

interpretation

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INTERPRETATION

MICHAEL PLATT

I

“In interpretation we are guided by the assumption that the author knew what he was doing, that at least in regard to his text he knew what he was doing. And if we can’t assume this then—I mean, if somewhere we have the statement by the author that he really did not know what he was doing, that he wrote about this thing but he did not know all about it or all that he should and that hence he put down many things of which he was very unsure, then we would be right to say that we can’t interpret what you wrote.”

“As you were speaking, it occurred to me that the difficulty comes up exactly with regard to the relation of the text to the things of which it speaks. In the case of the author who really does know all about what he speaks about and further indicates to us that he knows that he knows, then it is easy for us to proceed to interpret his writings or his speeches. But there must surely be many more of the cases in which, though the author knows a great deal, he does not know everything, and in these cases we can only interpret up to a point.”

“What point?”

“Up to the point where we reach the end of his knowledge, where we begin to get into opinion, and then into guesses, and then into images which may or may not reflect accurately the things they represent.”

“In other words, we cannot regard the text as ‘autonomous.’ So before when we spoke of an author knowing, at least in regard to his text, we were inaccurate. For how could he claim to know or to draw a line around his text when his text itself is not the thing to be known, but only meant to lead to knowledge. That is not well expressed. Let me try again. An author says that he knows something; that something is either wholly in his text, or it is something outside his text to which his text refers, yes?”

“Yes, but let us think with the aid of examples. Your distinction made me think that there are two kinds of authors and texts. There would be a text which is true and autonomous, which refers to nothing outside itself, and this text would have to be written by a God or by a being whose words were creative. His words would have to be things. They would have to be true simply by virtue of his saying them. But to that degree, since for the moment we are imagining this being as a God, they would not be a text at all. ‘Let there be light’—and so we live within His sunny text.”

“Do you mean to say that only what an author makes himself can be true and complete within itself?”

“I suppose so, or rather, I suppose you are pushing me in the direction of Vico, but I will take up the other possibility—namely, that we can know the truth only through mediation by words; that is, through texts, whether they be our own or others. For we seem to have moved from a question of interpretation to a question of the relation of signs or words to things. But this brings me back to my second example. What about the geometer? Aren't the things he says or describes true simply without need of reference outside themselves? For doesn't he say that 'Let this be the definition of a line or a sphere, etc.'? And then these things are simply true, true by definition.”

“You seem to have found an example of a text by a human author which strongly resembles a divine text. For in some way the 'Let there be' of the geometer reminds one of the 'Let there be' of the God of which Genesis gives the account. But let me add a note on the history of our question. Both Spinoza and Hobbes seem to have been impressed (and as well Descartes) by the status of mathematical knowledge. Hence, there is the anecdote about Hobbes' affront when he opened Euclid and then proceeded back to the beginning and came to accept what he had thought impossible to prove. Then there is the manner of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the geometric manner. Or one could point to the picture by the poet Blake of God as a geometer. But the wider phenomena would be a common occurrence. Often during a discussion one hears it said that, well, we must define our terms in order to speak at all. What these people mean is that only what is defined is capable of showing truth. At any rate, they mean this if they do not simply confuse the true with the defined. For they appear not to consider that the definition may be very inaccurate—you know, it may be very narrow or impossibly vague. But I thought of another example with regard to geometry, an example which could not have occurred to those men of the 17th century I mentioned a minute ago, the example of a non-Euclidian geometry. It too proceeds from definitions, but these definitions, though contrary to the Euclidian, do not seem less false. I believe the question this raises is very much like the question which vexed men ever since they tried to harmonize Aristotle on the eternity of the world with the account of a genesis out of nothing in Genesis—you know, Maimonides, Aquinas, Scotus. The whole question of whether, when God freely created the world, did he create it according to reason? If so, he wasn't free, because he had to create it just as it was. Or did he create it any way he wished. The first is Aquinas; the second is Scotus.”

“But in either case, the world as text would have the same status in regard to the interpreter. In both cases he would have before him, be it the world divinely created or the text divinely inspired (say, the Bible) . . .”

“Which one?”

"Well, say the Hebrew Bible. We will forget the Christian Testament for a moment. At any rate, he would have before him a text which was whole, which did not have something behind it to which it was referring."

"Well, even this is not secure. For perhaps light and the world are themselves meant to refer to something more real. Maybe, despite our habit of thinking of things as things, maybe things are signs as well as 'things.'"

"You are, or rather the motion of our minds is, making me a bit dizzy. Now we are in theology."

"Yes, but that is where 'interpretation' first took place and where these questions were discussed."

"You are right, but only partly. Because I think that these matters were under scrutiny in the philosophy of the ancients. Especially in Plato, in the divided line and in the *Meno* and elsewhere."

"You lead me to make the following observation. That really there is no such text as we first imagined—I mean, a text which is utterly autonomous, which does not refer to anything outside itself. How could there be? Is a text a whole or a part? If it is a whole, then there could be no interpreter outside it, and if it is a part, then it must have some relation to the whole. One can illustrate this with the Bible, which we thought to be such a good example of the opposite a moment ago. With the Bible, with the words 'let there be light,' we imagine that there was light with no interval or distinction between the word and the thing. Well, even in the case of this 'autonomous' text, we have no autonomy. Indeed, it is especially true in this case. For the minute we look at this text we are led to something outside it; we are led to the being who creates the light. But this has often been said, by Augustine for one, that the creation leads to the creator. Or in our terms that this seemingly autonomous, altogether remarkable text does lead to its author."

