his intentions expressed in the text, which gives meaning to a set of assembled signs. From this, Hirsch makes it clear that he believes only humans can *mean* things by using words. A computer, a parrot, or a wave cannot will an intended meaning that their words represent. For Hirsch, meaning is "an affair of consciousness, not of words."<sup>7</sup>

### *The Goal of Interpretation*

From the consideration of the ground of meaning in the intended objects of the author, Hirsch moves to consider the goal of interpretation. Interpretation, strictly speaking, is the act of recovering the intended meaning of the author. One might label this intended meaning the norm by which the effectiveness of literary studies can be judged. In the process of discovering or reconstituting the intended meaning of a text the interpreter is not free to choose any form of recovery he sees fit, he must proceed scientifically. Objective knowledge is only obtained when the interpreter's ideas correspond with the fixed objects intended by the author. In this way, the goal of interpretation is for Hirsch *shared meaning*.<sup>8</sup>

Essential to this task is the distinction between subject and object. Interpretation is not about describing the subjective intentional acts of the reader or the author. Meaning is not contained in either of these. Rather, the process of interpretation is comprised of (possibly) many different acts of consciousness all "dialing into" the same intentional object.<sup>9</sup> For instance, it is possible for my brothers and I to intend the same

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<sup>7</sup> Hirsch, *Validity*, 4. As cited in Vanhoozer, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Vanhoozer, 76.

<sup>9</sup> Vanhoozer, 76.

object in the phrase “coming home for the summer” as represented in our separate acts of “looking forward to.” Thus, meaning for Hirsch is essentially tied to its public function; it is “the shareable content of a speaker’s (or writer’s) intentional object.”<sup>10</sup> From this “shareable content” it is possible for many interpreters, even through the passage of time, to reconstruct a single and definite meaning of a text by intending the same object as its author.

### *The Guide of Interpretation*

A common misunderstanding that arises from Hirsch’s work involves a text’s ability to have both a determinate meaning *and* indeterminate significance. This distinction gives an important flexibility to a text’s passage through time and culture. As noted above, Hirsch insists that a text has only one meaning (the author’s intended meaning) which remains unalterable despite the change of external influences (the interpreter, culture, time, other works, etc.). However, a text’s *significance* does indeed change. Significance refers the way in which a text’s meaning interacts with the changing influences around it. Thus, the *Odyssey*, while only having one meaning, clearly has developed an enormously diverse significance in the course of Western history. In this way the text’s significance involves all of the other intentional acts that surround a text that are different from the author’s intentional object. As Hirsch notes, “Significance is always ‘meaning-to,’ never ‘meaning-in.’”<sup>11</sup> Hirsch calls the process of describing a text’s significance “criticism” while he reserves the title “interpretation” for the discovery of a text’s meaning.<sup>12</sup> Without this distinction, there is no way to preserve

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<sup>10</sup> Hirsch, 219. As cited in Vanhoozer, 76.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Vanhoozer, 77.

a text's objective meaning. Interpretation becomes a free-for-all, in which the author and interpreter are conflated and meaning can only be described as *meaning-for-me*.

In laying out his position, it is clear that Hirsch does not merely see his position on meaning as a simple recommendation among many others options (as some critics have suggested). He is stating, I think, that this position is the only one that makes it possible for us to read texts *as we actually do*. To remove the ground of meaning from the author's intention is commit oneself to textual anarchy, and this is simply not the way we approach texts in daily life. However, to the Deconstructionists, the anarchy of the textual world is a reality from which no one can escape. In their minds, the way in which people use texts (which Hirsch sees as a support for his view) demonstrates the utter futility of Hirsch's program: it is in fact just one more (manipulative) perspective awash in the endless sea of language.

