CHAPTER 2

Writing as an Intentional Act

The written text is the end product of an author, but the read text is the end product of its readers. The author(s) may supply the words of, say, the narratives in Genesis, but readers supply meaning to those words from their own cultural milieu. The distinction between the author's written narrative and the reader's read narrative suggests that two different views of the text are in play, each using the same marks on the page but with the possibility of different meanings. This raises a series of questions about the relation of the text to its meaning. Are some meanings a better characterization of the text than others? Do some points of view count for more than others? Are all interpretations equally convincing? Can the Parable of the Good Samaritan be about the virtues of robbing people?

Consider an analogy, where two Martians are playing a game which is being watched by a human observer. The observer notes that the Martians are using chess pieces (knight, bishop, rook) on a typical chess board. When one of the Martians is distracted, the other looks furtively about and quickly moves her bishop horizontally. At this point the human observer might well think that the Martian is cheating, and even accuse her of the same. But what if the Martian does not know the game of chess or is playing by the rules of a different game? While the Martian and the observer evaluate the action differently, can the observer ethically maintain that the Martian is cheating? Is one a more complete description of the act? Are all evaluations equally valid?

This story may be applied to the writing and reading of a narrative. The author is like the Martian who engages in an act of writing, while the observer is like the reader of that narrative. Each evaluates the text from a different perspective, with some being quite similar and others quite different. But what constitutes an adequate evaluation of the text and its meaning? To answer this question, we must develop a deeper understanding of the processes of writing and reading. In this chapter, we will explore writing from the author's perspective (we take up the reader's perspective in Chapter 4). In particular, we will develop the notion that writing is an intentional act, meaning that the biblical authors began with the desire to say something. This 'something' is not simply a reproduction of their culture in ornamental form, but involves the author acting as a subject, and so opens the possibility of creating new meanings.

1 The inspiration for this story comes from reading Wittgenstein.
Understanding Writing

We open this chapter with one of our core assumptions: writing is an intentional act. An intentional act is characterized as being ‘about something.’ This notion began with Husserl, who wrote that a person engages language “with the intention of ‘expressing himself about something’ through its means . . . he must endow it with a sense in certain acts of mind, a sense he desires to share with his auditors.”\(^2\) When a person writes, she does not simply begin scribbling words on a page, but begins with the desire to say something.

Searle develops this assumption in helpful ways. Searle suggests that people begin with a mental image or idea of what they want to do, and then design their actions based on the same. He writes: “That is, after all, why we have minds with mental states: to represent the world to ourselves; to represent how it is, how we would like it to be, how we fear it may turn out . . .”\(^3\) In other words, the author begins with a desire to say something, and then designs her work so that it does—from her point of view—say that something. She may change what she wants to say as she writes, but this simply represents a later desire to say something different.

However, is all writing intentional? There are a variety of examples that do not, on the surface, appear to be ‘about’ anything. For example, Tristan Tzara constructed his dada poems by randomly drawing words from a hat. Such a poem did not appear to be about meaning, but to be a collection of random and irrational acts. But here we must go behind the concrete poem to the desire that caused the author to form the poem in this way. Fiero gets to this issue: “If the world had gone mad, should not its art be equally mad? Dada answered with art that was the product of chance, accident, or outrageous behavior.”\(^4\) In such a case the poem was about the abstract concept of irrationality, as a critique of early 20th century European culture. The author’s design, of randomly picking words, was based on his desire to show irrationality, so that the abstract notion of ‘irrationality’ was the about-ness of the poem. To the degree that Tzara recognized irrationality in his poem, his design achieved its effect. The same is true for ‘stream of consciousness writing’ and ‘automatic writing,’

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3 John Searle, Minds, Brains, and Science (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 60. This is not to say that the author represents everything to herself prior to writing, as that would leave no place for creativity and the production of ‘newness’ in the writing process, on which see below.