"Yes, but one could add to this that this would certainly mean that the interpreter in order to fully understand this text would, so to say, have to stand in the author's shoes."

"You mean that the interpreter of at least this text would have to be a god, or become a god?"

"Yes, I suppose that is the way the discussion is going. That to understand this text one would have to ascend toward divinity. But let us ask whether this would be true for some other texts."

"Wait. Would this also be true if the creation or text was identical to its creator or author? I mean, in that case, there would be no room for a move from the text to the author; it really would be autonomous, self-contained."

"I suspect not, but it is becoming difficult to think about all the questions which are beginning to swarm around our original question."

“Then let me continue. Another text we mentioned was the geometric. But in this case too we do not have an autonomous text, for here too, as you or I showed by the example of the non-Euclidean geometry, we are led back to the author; we are led back to Euclid and to this non-Euclid. For we can no longer identify Euclid with truth-speaking, for this non-Euclid also speaks truth, or at least something equally true to his predecessor.”

“Equally true is also ‘equally false,’ I suppose.”

“I don’t know. At any rate, the point is that we are led to say that here too the will of the geometer cannot be bracketed; from the geometry we are led back to the geometer. By geometer we mean the mind that decided to say ‘let there be’ this definition (any one) rather than that one.”

“Do you suppose that what we mean by a complete interpretation is really a wish to get utterly beyond interpretation? This thought just occurred to me.”

“Well, let’s see. It would seem that truly there is no text of which we can give a complete interpretation. Perhaps God could give it, but then he would not need to anyway. Interpretation would appear to point utterly beyond itself. It would appear to point beyond texts themselves to the whole to which this text must refer.”

“Yes, this would mean that the interpretation of words points beyond words themselves. We cannot even stop at the point of the ‘author’s intention’—though we can say that we should go through this point.”

“But that is only provided that we think this author is leading us toward what we seek.”

“And what is that?”

“I suppose that is the truth in the widest sense—the whole, but also the many parts.”

“Then interpretation would be the servant of this thing which we seek.”

“But this leads to some further consequences. That there can be no autonomous science of interpretation apart from a final science of the whole. In other words, this art or science of interpretation is but a part of philosophy where philosophy is understood as the quest for this truth.”

“But do you know what else this means? It means that in order to interpret a text the interpreter must do so according to his knowledge of things to which the text refers. And hence his interpretation will be more or less adequate or inadequate according to his own knowledge. It will then be more or less adequate according to whether he knows more than the text or whether he knows less than the text.”

“That would seem to be possible. But another thing would seem to follow—that the best interpretation of a particular text could be by a

person who was more than equal to the text in question. For example, let us take Shakespeare.”

“Knowing you, I was expecting this ‘example’ sooner. Go ahead.”

“Well, let us take *Hamlet*. It would seem that the interpreter who could really interpret this play must be a person who knows as much as Shakespeare or more than Shakespeare.”

“But imagine what that means. It would mean that, if you are saying ‘knows more than Shakespeare,’ this person would have to know all about ghosts; he would have to know about the country from whose bourn no traveler returns. *He* would have to *be* such a traveler or have heard from informed and unimpeachable sources. But now we have come back to a point we reached from a different direction before—namely, that the interpreter would have to be a god, for surely it is a god who knows these things.”

“You make me wonder if a more modern text would not be easier, but still I think the difficult example is the most fruitful. First of all, do we know how much Shakespeare knows? I submit that we can only know what his play knows, for who knows, perhaps he has not put all he knew into this work or into the whole of his works.”

“You are right, but I thought that we meant by ‘Shakespeare’ only what was visible of him, so to say, in the text.”

“Well, this might exclude what we mentioned a long while ago, that he might indicate the places where he thought he knew something and the places where he was guessing.”

“It would seem that he does not indicate these places. At any rate, I can recall no statement in which he speaks of this. Perhaps we should look for such statements as he makes in the plays, but this would be a difficult matter, and we should devote another afternoon to it.”

“I too would like that. You know it would be difficult, because I cannot recall that there is any character in his plays who is called Shakespeare. But perhaps we could find a way around that.”

“Let us resume. It is probably not wholly possible to say how much Shakespeare knows. But this means that the provisional aim of our inquiry—call it interpretation—is very, very provisional. Interpretation which aims to give an account of the author’s meaning, of what he writes, will quickly overstep the line between what the author knows and what is beyond his knowledge. Indeed, in some kinds of texts this line will be harder to see than others.”

“I would say that both dialogues and poetry, as, for example, those of Shakespeare, would be good examples, and the opposite would tend to be treatises and all those books where the author speaks in his own person, while in the former examples we do not have the author speaking in anything like so obvious a way.”

“What do you think? I think that a mid-point between these two would be the essay, for there the author speaks in his own person, but his thoughts have an admitted incompleteness ; they are almost, come to think of it, but half of a dialogue. Indeed, they would be, shall we say, half of a friendship in which the text is really only half the speeches. At least in Montaigne one has this sense of admitted incompleteness and of ‘a silent listener’ who is a friend and who almost at every turn is invited to enter the inquiry.”

“What you say is very interesting. For it corresponds to our own experience—yes, when we read together some of his essays aloud not so long ago. We would read aloud slowly. Almost immediately as we began the work of interpretation we would find that we had strayed into talking about the matter he had raised, for it is remarkable how many matters he manages to raise in but one page. At first we felt that we were, as I said, straying, that it was our laziness or our distraction which did not keep us at the business of interpretation. But gradually we began to see that this was not so—that Montaigne’s essays were meant to lead us very quickly beyond his opinions to the matters themselves, and that when we most ‘digressed,’ we were most doing what he would have his readers do. In other words, in the case of Montaigne at least the interpreter is invited and encouraged very immediately and very often to forget interpreting Montaigne and follow out his own mind. But this itself reminds me that Montaigne himself says that he seldom read a text for more than a few hours, and with only one text does he say that he read it all the way through at a sitting (Tacitus, it was). But this immediate and frequent invitation to leave the text behind or leave off interpretation would not, I think, be present in all texts. For example, in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* or in Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* there is not much invitation to ‘digression,’ as we have called it.”