### *Derrida and the Undoing/Absence of the Author*

*There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language....This [play], strictly speaking, amounts to destroying the concept of 'sign' and its entire logic. – Jacques Derrida*

### *The Myth of Logocentrism*

Derrida's design in undoing the author as a stable source of meaning must be seen within the context of his larger critique of logocentric philosophy. According to Derrida many of the errors in modern language theory stem from Plato's idea that central function of language is to relate words to things. Just as things in the world are faint pictures of their heavenly ideal, so words similarly reflect the reality of the things to which they

relate.<sup>13</sup> One is reminded of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein's attempt to revive this platonic emphasis in their "picture theory" of language. In both ancient and modern proposals the common factor that unites them is their commitment to the position that language's function (meaning) is to name, picture, or refer to objects, facts and the world.<sup>14</sup> This position is what Derrida calls logocentrism. Derrida's chief complaint against logocentrism is that it seeks to locate some secure anchoring point *outside of language*. Platonism (both ancient and modern) finds that stability in the realm of the forms (or ideals) to which all particulars are related. Thus, logocentrism, in Vanhoozer's words, is:

The desire for a center, for a point of reference, for an ultimate origin – anything on which we can non-arbitrarily hang our beliefs and values. In short, logocentrism stands for the fundamental presupposition that it is possible to speak truly: that our talk will be about reality, and not mere talk about talk.<sup>15</sup>

For Plato, this relation of the mind to the world is what gives meaning to symbols. Symbols "stand in" for objects in the world (things or ideas) that, in turn, represent the eternal forms (ideas).<sup>16</sup> Thus, signs are really not that complicated for Plato, they are further removed from "reality" than the actual objects they represent and are therefore inferior to them, but they are capable of representing their objects truly. It is precisely this confidence that the mind has direct access to the world apart from language that Derrida identifies as the Achilles heel of logocentrism.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

### Presence as Absence

In Derrida's writings, the history of western metaphysics follows Plato's lead by insisting that there is a reality outside or above language. This might be termed the "vertical view" of language. The "higher" realm of objects and ideas, to which the mind has direct access, serves as a standard that enables us to measure our interpretations or theories and judge their correspondence with reality. Derrida explicitly rejects this view of language. Language does not point "upward" to a higher realm of reality, nor is there anything "behind" language by which its representative accuracy can be evaluated. Rather than pointing "upward" to external realities, Derrida maintains that language only points horizontally to *other signs*. Building on the work of Saussure, Derrida completely accepts the idea that a sign (signifier) is arbitrarily connected with what it signifies (importantly the signified is a concept of some sort, not some external thing). Moreover, because signs only point to other signs, a signifier obtains its identity only by differing with other signs. So the word "dog" means what it does because it is not a cat, car, box or wagon, not because it stands for anything in the external world. Linguistic systems are systems of signs and signifieds, arbitrarily constructed on the principle of *differance*.<sup>17</sup>

Having loosed the sign from any external reality to which it must refer, Derrida lays his axe at the root of Western metaphysics by asserting that, like signs themselves, thought is also held captive within operations of language. Just as Derrida denies that a sign can correspond to an external reality, so he also denies that thought is able to reach the external world either. Language comes before either thought or speech, and thus

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<sup>17</sup> Within *differance* Derrida also show how each sign also *defers* to other signs (see his discussion of *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*). This creates an inherent instability in any linguistic system that prevents meaning from becoming fixed.

imprisons the subject in a world where all is language.<sup>18</sup> Thus the world, thought, and words are all placed within an arbitrary system of signifiers and signifieds that endlessly defer to each other. Meaning “is not the thing signified, but the endless displacement of one sign by another, a ceaseless play of signs that never comes to rest on something in the world.”<sup>19</sup> The world, like the human subject, is language “all the way down.”

Vanhoozer brings together all of these strands nicely:

In sum, Derrida undoes the basic metaphysical assumption – that there is access to an authoritative *logos* that guarantees the correspondence of language to reality – by arguing that writing is prior to speech. Just as *langue* is prior to *parole*, so the language system (writing) is prior to any attempt to say something (speech). Writing, moreover, is prior to thought. “Writing” is Derrida’s general term for this all-too-human situation of having to make do with the mediation of signs (interpretation) rather than with immediate understanding (intuition). “Writing” stands of the deferral of presence: presence is “deferred” since we have access to it only through a system of signs. “Writing” is what we have *instead of* presence. In writing we live and move and have our being.<sup>20</sup>

### *Iterability and Authorial Intention*

We are now in a position to examine how Derrida (and other postmodern critics) would respond to Hirsch’s hermeneutical realism. Part of this critique appears to emerge on at least two different fronts, both from Derrida: First, we will look at the charge that Hirsch’s location of meaning in the intentionality of the author separates it from the text and makes it impossible for the interpreter to access. Following this, we will consider Derrida’s understanding of authorial intention in light of the iterability of language. In both of these ways, Derrida opposes Hirsch’s attempt to reconstruct, verify, and totalize the author’s intention.

