Chapter 4
Language, meaning, and interpretation

Is literature a special kind of language or is it a special use of language? Is it language organized in distinctive ways or is it language granted special privileges? I argued in Chapter 2 that it won't work to choose one option or the other: literature involves *both* properties of language *and* a special kind of attention to language. As this debate indicates, questions about the nature and the roles of language and how to analyse it have been central to theory. Some of the major issues can be focused through the problem of meaning. What is involved in thinking about meaning?

Meaning in literature

Take the lines which we earlier treated as literature, a two-line poem by Robert Frost:

> THE SECRET SITS
> We dance round in a ring and suppose,
> But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

What is 'meaning' here? Well, there's a difference between asking about the meaning of a text (the poem as a whole) and the meaning of a word. We can say that *dance* means 'to perform a succession of rhythmic and patterned movements', but what does this text mean?

suggests, you might say, the futility of human doings: we go round and around; we can only suppose. More than that, with its rhyme and its air of knowing what it is doing, this text engages the reader in a process of puzzling over dancing and supposing. That effect, the process the text can provoke, is part of its meaning. So, we have the meaning of a word and the meaning or provocations of a text; then, in between, there's what we might call the meaning of an utterance: the meaning of the act of uttering these words in particular circumstances. What *act* is this utterance performing: is it *warning* or *admitting*, *lamenting* or *boasting*, for example? Who is *we* here and what does 'dancing' mean in this utterance?

We can't just ask about 'meaning', then. There are at least three different dimensions or levels of meaning: the meaning of a word, of an utterance, and of a text. Possible meanings of words contribute to the meaning of an utterance, which is an act by a speaker. (And the meanings of words, in turn, come from the things they might do in utterances.) Finally, the text, which here represents an unknown speaker making this enigmatical utterance, is something an author has constructed, and its meaning is not a proposition but what it *does*, its potential to affect readers.

We have different kinds of meaning, but one thing we can say in general is that meaning is based on difference. We don't know who 'we' refers to in this text; only that it is 'we' as opposed to 'I' alone, and to 'he', 'she', 'it', 'you', and 'they'. 'We' is some indefinite plural group that includes whatever speaker we think is involved. Is the reader included in 'we' or not? Is 'we' everyone except the Secret, or is it a special group? Such questions, which have no easy answers, come up in any attempt to interpret the poem. What we have are contrasts, differences.

Much the same could be said of 'dance' and 'suppose'. What *dance* means here depends on what we contrast it with ('dancing around' as opposed to 'proceeding directly' or as opposed to 'remaining still'); and

'suppose' is opposed to 'know'. Thinking about the meaning of this poem is a matter of working with oppositions or differences, giving them content, extrapolating from them.

Saussure's theory of language

A language is a *system* of differences. So declares Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist of the early 20th century whose work has been crucial to contemporary theory. What makes each element of a language what it is, what gives it its identity, are the contrasts between it and other elements within the system of the language. Saussure offers an analogy: a train – say the 8.30 a.m. London-to-Oxford express – depends for its identity on the system of trains, as described in the railway timetable. So the 8.30 London-to-Oxford express is distinguished from the 9.30 London-to-Cambridge express and the 8.45 Oxford local. What counts are not any of the physical features of a particular train: the engine, the carriages, the exact route, the personnel, and so on may all vary, as may the times of departure and arrival; the train may leave and arrive late. What gives the train its identity is its place in the system of trains: it is this train, *as opposed to* the others. As Saussure says of the linguistic sign, 'Its most precise characteristic is to be what the others are not.' Similarly, the letter *b* may be written in any number of different ways (think of different people's handwriting), so long as it is not confused with other letters, such as *l*, *k*, and *d*. What is crucial is not any particular form or content, but differences, which enable it to signify.

For Saussure, a language is a system of signs and the key fact is what he calls the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. This means two things. First, the sign (for instance, a word) is a combination of a form (the 'signifier') and a meaning (the 'signified'), and the relation between form and meaning is based on convention, not natural resemblance. What I am sitting on is called a *chair* but could perfectly well have been called something else – *wab* or *punce*. It's a convention or rule of English

that it is the one rather than the other; in other languages, it would have quite different names. The cases we think of as exceptions are 'onomatopoeic' words, where the sound seems to imitate what it represents, like *bow-wow*, or *buzz*. But these differ from one language to another: in French, dogs say 'oua-oua' and *buzz* is *bourdonner*.