“Yes, there it would be fatigue if the interpreter left off interpreting.”

“But what you said about the essay form—and neither Aristotle or Heidegger calls his work an essay—makes me think. . . . This will be a digression. . . .”

“After what we have said about digressions, I cannot oppose you. . . .”

“Well, I was thinking about Montaigne and how he got to writing essays. The usual explanation seems . . . well, not wrong, but not sufficient. I was thinking of this when you spoke of the essay as half a friendship. Because the essay we were in fact reading aloud dealt with friendship and not only in the abstract, but about his friendship with a man he called his better self. It was Etienne de la Boétie. And this man who meant so much to him died very young—I believe it was in Montaigne’s arms. At any rate, he says that his friend wrote beautifully, so that he would have equalled the ancients, and Montaigne says that he intends to include a specimen of his writing, and then you will see what a noble fellow he

was. Then he says prudence prevents me from putting it in. But I always suspected that really we did not need this piece of writing to know what that other fellow was like. Indeed, one could simply know that it was the man Montaigne liked to talk to more than anyone else, the man in whose presence he discovered the most. But we could see what this man was like because there in this essay we have an impression of this man. Because this essay, like most of the others, was addressed to Montaigne's best friend. With Etienne dead, Montaigne must have felt really deprived, especially of someone to talk with, but gradually he found that he could imitate this kind of talk with his friend by writing his essays. Indeed, his own speech with himself—was it not a kind of speech of one friend to another? In fact, is not a friend another self? So that one can say that the essay is a form conceived in friendship as well as solitude. It supposes as an ideal reader (and hence interpreter) a listener who is a friend, who is a kind of 'alter ego.' And on almost every page of these essays we feel this invitation but, to be sure, with layers of reserve which, so he tells us, he and Etienne went through very quickly."

"Yes, I think you can say that there is a relation between friendship and the dialogue, and that the essay, at least as Montaigne writes it, is a kind of half-friendship, or rather, that it is a full friendship where Montaigne finds his proper reader."

"Yes, one can say that a friend is he with whom I think best and that together we come up with more things than, say, when alone or with others."

"Yes, provided that we remember that there have been some men for whom this friendly talking took place right inside their mind. You know how when one is thinking one seems to be speaking in dialogue."

"And hence we say 'I thought to myself.' When we say this, we seem to mean that there are two, and that they think together in dialogue."

"But what would that make the dialogue—I mean, the literary ones—but the mimesis of this kind of thought?"

"Well, I think there would be this difference. In some literary dialogues there is speech between men who are not friends. Even when they are well disposed to each other, they may not be friends. And so one should distinguish between the speeches between friends and those between acquaintances and also speeches between unequals."

"Yes, one should. But that makes me wonder. If friends were really equal and drawn by the attraction of like to like, then they would be identical, and how could they have anything to offer to each other?"

"Well, perhaps we can say that equals are not identical."

"Yes, perhaps. Since we were comparing the speeches of friends to the speeches that a man seems to make inside his mind when he thinks, then I wonder: could there be a kind of thinking which was not between equals, but between a fool and a smarter man?"

"That is interesting. It raises the question of whether all men can be friends to themselves. I think not — that some men must be their own enemy, and one sees this sometimes in persons who mutter in the street and say nasty things, not so much to the passers-by as to themselves."

"Yes, but probably that would not be thought, as we were speaking of it."

"No, but that reminds me of the poem at the end of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* where he talks about dwelling among the coldest of highlands. Suddenly he says that one becomes two, friend Zarathustra came. I believe he is talking about the birth of a god. A god he gave birth to. But somehow this god was also his friend and also, in the way that a friend is, another self."

"Perhaps this friend was better at being Nietzsche than Nietzsche was. Perhaps Nietzsche felt that Zarathustra was better at being himself than he was."

"That would certainly be a possibility. At any rate, one certainly feels that here was a man who very much wanted a friend and that he never had one. Perhaps his writings are like Montaigne's in that they are addressed to potential friends."

"Well, or perhaps potential admirers."

"Yes, perhaps. He does speak of teaching a hundred men and thereby changing things."

"And he also claimed to be a 'destiny' and in a letter to Burckhardt he claims to be god."

"Well, *that* would make his texts comparable to the Bible we were speaking of before."

"Yes, with this difference: that he seems to have meant them to be taken as a provisional teaching or a provisional thinking. In other words, he expected someone to come after him and read him and listen to his better self or friend—namely, Zarathustra—and then to do better and to go much farther."

"Such a person would have to be Nietzsche's superior and also the superior of Zarathustra, would he not?"

"Yes."

"Then I know a person who seems to have claimed this, and it is Heidegger. Indeed, I believe it is he who has raised the question of whether, in order to understand a text, one does not have to be the superior of that text and the superior of its author."

"I wonder what he meant to imply about this question when he published an article about who Nietzsche's Zarathustra is."

"I do not know, but I think we have come back to our starting point."

"How so?"

“Well, just to raise the question of whether one must be the superior of the text one is to interpret means that there can, as we said, be no autonomous science of interpretation.”

“But there is another indication of this.”