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<sup>18</sup> It’s like being squashed between the pages of a massive text.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Clearly Hirsch's position that meaning is to be found in authorial intention falls within the category of logocentric philosophy. As we saw above, Hirsch grounds the meaning of a text outside the system of language in the "transcendent" and objective intentions of the author. Moreover Hirsch assumes that, not only is the linguistic system of signs and signifiers able to accurately represent reality, the mind of the author is able to connect with the world via perception apart from language. Here the deconstructionist poses an interesting problem for Hirsch by claiming that his position makes authorial intention into a Platonic "thing-in-itself."<sup>21</sup> As G. B. Madison comments, "Hirsch endows meaning with all the properties of the classical notion of substantial reality (*res*), which is to say that he reifies it."<sup>22</sup> The problem with this is that it seems to cut off the reservoir of meaning (the author's intention) from the place where that meaning is to be discovered (the ambiguities of the text). If meaning is to be found in the author's intention and those intentions are located in his consciousness, then how are we to discover them apart from the linguistic system expressed in the text? It appears that there is no scientific way to discover authorial intention (and thus meaning) apart from language. Thus, consciousness (and intentionality) appears to be mediated by language. Here Hirsch seems to play right into Derrida's hands. Authorial intention can only be found through the infinitely deferring play of sign and signifier.

Does this linguistic contextualization of intentionality do away with the concept of authorial intention altogether? Derrida is quick to answer "no." Authorial intention remains, but it cannot serve as the foundation of a text's meaning. Because subjectivity and intentionality are both conditioned by language, not prior to it, it is impossible for

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<sup>21</sup> Vanhoozer, 78.

<sup>22</sup> Madison, G. B. *Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*, 6. As cited in Vanhoozer, 78.

even the author to know his own intentions fully.<sup>23</sup> The author, in the words of Roland Barthes, is “not an innocent subject, anterior to the text....This ‘me’ [the author] which approaches a text is itself already a plurality of other texts.”<sup>24</sup> This points to the fundamental difference between Derrida and Hirsch on the function of language. For Hirsch language is able to express the intentions of the author: it is intentional. For Derrida, however, language’s defining characteristic is that it is “iterable.” Iterability refers to the fact that language (especially that of a text) can be repeated (apart from the author’s original intention) with *difference*. Practically this means that, because language both “precedes and exceeds the author’s intention” (or that of the reader), there is no one context or intention that a text can be anchored to.<sup>25</sup> Iterability means, above all things, that a text *will* be repeated (and nearly every time) in a way different from the author or other readers. This “essential drift” of a text’s meaning resulting from the infinite number of perspectives brought to the text by different interpreters and supported by the continual deferral of sign and signifier makes it impossible to locate meaning in any one place.

The linguistic construction of an author’s intentions and the iterability of language itself offer substantial challenges to Hirsch’s hermeneutical realism. By cutting off the sign and the mind (intentionality) from any connection to the external world, Derrida confines the world of meaning to the system of language to be found in a text.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the meaning of a text is conditioned by the iterability of language itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Vanhoozer, 78.

<sup>24</sup> As cited in Vanhoozer, 78.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Derrida’s point is that everything (human consciousness, intentionality, books, etc.) is a text. Language comes before thought.

Words, thoughts and intentions are all like individual ships that are released into a sea without horizons. Because of the endless deferral of sign and signifier and the constancy with which interpretative contexts change, it is impossible for the author to exercise control over the meaning of his text.