Even more important, for Saussure and recent theory, is the second aspect of the arbitrary nature of the sign: both the signifier (form) and the signified (meaning) are themselves conventional divisions of the plane of sound and the plane of thought respectively. Languages divide up the plane of sound and the plane of thought differently. English distinguishes *chair*, *cheer*, and *char* on the plane of sound, as separate signs with different meanings, but it need not do so – these could be variant pronunciations of a single sign. On the plane of meaning, English distinguishes 'chair' from 'stool' (a chair without a back) but allows the signified or concept 'chair' to include seats with and without arms, and both hard seats and soft luxurious seats – two differences that could perfectly well involve distinct concepts.

A language, Saussure insists, is not a 'nomenclature' that provides its own names for categories that exist outside language. This is a point with crucial ramifications for recent theory. We tend to assume that we have the words *dog* and *chair* in order to name dogs and chairs, which exist outside any language. But, Saussure argues, if words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next, which is not at all the case. Each language is a system of concepts as well as forms: a system of conventional signs that organizes the world.

Language and thought

How language relates to thought has been a major issue for recent theory. At one extreme is the common-sense view that language just provides names for thoughts that exist independently; language offers

ways of expressing pre-existing thoughts. At the other extreme is the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis', named after two linguists who claimed that the language we speak determines what we can think. For instance, Whorf argued that the Hopi Indians have a conception of time that can't be grasped in English (and so can't be explained here!). There seems no way of demonstrating that there are thoughts of one language that can't be thought or expressed in another, but we do have massive evidence that one language makes 'natural' or 'normal' thoughts that require a special effort in another.

The linguistic code is a theory of the world. Different languages divide up the world differently. Speakers of English have 'pets' – a category to which nothing in French corresponds, though the French possess inordinate numbers of dogs and cats. English compels us to learn the sex of an infant so as to use the correct pronoun to talk about him or her (you can't call a baby 'it'); our language thus implies that the sex is crucial (whence, no doubt, the popularity of pink or blue garments, to signal the right answer to speakers). But this linguistic marking of sex is in no way inevitable; all languages don't make sex the crucial feature of newborns. Grammatical structures, too, are conventions of a language, not natural or inevitable. When we look up in the sky and see a movement of wings, our language could perfectly well have us say something like 'It's winging' (as we say, 'It's raining'), rather than 'Birds are flying'. A famous poem by Paul Verlaine plays on this structure: '*Il pleure dans mon coeur* ¦ *Comme il pleut sur la ville*' (It cries in my heart, as it rains on the town). We say 'it's raining in town'; why not 'it's crying in my heart'?

Language is not a 'nomenclature' that provides labels for pre-existing categories; it generates its own categories. But speakers and readers can be brought to see through and around the settings of their language, so as to see a different reality. Works of literature explore the settings or categories of habitual ways of thinking and frequently attempt to bend or reshape them, showing us how to think something

that our language had not previously anticipated, forcing us to attend to the categories through which we unthinkingly view the world. Language is thus both the concrete manifestation of ideology – the categories in which speakers are authorized to think – and the site of its questioning or undoing.

Linguistic analysis

Saussure distinguishes the system of a language (*la langue*) from particular instances of speech and writing (*parole*). The task of linguistics is to reconstruct the underlying system (or grammar) of a language that makes possible the speech events or *parole*. This involves a further distinction between *synchronic* study of a language (focusing on a language as a system at a particular time, present or past) and *diachronic* study, which looks at the historical changes to particular elements of the language. To understand a language as a functioning system is to look at it synchronically, trying to spell out the rules and conventions of the system that make possible the forms and meanings of the language. The most influential linguist of our day, Noam Chomsky, the founder of what is called transformational-generative grammar, goes further, arguing that the task of linguistics is to reconstruct the 'linguistic competence' of native speakers: the implicit knowledge or ability speakers acquire and which enables them to speak and to understand even sentences they have never before encountered.