“What is that?”

“That apparently it is important for the interpreter to reflect upon his own interpreting, and this is what we have been doing, but this suggests that interpretation is not its own lawgiver. It seems to suppose reflections which transcend mere interpreting.”

“But there is another possibility suggested by the ground we have reached—namely, that there is, properly speaking, no such thing as interpretation. The minute one tries to give rules on how one could practice this art or method, one runs into questions beyond interpretation.”

“And yet one sees persons doing this interpretation very often. Do you suppose that they know what it is they are doing?”

“This is quite possible; indeed, I have the feeling that until we talked I did not see what I was about.”

“But still, I don’t think that this ‘interpreting’ which these people do, even if they do not know its real nature, is harmful to these persons or to those who read their interpretations.”

“I agree. And especially if the persons pick good texts, they are likely to receive very beneficial opinions from them.”

“No more than beneficial opinions?”

“No more, at least not if they do not reflect about what it means to do interpretation. And sometimes they might even receive opinions which were not so beneficial. One cannot underestimate the mischief that reading good books can stir up. Consider what the reading of good books did to Don Quixote. What do you think?”

“I think that the man who knew which texts to interpret would be a long way toward doing interpretation in such a way that it pointed beyond itself.”

“But would not this person be exactly the person *not* to do interpretation, but to do the something else which we said interpretation pointed to?”

“If such a person were to appear, other men would have to be his interpreters. Only he would be beyond interpretation.”

“There is something political about your remark. I mean, there is something political about men who wish to attract interpreters, for there is something which resembles rulership in the relation of thinkers or teachers to their interpreters. Moreover, the question of what might lie beyond interpretation seems to partake of politics since it is concerned

with superior and inferior. Indeed, does not the whole question as it is often put: 'Can you understand someone better than he understands himself?' bespeak a political passion? Interpreters desire to be superior not only to all other interpreters but also to the text they interpret. There is much will to power in this seemingly gentle activity."

"Also there is much resentment, for the interpreter desires to be superior to a text which, after all, he is dependent upon."

"At least this is so where the emphasis in the question falls upon superiority and not upon understanding."

"If someone should listen to our conversation, they would have to interpret it."

"Can we suppose that, whether they are superior or inferior, they will interpret it as a friend?"

"Perhaps. I am unsure whether there could be more than two friends."

"I think we have reached a stopping place. We must make it our beginning another time."

"We will enjoy talking again."

"Yes, but next time we must see if we cannot go beyond politics."

"Perhaps we can do so by pointing to the difference between interpreters as friends and as superiors and inferiors."

II

"In speaking or thinking of interpretation, we found ourselves also speaking or thinking of friendship. The connection lies this way: both interpretation and friendship require the exercise of sympathetic intelligence."

"In interpretation it would seem to be the whole of the enterprise. In friendship good will is needed in addition, for it is possible for there to be a person who, though gifted with superior intelligence of this kind, uses his intelligence to do evil, say, the way the gifted and intelligent Iago does great evil to Othello."

"It is rather that he evilly arranges it that Othello does evil to his beloved Desdemona, and since she is his other self, his lover, his friend, when he finds out that he has misinterpreted her heart, he knows he has done himself evil. To misinterpret your friend is worse than many things you can do to yourself; it touches nearer than Othello's suicidal dagger. Indeed, his suicide testifies to this. He slays the 'self' who made the misinterpretation."

"Yes, despite the fact that in some sense the source of the misinterpretation of Desdemona is Iago; Othello never points to him as the cause. He regards himself as fully, perhaps wholly, responsible."

“He is fully responsible but not wholly responsible. It’s a curious case. Even if you adopt what another sees, even if you come to interpret through his eyes, you are responsible. You can say you were guided. You can say you learned in conditions arranged by another. You cannot say, ‘He taught me.’”

“I wonder if this relation of Iago the interpreter to Othello with regard to Desdemona has an analogue in the interpretation of texts. It would occur if a gifted interpreter convinced many readers that what they had always thought of as a good and wise book was just the opposite, and that they should straightaway burn the book.”

“Well, it would suffice if they merely ignored it or disdained it, dropped it from the curriculum, or read it in a way which blurred its clarity. I wonder, do you suppose this interpreter would know that his interpretation is false, the way Iago must when he interprets, or gets Othello to interpret, in a false light, or would he simply not know that he was misinterpreting?”

“Well, one must always allow for stupidity or lack of clarity. But we were speaking of an interpretation by a man of superior intellectual gifts. There I would say either case might be true. He might know he was saying the thing which is not, or he might not grasp how he was distorting what he claimed to interpret. Think of these cases: what about where Augustine interprets Virgil to be a stimulator of sinful passions, where Paul interprets Christ, where Christ interprets all the Hebrew Bible to point toward him in Luke 24:27, where Machiavelli silently makes his readers oblivious of the biblical teaching, or where Nietzsche interprets Socrates as a rationalist and as a sickness?”

“Each of these cases calls for investigation which goes beyond our discussion.”

“The difficulty which they raise, whether misinterpretation is willful or not, even granting that all these are cases of misinterpretation, remains and, hence, in the figure of Iago reminds us that to understand is not the same as to act as a friend. In his case sympathetic understanding of the weakness of Othello together with a powerful mind capable of making others see things as he sees them, and finally even to see themselves as he sees them, serves enmity.”

“Yes, and of a kind which only intelligence could render so effectively evil. It is, after all, a garden variety of malice to hurt someone. It is much more malicious to get that person to hurt himself. Most malicious of all is to get that person to hurt himself by hurting what is dearest to him. Here poor Othello isn’t even able to say, ‘He helped me.’”

