

E. D. HIRSCH "OBJECTIVE INTERPRETATION" (1960)

For Hirsch, the goal of any act of interpretation must be to understand what the author intended. An author's intention is not his/her state of consciousness at the time of writing, merely the intention to mean something which is then conveyed by making use of pre-existing linguistic conventions. Once this intention is actualised in words, it may be shared by readers/listeners who are familiar with the same linguistic conventions. All other considerations (e.g. the work's impact upon the audience, its relationship with its socio-historical context, or an exclusive focus on the work itself [its structure, its form, etc.]) are less important than determining the author's intention.

In "Objective Interpretation" (the misleading title of which would seem to have a little to do with an expressive approach to criticism), Hirsch affirms that there is a difference between what he calls '*criticism*' and what he terms '*interpretation*.' The former (criticism) he defines as the figuring out of the "relevance" (464) (what he also calls "significance" [110] in a later essay) of the work to the present. He defines interpretation as the recovery of the "meaning" (464) of the work which he equates with the author's intention. Where '*criticism*' leads to what Hirsch terms '*evaluation*' (is a given work good? What is its '*value*'? What does it do to or for people? Etc.), '*interpretation*' leads to '*understanding*.' While the relevance or the application of meanings do change, he stresses, the meaning of a given work itself does not.

Consequently, Hirsch is desirous of establishing certain normative principles by which the absolute correctness of a given interpretation can be decided once and for all. The two most important factors in determining the '*meaning*' of a work are, according to Hirsch,

- determining the writer's "mental and experiential world" (469) in so far as this necessarily impinges upon the work in question; and
- determining the genre to which the work belongs: by "classifying the text as belonging to a particular genre, the interpreter automatically posits a general horizon for its meaning" (469), i.e. a "sense of the whole, a notion of typical meaning-components" (469).

He contends that there are, thus, four criteria which must be borne in mind in the course of any act of interpretation designed to establish an author's intended meaning:

- what he describes as "legitimacy" (475)--any interpretation of a work must bear in mind what were the public norms of the language within which it was composed at the time of its composition;
- what he calls "correspondence" (475)--all (and not just some) of the linguistic components of the work must be accounted for; one cannot choose to consider some aspects of a given work and blithely ignore others which do not accord with one's interpretation;
- what he terms "generic appropriateness" (475)--the meaning construed must be appropriate to the work's genre; our interpretation of particular work ought to conform to what we know about the formal and thematic characteristics of a particular genre;
- "plausibility" or "coherence" (475)--this is the decisive criterion for Hirsch and involves deciding from among many readings which is the most plausible based upon a "reconstruction of relevant aspects in the author's outlook" (475).

For Hirsch, "objectivity in interpretation requires explicit reference to the speaker's subjectivity" (475); in other words, we will more accurately understand a given work if we relate it to what we know about its author's life and outlook.

In short, Hirsch asserts that a reader may arrive at a definitive and objective

interpretation by taking into consideration relevant aspects of the author's outlook, his/her cultural milieu and predispositions, as well as the literary and generic norms respected by the author. Hirsch is entirely opposed to the notions of '*indeterminacy*' (the view that one can never be absolutely certain of a work's meaning) and '*subjectivism*' (the view that meaning is not objective and that the interpreter shapes what s/he 'finds' in a given work--in other words, meaning is not found but constructed). For Hirsch, the meaning of any work is determinate and objectively ascertainable by reference to an author's intention. If a work is read without reference to its author's intention, it will most often remain indeterminate. The fact, too, that each work is the product of an author's intention means that there is a meaning to be found there that has nothing to do with the reader's subjective inclinations.