So linguistics *starts* from facts about the form and meaning utterances have for speakers and tries to account for them. How is it that the following two sentences with similar forms – *John is eager to please* and *John is easy to please* – have rather different meanings for speakers of English? Speakers know that in the first John wants to please and that in the second others do the pleasing. A linguist does not try to discover the 'true meaning' of these sentences, as if people had been wrong all along and deep down the sentences mean something else. The task of linguistics is to describe the structures of English (here, by positing an

underlying level of grammatical structure) so as to account for attested differences in meaning between these sentences.

Poetics versus hermeneutics

Here there is a basic distinction, too often neglected in literary studies, between two kinds of projects: one, which follows the model of linguistics (though it has a longer history), takes meanings as what have to be accounted for and tries to work out how they are possible. The other, by contrast, starts with forms and seeks to interpret them, to tell us what they really mean. In literary studies, this is a contrast between *poetics* and *hermeneutics*. Poetics starts with attested meanings or effects and asks how they are achieved. (What makes this passage in a novel seem ironic? What makes us sympathize with this particular character? Why is the ending of this poem ambiguous?) Hermeneutics, on the other hand, starts with texts and asks what they mean, seeking to discover new and better interpretations. Hermeneutic models come from the fields of law and religion, where people seek to interpret an authoritative legal or sacred text in order to decide how to act.

The linguistic model suggests that literary study should take the first track, of poetics, trying to understand how works achieve the effects they do, but the modern tradition of criticism has overwhelmingly taken the second, making the interpretation of individual works the payoff of literary study. In fact, works of literary criticism often combine poetics and hermeneutics, asking how a particular effect is achieved or why an ending seems right (both matters of poetics), but also asking what a particular line means and what a poem tells us about the human condition (hermeneutics). But the two projects are in principle quite distinct, with different goals and different kinds of evidence. Taking meanings or effects as the point of departure (poetics) is fundamentally different from seeking to discover meaning (hermeneutics).

If literary studies took linguistics as a model, its task would be to describe the 'literary competence' that readers of literature acquire. A poetics describing literary competence would focus on the conventions that make possible literary structure and meaning: what are the codes or systems of convention that enable readers to identify literary genres, recognize plots, create 'characters' out of the scattered details provided in the text, identify themes in literary works, and pursue the kind of symbolic interpretation that allows us to gauge the significance of poems and stories?

This analogy between poetics and linguistics may seem misleading, for we don't know the meaning of a literary work as we know the meaning of *John is eager to please* and therefore can't take meaning as a given but have to seek it. This is certainly one reason why literary studies in modern times have favoured hermeneutics over poetics (the other reason is that people generally study literary works not because they are interested in the functioning of literature but because they think these works have important things to tell them and want to know what they are). But poetics does not require that we know the meaning of a work; its task is to account for whatever effects we can attest to – for example, that one ending is more successful than another, that this combination of images in a poem makes sense while another does not. Moreover, a crucial part of poetics is an account of how readers do go about interpreting literary works – what are the conventions that enable them to make sense of works as they do. For instance, what I called in Chapter 2 the 'hyper-protected cooperative principle' is a basic convention that makes possible the interpretation of literature: the assumption that difficulties, apparent nonsense, digressions, and irrelevancies have a relevant function at some level.

Readers and meaning

The idea of literary competence focuses attention on the implicit knowledge that readers (and writers) bring to their encounters with texts: what sort of procedures do readers follow in responding to works

as they do? What sort of assumptions must be in place to account for their reactions and interpretations? Thinking about readers and the way they make sense of literature has led to what has been called 'reader-response criticism', which claims that the meaning of the text is the experience of the reader (an experience that includes hesitations, conjectures, and self-corrections). If a literary work is conceived as a succession of actions upon the understanding of a reader, then an interpretation of the work can be a story of that encounter, with its ups and downs: various conventions or expectations are brought into play, connections are posited, and expectations defeated or confirmed. To interpret a work is to tell a story of reading.