“Iago’s powers of interpretation are used to create powerful and vehement misinterpretations. In addition, they are doubly set against sympathetic insight; what he wishes to create is the most abysmal misunderstanding where there was every expectation of the most profound

understanding. What he aims to destroy is not simply Othello but the mutual sympathetic insight of Othello and Desdemona. His victim is Othello, but it is also sympathetic intelligence itself. It is as if he set himself a chess problem. Choose that human relation which promises the most profound sympathetic understanding, and show that it is not very profound at all. Iago chooses lovers, and by getting one lover to kill the other he shows, at least to his satisfaction, that the understanding of lovers is not deep enough. He shows that their mutual knowledge was but a kind of ignorance. He is the kind of man who might say, 'I hold there is no sin but ignorance.' "

"Shakespeare has given to Iago some of his great powers of sympathetic insight. Iago is a remarkable dramatist; he plots and arranges like a master director; he imposes his script upon almost all of the others. And to do this he must know them very well."

"Shakespeare has also withheld something of himself which is crucial and which, in addition, distinguishes him from Iago, for Iago is only a part of Shakespeare's self-understanding. Iago has absolutely no power to make anything. He is all critic or all interpreter. He envies those like Othello and Desdemona whose mutual sympathetic insight, however defective, is likely to make something—in their case, a child. Iago couldn't have made Othello or Desdemona or, for that matter, himself. Only Shakespeare could have done that. In the case of Iago interpretation and friendship are mortally opposed, but they need not always be. After all, Othello accepted the interpretation of Iago and he could have rejected it. It would, it is true, have taken superior sympathetic insight into Desdemona and it would also be in accord with the truth; Desdemona is not false to Othello. Iago gets to Othello with certain abstract doubts; all Iago's circumstantial suspicions derive their power from one observation: that you can never entirely know another human being. Though true, this observation is debilitating to a man who is not prepared to recognize it. Really, it is a discovery which is allied with the discovery of love. It is coeval with mutual sympathetic insight. Love has a strange effect; it makes each lover aware of the solitude which is always with us. Other ways of being together in the world obscure this solitude, but love, precisely because it approaches union, makes us see our solitude. Witness the painting called the *Jewish Bride*, by Rembrandt. Upon this solitude experienced in this relation profound suspicions can grow. Since this solitude is likely to be utterly unexpected, it is likely to be misunderstood; through this misunderstanding Iago can force a secret entry. In it jealousy is planted. Still, a person of greater sympathetic insight than Othello, one better armed against absolute doubting, could surely have countered Iago's interpretation."

"We are not even considering the question of whether it is just to punish someone because one suffers from the pangs of despised love.

It is not clear to me that just because someone one loves stops loving one and loves another, as Othello is led to believe of his beloved, one is right to take revenge. If you punish someone for not giving a gift, you deny that it is a gift and make it a duty."

"Even Othello seems to feel the force of what you say, for he dresses up the killing as a judgment on behalf of other men: 'Kill her, lest she betray others.'"

"What you said about doubting that you can know and hence trust another person reminds me that part of what we are talking about is also talked about by others as the question of 'other minds.'"

"The scope of that question is very wide. It would seem to inhere in all attempts to understand the human things, human persons, human deeds, human speeches, either spoken or written, either witnessed by ourselves or reported to us by others."

"I have noticed something. That every discussion of the question of whether there can be a knowledge of other minds or of what it means to interpret is itself an appeal to other minds; it assumes unconsciously, though not unwisely, that other minds will read or hear what is being said about the question of 'other minds.'"

"It is a little like a remark I remember from Aristotle, that friends always find themselves saying, 'Friends, there are no friends.'"

"Or it is like the *Lysis* where the conversation about friendship (*φιλία*) ends with Socrates saying: 'Well, Lysis and Menexenus . . . our hearers here will carry away the report, that though we conceive ourselves to be friends with each other—you see I class myself with you—we have not as yet been able to discover what we mean by a friend.'"

"It's as true in the instance you bring up as in the one I mentioned that the discussion of friendship can only be undertaken by those who are friends or who regard each other as friends. Whenever I have heard this remark of Aristotle's repeated in conversation, I have observed the same effect: a startled look, quickly hidden in introspection. To each mind this remark brings the question, 'Who here is my friend? Are we here friends?'"

"So it is in the midst of friends that this most personal question, this question which makes a solitude out of a company, is likely to come up. Isn't it likely that even your observation will do the same to us?"

"Yes, it has, at least for me. But I think that is no great worry for either of us. That is, it should not embarrass us to ask, silently, about each other: is he really my friend, does he really understand me? Interpretive sympathy can never be perfect, nor perfectly mutual. When you understand someone as yourself, or when you understand him as he understands himself, there is always an additional thing, namely, yourself, which is in addition to him. Take the example of

Shakespeare: did he have to interpret his own works? Say his aim in writing was to understand human things at large, including himself. Even if the interpreter is guided by this aim, he is also in addition interpreting Shakespeare. And *this* Shakespeare didn't have to do. This incorrigible difference (and why should it be corrigible?) could only be overcome in that absurd idea of Borges, writing about this fellow who, though never having read *Don Quixote*, wrote the whole thing absolutely as Cervantes had. Indeed, that interpreter became Cervantes. How nicely this story uncovers the envy in interpretation; he wishes to *be* the man he interprets. At the same time he is ashamed of interpreting, for it shows his dependence; hence he denies he ever read Cervantes."

