CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CREATIVE INTERPRETATION OF LITERARY TEXTS

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I Introduction

The question I wish to consider is the nature of creativity in literary interpretation. The issue comes from thinking about the debate surrounding constructivism.1 Some authors have held that literary works are, in a sense, constructed not simply by the writer, but also by the interpreter. This view has been much attacked, for instance, in two recent introductions to aesthetics.2 The issue, of course, is a deep one and cannot be easily resolved or dismissed. It goes to the great debates of our time between realists and anti-realists and between objectivists and relativists.

Constructivism presents two obvious problems. First, if constructivists believe that interpretations actually change the meanings of works of art, then works of art created at one time could be transformed by an action at a much later time; this seems counterintuitive.3 Second, if

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1 One critique of constructivism is Robert Stecker, “The Constructivist’s Dilemma,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 55, no. 1 (1997): 43–51. Stecker elaborates his ideas further in Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech and the Law (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003). A central text is Michael Krausz, ed., Is There a Single Right Interpretation? (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). A nice recent version of constructivism is found there in Jitendranath Mohanty’s, “Intentionality, Meaning, and Open-Endedness of Interpretation,” 63–75, where he says, “A reason why in these cases [for example, poetry] there is no final interpretation is that while the text as printed matter…is a work complete in itself, as an aesthetic object it is constituted by the printed text and the responses of the reader…. The total aesthetic object, growing as it does through time and history, demands ever new interpretations” 75.


3 Opponents do not consider that this happens in everyday discourse, for example when I say “I meant by X so-and-so.” Peirce, saw this when he said, “Every utterance naturally leaves the right of further exposition in the utterer; and therefore, insofar as a sign is indeterminate, it is vague, unless it is expressly or by a well understood convention rendered general.” Charles Sanders Peirce, “Issues of Pragmatism,” in Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy, 2nd ed., ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 119.
what is meant is that each interpreter constructs its own text, which then is the one that is interpreted, then there is no basis for disagreement since they are talking about different texts. These are serious problems. Still, the idea of constructivism intrigues, not least because it includes a dynamic element lacking in competing theories. Most non-constructivist theories see interpretation as involving the production of an accurate representation of a meaning which has always existed, unchangingly (since the work’s creation), whether in the text, in the mind of the author, or within the cultural context of original reception. This leaves out the possibility of creative interpretation, except in the shallow sense that one could be creative in coming up with a way to find or describe the pre-existent meaning.

My thought is that creative interpretation is not only possible but also better than interpretation that is not creative. I am speaking of the kind of interpretation that creates as it interprets, and thus that constitutes an understanding of the text in a novel and valuable way. There is a strong distinction between an interpretation that is merely ‘correct’ and one that brings the text alive through connecting it with lived experience while still remaining consistent with the text. The second sort is better in general, although the first might serve some purposes. Interpretations are only going to be live if they achieve a higher level of creativity, one that is both discovery and invention. Interpretations of literary texts are more or less creative in this sense. More creative interpretations bring out the evolving meaning of the work in its interaction with the surrounding environment.

To accomplish my task, we need to avoid four possible misinterpretations concerning the term ‘creative’: (1) Creative is not understood here to simply mean conducive to more aesthetic pleasure. (2) Although we sometimes use the term creative in a negative way, I use it here only in the positive sense. (3) Although people sometimes understand the most creative interpretations to be the ones that make the most unusual connections, this approach to defining creative is problematic in that it emphasizes the element of novelty in creativity over that of value. (4) To conclude that either an interpretation is creative or it is

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4 This emphasis on discovery and invention is consistent with what Michael Krausz has called constructive realism; see his “Constructive Realism: An Ontological Byway” in Interpretation and Transformation: Explorations in Art and the Self (New York: Rodopi, 2007), chap. 7.