But the story one can tell about a given work depends upon what theorists have called the reader's 'horizon of expectations'. A work is interpreted as answering questions posed by this horizon of expectations, and a reader of the 1990s approaches *Hamlet* with expectations different from those of a contemporary of Shakespeare's. A whole range of factors can affect readers' horizons of expectations. Feminist criticism has debated what difference it makes, what difference it should make, if the reader is a woman. How, Elaine Showalter asks, does 'the hypothesis of a female reader change our apprehension of a given text, awakening us to the significance of its sexual codes?' Literary texts and the traditions of their interpretation seem to have presumed a male reader and induced women readers to read as a man, from a male point of view. Similarly, film theorists have hypothesized that what they call the cinematic gaze (the view from the position of the camera) is essentially male: women are positioned as the object of the cinematic gaze rather than as the observer. In literary studies, feminist critics have studied the various strategies by which works make a male perspective the normative one and have debated how the study of such structures and effects should change ways of reading – for men as well as women.

Focus on historical and social variations in ways of reading emphasizes that interpreting is a social practice. Readers interpret informally when they talk to friends about books or films; they interpret to themselves as they read. For the more formal interpretation that takes place in classrooms, there are different protocols. For any element of a work, you can ask what it does, how it relates to other elements, but interpretation may ultimately involve playing the 'about' game: 'so, what is this work really about?' This question is not prompted by the obscurity of a text; it is even more appropriate for simple texts than for wickedly complex ones. In this game, the answer must meet certain conditions: it cannot be obvious, for instance; it must be speculative. To say '*Hamlet* is about a prince in Denmark' is to refuse to play the game. But '*Hamlet* is about the breakdown of the Elizabethan world order', or '*Hamlet* is about men's fear of feminine sexuality', or '*Hamlet* is about the unreliability of signs' count as possible answers. What are commonly seen as 'schools' of literary criticism or theoretical 'approaches' to literature are, from the point of view of hermeneutics, dispositions to give particular kinds of answers to the question of what a work is ultimately 'about': 'the class struggle' (Marxism), 'the possibility of unifying experience' (the new criticism), 'Oedipal conflict' (psychoanalysis), 'the containment of subversive energies' (new historicism), 'the asymmetry of gender relations' (feminism), 'the self-deconstructive nature of the text' (deconstruction), 'the occlusion of imperialism' (postcolonial theory), 'the heterosexual matrix' (gay and lesbian studies).

The theoretical discourses named in parentheses are not primarily modes of interpretation: they are accounts of what they take to be particularly important to culture and society. Many of these theories include accounts of the functioning of literature or of discourse generally, and so partake of the project of poetics; but as versions of hermeneutics they give rise to particular types of interpretation in

which texts are mapped into a target language. What is important in the game of interpretation is not the answer you come up with – as my parodies show, some versions of the answer become, by definition, predictable. What's important is how you get there, what you do with the details of the text in relating them to your answer, how otherwise puzzling details are elucidated by your interpretation.

But how do we choose between interpretations? As my examples may suggest, at one level there is no need to decide whether *Hamlet* is 'ultimately about', say, Renaissance politics, men's relations to their mothers, or the unreliability of signs. The liveliness of the institution of literary study depends on the twin facts that (1) such arguments are never settled, and (2) arguments have to be made about how particular scenes or combinations of lines support any particular hypothesis. You can't make a work mean just anything: it resists, and you have to labour to convince others of the pertinence of your reading. For the conduct of such arguments, a key question is what determines meaning. We return to this central issue.

Meaning, intention, and context

What determines meaning? Sometimes we say that the meaning of an utterance is what someone means by it, as though the intention of a speaker determined meaning. Sometimes we say meaning is in the text – you may have intended to say x, but what you said actually means y – as if meaning were the product of the language itself. Sometimes we say context is what determines meaning: to know what this particular utterance means, you have to look at the circumstances or the historical context in which it figures. Some critics claim, as I have mentioned, that the meaning of a text is the experience of the reader. Intention, text, context, reader – what determines meaning?