"Yes. 'To understand him as he understands himself' would mean you would have to *be* him. Still, I wouldn't trust the interpretation of an interpreter who had never felt this desire. It's a bit like impersonation or ventriloquism, spooky when you consider that this means the interpreter is outside himself, trying to leave his self behind; it comes so close to the fellows who think they are Napoleon. Which reminds me of that remark of Nietzsche's to Burckhardt, a remark which twinkles with so much wit that it makes you wonder at its madness, . . . that really he would rather be a Basel professor than God, but on that account he has not failed to create the world. At once so gracious and so unhinged."

"Can an interpreter be the thing or person he interprets?"

"That's the same question as can a friend *be* his friend, except that friends have bodies while interpreters do not. A friend can't be his friend because they don't have the same body; they feel pleasure and pain differently; moreover, they die separately, and this separation or difference, taking rise from the body but, I think, also present in the mind, was what shook Montaigne so much when he saw his friend Etienne de la Boétie pass in suffering before his eyes and disappear."

"But even in the case of interpretation, where the body is not pertinent, I suspect that the interpreter cannot be the thing he interprets; even if he succeeded in standing in the shoes of the maker or author, still that is not the same thing as being that author. In addition it does not mean that he ceases being himself, that is, someone different from the author."

"And this is true in even those cases where the author or friend wants very much to be understood, to say nothing of the cases where the author or 'friend' is secretive and does not want to be fully understood, or wants only to be understood by a few."

"I wonder if there was ever an author who wanted to be understood by no one."

"Yes, but he did not write any works at all. If someone writes, that would seem to mean that he writes at least for one person, even if he wishes to be misunderstood by all others."

"Couldn't it be the case that there is a person who writes solely for himself? He writes to remind himself of his thoughts, to record them."

"Well, then, the someone he writes for is himself. We are back to the doubleness in every person which we noted before; the thing which makes it possible to speak to yourself, to know yourself, to have a sympathetic insight into yourself, to interpret yourself, to be a friend to yourself."

"Then anyone who denied or doubted that one mind could know another and all the allied things, that it is possible to have a sympathetic insight into another, possible to interpret, etc., would also doubt or deny these things with reference to the self."

"Yes, with as much self-contradiction as in the former case."

"It would seem, from part of what we are saying, at least, that friendship best disposes us to learn or to seek the truth, and, in a like manner, that the interpretation of texts disposes one to learn. Here I think what we said is only partly true or rather that it is blind on one side to a great danger."

"What is that?"

"Well, I think we touched on it when we were observing that it is exactly the closest human relations which bring to sight solitude. In the same way, in interpretation the person who is most ardent to interpret is the one for whom the whole activity of interpretation becomes fraught with questions. Both states are conducive to melancholy."

"Just when I feel close to understanding a text, just then as I feel curtains parting, then I wonder if I am not really alone and on my own entirely. In the same way when talking with a friend there are silent moments, or reserved thoughts, which if audible would sound like this: do I really know him, does he really know me? I will give an example. I was talking with my daughter the other day. I have watched her grow these seven years, always thinking of who she will become, and sometimes thinking of that later time when she will be able to converse as an equal. I asked her: 'Is it possible for one person to know another person better than that person knows himself?' I added an example. 'For example, is it possible that I or your mother knows you better than yourself?' 'Well, do you know which drawer my socks are in?' No. I did not. Here was a criterion of knowledge which had escaped me and yet spoke aptly to the question. The very fact that I would never have expected a knowledge of where socks are kept to be pertinent showed that I did not know something that was pertinent in this person's self-understanding."

"I would guess that that moment was itself a progress in knowing."

"Well, yes. At least in the reminder that there was something beyond what I had known."

"But this illustrates what I was about to say, that solitude and the correlative suspicion that one is all alone with a text are not the opposite of friendship and understanding, respectively. Those who think so have not really tasted of either. And here is where the danger of both friendship and interpretation come in. We seem to desire friends in part for reasons which do not lead to the most precise thinking. How many times in a conversation one person misses what the other says, or hears it in accord with his thought? Friendship is accounted a pleasure; for this pleasure have not many thoughts been left unuttered—no, more—un-thought? In other words it is well that there is always a taste of solitude in friendship so that thinking itself is not utterly dependent upon this most human, if most rare, of relations."

"I suspect as well that friendship too would languish without this taste. It is for this reason I think the ancient maxim of 'a friend is another self' is finally inadequate. There must be some difference which forestalls unity or identity."

"Yes, that description seems to have been from the 'outside,' made by someone who, at least at that moment, did not know a friend. Moreover, that description seems to have been in accord with the high esteem in which the ancients held the friendship of members of the same sex, more especially of the male sex."

"Yes, there there was 'like and like' in the bodies. In this regard I must mention some observations I made about Montaigne. When you mentioned him before, I went to read his essay about his friendship with Etienne, and I received the distinct impression that he and Etienne were 'like and like' in the body as well as the mind. Their relation admits, he says, no equal, no comparison. It was not family loyalty; it was not paternal care; nor was it mixed with fraternal competition. The love of a woman stirs up divers and *ondoyant* motions in us. This love did not. It was constant and serene. We two were seamless, we flowed into each other, he adds. The revealing point comes when he is speaking of the incapacity of mind which excludes woman from such relations; his evidence is that there have been no examples; then Montaigne makes the general observation that a love which adds the union of the body to that of the mind is fuller, more complete, than one which is simply of the mind. Since he constantly says that his relation with Etienne lacked nothing, we are led to surmise that it lacked *nothing*, more specifically, that it did not lack the bodies as well. Almost as if he knows what thought had crossed his reader's mind, Montaigne immediately turns to the subject of 'Greek love.' He says it is justly abhorred by our morality. That 'justly abhorred' reminds one of Locke's 'justly decried' about Hobbes. Then he gives

his own opinion as distinct from 'our morality.' It is confined to a single point, that such love was between unequals, between an older man and a youth, between those who were not equal in mind or in body. His apparent concurrence with 'our morality' leaves open the possibility of a union of equal minds and equal bodies, of whatever sex."