*Subjectivity, Objectivity and Authorial Intent: Is There a Différance?*

*“Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are....As good kill a man as kill a good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God’s image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye.” – John Milton*

In the final section of this paper I would like to offer some critical reflections on this debate. It seems to me that both the methodological foundationalism of Hirsch and the radical subjectivism of Derrida both say something true about the hermeneutical task, but they also appear to push their perspectives too far and thus end up over-simplifying or distorting the reality of our interpretative situation. An important part of moving forward then, will be to show how these weaknesses actually hinder the development of a solid hermeneutical strategy. I will begin by pointing to what I believe to be the chief flaw of deconstruction: the presumption of a “realistic” idealism. From this I will go on to show how many of Derrida’s critiques of hermeneutical realism unravel once the presumption of linguistic idealism is removed. Finally, I would like to look at the inherent limitations of Hirsch’s methodology and the artificial restrictions it places on a robust realistic hermeneutic.

*What the World Really is[n’t] Like*

As we noted above, Derrida rejects the logocentric view that language refers to a reality outside of itself. The metaphysics of presence is based upon the false assumptions

that the mind has the ability to “get behind” the world of the symbol and access the “real” things they represent. For Derrida logocentrism is built upon the myth that there is a “true” nature of the world to discover. If the world is language all the way down, then world of the sign *is reality*. In other words, Derrida insists that the mind (intentionality) never gets in touch with a non-linguistic world because the world is not really *like that*. Because Derrida’s philosophy is largely negative (deconstructive) it is easy to miss the subtlety of the point being made. By saying that the world does not exist apart from writing, he is making a universal claim about *how the nature of the world really is*. As Alan Jacobs astutely asks:

But does deconstruction make a claim about the nature of language? Richard Rorty, we recall, says no: to reiterate his point, thinkers like Derrida “say that the very notion of discovering the *nature* of such things is part of the intellectual framework which we must abandon.” But why must we abandon it? What reasons can Derrida give us for abandoning it? As soon as deconstructors get involved in the business of providing reasons, they are perforce in the business of making claims and thus are subject to their own critique. To say that such claims are made only provisionally – employing a temporary and heuristic center – only postpones the dilemma. For why should one accept *this* provisional claim rather than *that* one, or either in preference to a *third* one – unless, of course, the claims are not provisional or contextual at all but rather seek to describe discourse, language in use, as it really is?<sup>27</sup>

One is reminded of the similar problem that Wittgenstein discovered with logical atomism: all of the propositions about logical atomism were rendered meaningless by the central criteria of the system. Similarly, if we are to take deconstruction seriously we must consider all constructions of the way the world really is (or the way language operates) to be just that, *constructions*. Ultimately, there can be no *reason* for accepting

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<sup>27</sup> Jacobs, Alan *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Appraisal*, Clarence Walkout and Leland Ryken eds.(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 192.

deconstruction's claim about the nature of language. The claims are rather presuppositions that one must accept on the basis of authority, and in the case of deconstruction that authority often appears to take on the form of a Nietzschean will-to-power.

### *Iterability Undone*

So what happens when one rejects deconstruction's central presupposition of linguistic idealism? It would appear that several of the critiques mentioned above are severely mitigated. Consider first that Derrida's critique of the meaning of the author's intentions assumes that language cannot represent the consciousness of the author and that that consciousness cannot intend things that are not part of a "text." But if the mind of the author and the interpreter are able to connect with the world through perception and then are able to represent those perceptions through the symbolism of language, it would seem that the author's intention is, in principle at least, recoverable. Even in the case where the author's intention is only accessible through the language of a text, it would appear that language is not quite the demon that the deconstructionists imagine. In fact, it seems that in order for the demon to give one a really bad time, one must first fully enter the presupposition of linguistic idealism, lock the door, and throw away the key. On the realist position is it possible to misunderstand the author's intention? Of course it is possible. But is it necessary? Certainly not. The subjective concerns (prejudices, cultural background, history, etc.) that an interpreter brings to the text are not all determining, nor do they prevent him from being challenged by the author's intended meaning contained in the text. Language has "traction" (even though it is often slippery) because it can meaningfully represent the intention of the one using it.