Now the very fact that arguments are made for all four factors shows that meaning is complex and elusive, not something once and for all determined by any one of these factors. A long-standing argument in

literary theory concerns the role of intention in the determination of literary meaning. A famous article called 'The Intentional Fallacy' argues that for literary works arguments about interpretation are not settled by consulting the oracle (the author). The meaning of a work is not what the writer had in mind at some moment during composition of the work, or what the writer thinks the work means after it is finished, but, rather, what he or she succeeded in embodying in the work. If in ordinary conversation we often treat the meaning of an utterance as what the utterer intends, it is because we are more interested in what the speaker is thinking at that moment than in his or her words, but literary works are valued for the particular structures of words that they have put into circulation. Restricting the meaning of a work to what an author might have intended remains a possible critical strategy, but usually these days such meaning is tied not to an inner intention but to analysis of the author's personal or historical circumstances: what sort of act was this author performing, given the situation of the moment? This strategy denigrates later responses to the work, suggesting that the work answers the concerns of its moment of creation and only accidentally the concerns of subsequent readers.

Critics who defend the notion that intention determines meaning seem to fear that if we deny this, we place readers above authors and decree that 'anything goes' in interpretation. But if you come up with an interpretation, you have to persuade others of its pertinence, or else it will be dismissed. No one claims that 'anything goes'. As for authors, isn't it better to honour them for the power of their creations to stimulate endless thought and give rise to a variety of readings than for what we imagine to be a work's original meaning? None of this is to say that authors' statements about a work have no interest: for many critical projects they are especially valuable, as texts to juxtapose with the text of the work. They may be crucial, for example, in analysing the thought of an author or discussing the ways in which a work might have complicated or subverted an announced view or intention.

The meaning of a work is not what the author had in mind at some point, nor is it simply a property of the text or the experience of a reader. Meaning is an inescapable notion because it is not something simple or simply determined. It is simultaneously an experience of a subject and a property of a text. It is both what we understand and what *in* the text we *try* to understand. Arguments about meaning are always possible, and in that sense meaning is undecided, always to be decided, subject to decisions which are never irrevocable. If we must adopt some overall principle or formula, we might say that meaning is determined by context, since context includes rules of language, the situation of the author and the reader, and anything else that might conceivably be relevant. But if we say that meaning is context-bound, then we must add that context is boundless: there is no determining in advance what might count as relevant, what enlarging of context might be able to shift what we regard as the meaning of a text. Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless.

Major shifts in the interpretation of literature brought about by theoretical discourses might, in fact, be thought of as the result of the widening or redescription of context. For example, Toni Morrison argues that American literature has been deeply marked by the often unacknowledged historical presence of slavery, and that this literature's engagements with freedom – the freedom of the frontier, of the open road, of the unfettered imagination – should be read in the context of enslavement, from which they take significance. And Edward Said has suggested that Jane Austen's novels should be interpreted against a background which is excluded from them: the exploitation of the colonies of the Empire which provides the wealth to support a decorous life at home in Britain. Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless, always open to mutations under the pressure of theoretical discussions.

Accounts of hermeneutics frequently distinguish a *hermeneutics of recovery*, which seeks to reconstruct the original context of production

(the circumstances and intentions of the author and the meanings a text might have had for its original readers), from a *hermeneutics of suspicion,* which seeks to expose the unexamined assumptions on which a text may rely (political, sexual, philosophical, linguistic). The first may celebrate the text and its author as it seeks to make an original message accessible to readers today, while the second is often said to deny the authority of the text. But these associations are not fixed and can well be reversed: a hermeneutics of recovery, in restricting the text to some supposedly original meaning remote from our concerns, may reduce its power, while a hermeneutics of suspicion may value the text for the way in which, unbeknownst to its author, it engages and helps us to rethink issues of the moment today (perhaps subverting assumptions of its author in the process). More pertinent than this distinction may be a distinction between (1) interpretation which takes the text, in its functioning, to have something valuable to say (this might be either reconstructive or suspicious hermeneutics) and (2) 'symptomatic' interpretation which treats the text as the symptom of something non-textual, something supposedly 'deeper', which is the real source of interest, be it the psychic life of the author or the social tensions of an era or the homophobia of bourgeois society. Symptomatic interpretation neglects the specificity of the object – it is a sign of something else – and so is not very satisfying as a mode of interpretation, but when it focuses on the cultural practice of which the work is an instance, it can be useful to an account of that practice. Interpreting a poem as a symptom or instance of features of the lyric, for example, might be unsatisfactory hermeneutics but a useful contribution to poetics. To this I now turn.