"So you think he is telling us that his relation with Etienne differs not at all from 'Greek love' in regard to the body but only in the equality of the partners?"

"Well, he was not blunt about this bodily side to it. And with reason. He wants to speak about the most important relation with another human being in his whole life. That requires modesty. His modesty as much as his superlative language is a mark of how significant that relation was; what is interesting is to see what most needs the protection of privacy. The thing which Montaigne covers with his modest speech is the body. In other words, he seems to cover with modesty the very thing which could never be fully shared, the body. Because even if lovers enjoy a union of bodies, still they die with their own bodies and no one else's. The latter we know he experienced."

"That suggests a fuller account of the origin of his writing of essays. Montaigne was present at the death of Etienne. He saw a friend disappear and a body turn into a cadaver. It is an experience which raises questions about the relation between a mind and a body. Something disappeared or became elusive; speech ceased. It was friendship which conducted Montaigne to the school of death. So, the origin of essaying lies in Etienne in two ways, in their conversation together and in the death. Neither one would suffice to start the essaying of Montaigne. And what is the theme of that essaying, if not a preparing for death, of a conquest of the fear of death? To philosophize, to learn to die, to compose his essays . . . with Montaigne these are the same things. Death gave him what the realization that you cannot perfectly understand another also gives."

"Except that for him it had to be by the death of Etienne. Because Montaigne never gives the slightest hint that he ever doubted that he understood Etienne perfectly and that he was perfectly understood in return. He says they were 'like and like.' I wonder. The more he insists on their seamlessness, the more he gives the impression that Etienne was his superior; which means that Etienne was both 'another self' and yet a better self. He appears to believe that Etienne is better at being himself than he, himself, is. This lets us know how curious is this relation where you hear someone who is 'you.' Where you go to meet yourself. Where someone is more like 'you' than you are. At least marriage has in the difference of the bodies a reminder that similarity is not identity."

"The moderns point away from seamless 'like and like' when they

make of marriage something to esteem as highly as friendship. There, in the bodies of the married ones, is the difference. It is a difference which makes for pleasure and for misunderstanding, but it may also be a fence against even greater misunderstanding. The lines 'the marriage of true minds' remind us that there is difference and solitude in the heart of our endeavor to understand another."

"The same is true in interpretation, for to wonder whether one is on one's own defends against merely thinking what another has thought. It reminds one that not all thinking is interpreting, though all interpreting points to thinking."

"Exactly the doubt which haunts the interpreter at times, that he is not really following his author's intention, that he is left with himself alone; this would be the source of both independent philosophizing and of a more scrupulous endeavor to discover what the text says. When someone is reading a text and he comes to a point of solitude, where he is reading and suddenly he feels he can't ever understand all that the author intended, then precisely at that point is it not natural to assume that the mind in that text is precisely in the same lonely position? On the other side of the text is the author; it is likely that he, as he wrote, thought 'really all understanding of what I am writing is only degrees of misunderstanding, some better, some worse, some wide, some near.' But this discovery on the part of the interpreter that facing him in the text is the equally unavailable solitude of the author could be the stimulus to a more scrupulous reading."

"A most interesting case of this is the case where an author has hidden his real thoughts far from the surface of his work, yet they are still present to he who will work hard."

"What would be the motive?"

"I can think of two. One is persecution. The other is education. An author may hide his genuine thoughts or his genuine teaching beneath the veil of more or less accepted opinions so that he will not be censored or persecuted by those in power."

"How will his true thoughts or his true teaching be available?"

"Well, only with extreme exertion expended by the best minds would his hints bear fruit. He might put his own views in the mouth of another whom he claimed to be interpreting and then in another place he might refer to this practice; perhaps these two places would be separated by a hundred pages, so it would take an alert reader to put two and two together. Or he might call the character who expresses his views something misleading, such as 'fool' or 'jester' or 'madman,' or he might give many telling remarks a hilarious turn, knowing that when most men laugh they do not also think. And this leads to the second motive, education. It is not good to allow students to receive everything easily. Merely inherited or received learning is seldom well used, or rather

it is seldom understood. The mind of the student has to be exercised if it is to understand even what it hears from a teacher. This is why lectures are the least beneficial way in which to learn; in them, for the most part, the vanity of the lecturer lives in deadly unison with the passivity and weakness of the student."

"They are like inherited wealth. At least with regard to learning, there is no such thing as inherited wealth; everything which is inherited must be also acquired. Hence, the wealth of learning left in books is really an available wealth, not an inherited one."

"It's exactly these considerations which might lead an author to adopt reserved manners with his reader, to leave his most daring or his most fundamental thoughts under the surface."

"I think what you are talking about is different from what we were talking about before. In this case, whether the motive of the author is protection from persecution or whether it is to educate the proper reader, still the author intends some readers, however few, to understand the things which he has hidden."

"Yes . . ."

"But in the other case it was a certain solitude or hidden place which the author knows in himself and which he suspects no one will ever find. For example, he might read over something he has written and sigh, 'It is not likely that all I mean there will be understood by another human being.'"

"Something like the same sigh might escape him in another form, a form less secretive and more directed to cognition. Reading over a passage, or even as he wrote it, he might come to a halt and think, 'Where that thought goes, I hardly know.'"