This also means that the challenge of language's iterability also undergoes a significant change. If intentionality can operate apart from the prison of language, then it is possible to locate a context for an author's intention in a text. If words can refer to intended objects then a text is not hopelessly condemned to "essential drift" in quite the way Derrida would like. A text can be repeated in many different contexts and yet still retain its ability to mean what the author intended. Think of how this is proved in practice day in and day out by the way we actually read texts. Whenever I pick up a text, I assume (perhaps naively) that I will understand something of what the author intended for me to understand, and I believe this in spite of my experience of misunderstanding at times and being corrected. That I can be corrected is important, and this prevents me from interpretative despair.<sup>28</sup>

### Authorial Intention and Beyond

Perhaps the most significant objection to be raised against Hirsch's approach to hermeneutics is the way it fails to take seriously the complexity with which humans (both author and interpreter) use language to accomplish certain aims. Hirsch tends to oversimplify how an author intends his meaning to be understood by adhering to rather narrow conceptual and methodological tools. In post-Wittgensteinian criticism it is evident that language can be used to accomplish many different purposes (promising, commanding, warning, etc.). Thus, the dynamism of viewing the work of an author as possessing communicative speech-acts (John Searle) so that texts have a certain

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<sup>28</sup> This is not to say that it is impossible for the author to fail to express his intentions fully. At this point, however, it seems (as John Frame pointed out to me) that the separation would be between the meaning of the language and the intention of the author.

“directedness” and performance value to them has much to commend it.<sup>29</sup> Second, as

Anthony Thiselton states,

It only postpones rather than solves the problem if we follow Hirsch in restricting “meaning” to a largely *semantic* notion of meaning or only to more straightforward models of inter-personal communication. It does not help to use term “significance” as a catch-all for more complex and more context-relative examples as if these functioned only as subjective connotations, all of the same kind. What meaning *is*, as Wittgenstein observes, depends on the language-game from within which meaning-currency is drawn.<sup>30</sup>

The type of language game the author participates in does condition the scope, direction, and meaning of what he produces. The “situation” does matter and it matters in such a way that it is insufficient to reduce all contextual influences to the “significance” of a text after the “true” meaning is understood. In an important way they help constitute the meaning. Thiselton notes that this distinction is especially vivid in the parables of Christ where the participation of the interpreter in the story is essential *to the completion of its meaning*.<sup>31</sup> This does not mean however, that meaning can be completely reduced to “socio-pragmatic meaning-effects.” As Thiselton also notes, whenever we approach a text we always assume “some kind of criteria which will allow us to determine when some ‘mistake’ or misunderstanding has occurred.”<sup>32</sup> There are “intersubjective regularities” that enable us to communicate meaningfully without falling into a Wittgensteinian “private language” cut off from all possibility of “error.” These insights

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<sup>29</sup> Thiselton, Anthony, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> See chapter three of Roger Lundin, Anthony C. Thiselton, Clarence Walkout. *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*. Eerdmans, 1985.

<sup>32</sup> Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 13.

can be maintained without forcing us to adhere narrowly to a purely semantic notion of meaning.

In all, I believe that Hirsch's central concern to locate the meaning of a text in the intention of the author has much to commend it. Ultimately, I do not believe that its strengths are overcome by the challenges of deconstructionism. As we have seen, deconstruction itself rests upon a metaphysical presupposition, that the true nature of the world is best represented by linguistic idealism, which is directly contrary to their claims that there is no "true" nature of the world to be discovered. Linguistic idealism, it turns out, is necessary to support deconstruction's ideological agenda. Alan Jacobs humorously notes how deconstructionists' insistence on the necessity of deconstruction reminds him of a brooding authority who makes children "play" industriously according to his dictates whether they want to or not.<sup>33</sup> An acknowledgement that subjective and contextual concerns do have an important bearing on the interpretative process does not require that one must embrace the radical plurality and subjectivism of Derrida. In fact, many of the concerns that undergird deconstructionism can helpfully expand our methodology for arriving at the author's intention and expand our view of what is possible in the world of communicative action. Ultimately, I believe that a commitment to the meaningfulness of authorial intention is one part of a full-orbed strategy that must be developed if the dazzling richness of human (and Divine!) communication is to be preserved and appropriated. A single perspective or emphasis (at least as understood by finite minds) will never be able to fully encompass the unity and diversity of the hermeneutical task. To rephrase Derrida, "it is one and many all the way down." The

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<sup>33</sup> Jacobs, *Contemporary Literary Theory*, 197.

expansiveness and inexhaustibility of communication should not be a surprise or a concern to the Christian, because, in the final and ultimate sense, the Word is the infinite God Himself.

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