"Indeed, isn't this a description of what one encounters if one tries to interpret questions? To interpret such a text you have to see where the thought goes. You have to see where the question points and this might be in a direction unforeseen by the author/questioner."

"Or it might be in a direction he does see, in which case he may have elected either to make this clear or to keep silent."

"In any case such a text, one which abounds in or returns to questions, insures that the reader will not be spared thinking. But as we were saying, there would appear to be a difference between the thinking which goes along with trying to understand a text and that which does not. The one is guided by the incentive of learning something from trying to see what another mind has thought, and so it sets out to understand the text according to the author's intention and his understanding, and the other sets out on its own projects."

"Some thinkers who have considered what it means to interpret say that really it is all in the present; you can't really understand an author

as he understands himself. They tend to deprecate the criteria of understanding a text objectively; they seem to say that interpretation really belongs to the interpreter, not to the text. To them fidelity in seeking to understand what an author has written, first as he has intended and only later in another way, is baseless. They may even go so far as to say that it is a harmful illusion. Since they are certain it is baseless, they are also certain that it is good to be liberated from the bondage of such fidelity."

"The certainty which would release us from this bondage is not to be had. It is just their desire for certainty, or rather their insistence that they have certainty, which seems suspect. Only if you are certain that you can't have significant understanding of a text as it is intended by its author are you released from the apprenticeship of reading him as he understood himself. These thinkers you mention prefer certainty to a truth which is difficult yet sufficiently exact. When they say emphatically that all interpretations are equally wide of the text, they claim to know more than they do know."

"If you say something is wide of a text, doesn't that suppose that you know the text? Surely you would have to know where the target is to judge that all arrows had missed it."

"Yes, their view is not genuinely skeptical, it is not in doubt at all. Their need to make absolutely undoubtful statements, namely, that no interpreter can know what he reads as the author meant it, betrays them into presupposing the opposite of what they maintain. Herein, they appear to have fled a difficulty. The difficult and yet significant terrain lies in the 'more or less' where one interpretation is judged less inferior than another."

"If the interpreter is like man according to Kant, never making contact with something other, but only with himself . . . then we must ask them why do you interpret, why address a text? There is something suspicious in these interpreters who claim that really they are always doing original work. Moreover, when they write long books defending this view, they are not really serious in at least one respect . . . for they would not want their books mis-translated and they would even object if a reviewer misinterpreted or misunderstood them. Yet these views are based upon acceptance of the view which they deny in their book. There they hold a view according to which there can be no such thing as misinterpretation, or mis-translation or misunderstanding."

"We must hold to the view that there is a difference between someone who sets himself the task, even if he is never certain that he accomplishes it, of understanding an author as he understands himself or as he intends to be understood and someone who thinks by himself."

"The point which draws my attention is this: you can't prove that someone has not understood the text correctly . . . except by appealing

to a better, a more correct interpretation. How could you prove that the aim of interpretation is not achievable, indeed, that it has not already been achieved? Those who assert that it is not possible are too certain. At the same time those who say that it *is* achieved could also be too certain. Let us say that someone interprets a paragraph by Wittgenstein and at the end he says, "There, what I have said is certainly in accord with and utterly exhausts how Wittgenstein understands that paragraph. It is finished! 'τετελεσται!' We would have to object. Are you so sure it is finished? Wouldn't you have to have something somewhere else which revealed what the interpretation of the paragraph was, so that we could compare what you say is *the* final and only interpretation with it? But, you see, we don't have such a thing. Now what if this interpretation this person had offered was really good? It made so much more sense than others before it. Even this would not mean that a better one might not appear."

"In other words, it is a matter which appears to permit only judgments more or less close, more or less correct."

"And judgments like 'best so far.'"

"So then, even though interpretation aims at a goal which cannot be achieved (or if it is achieved, it can't be known for certain that it has been), still, you are saying it should not abandon this goal."

"Yes, because it is well guided by this goal. The progressive steps from worse to better are made by adherence to this goal. Indeed, as we were saying before, the discovery that the final goal may *not* be reached with certainty should not, rightly understood, lead to despair, nor to the view that 'anything goes.' The suspicion that something remains hidden in the text leads on the one hand to more scrupulous reading, but on the other it also leads to a diminution of anxieties engendered by belief in impossible goals."

"Yes, there appears to be an immoderate wish behind the assertion that the goal of interpretation can be reached. Instead of living with a portion of uncertainty, facing it with strength of soul and exercising what powers one has on the task of replacing worse by better, these persons wish to know beforehand that the promised end of certainty is possible."

"By the same token there is in each friend a solitude which no friendship can erase."

"To live with this knowledge requires strength of soul."

"It is also likely that by virtue of that knowledge and its strength he will be a better sort of friend."

"Both the solitude of the interpreter and the solitude of the friend, if not ignored, entail a further discovery. Because of the discovery of solitude, the interpreter now sees that what he had aimed at was to be the author of the text he devoted his labors to. He wished to be able

to say, 'I, Aristotle, say' or 'I, Shakespeare, indicate.' It is the same with the friend who hides his solitude, his difference. He regards the other as better at being himself than he is. He wants to be that other self."

"The marriage of true minds, whether it is through texts or through what we have been calling friendship, requires a degree of similarity in the minds so that they may understand each other. It also requires a degree of difference so that it will be a marriage, not a mistaking of each for the other."

"Minds are very like faces. They are enough alike to be called 'faces' or 'minds'; they are enough different to be distinguished. This similarity modified by dissimilarity or this dissimilarity modified by similarity makes understanding both possible and necessary."