

## Discipline In Focus

# On making sense of the text

BIJOY H. BORUAH

There is a sense in which language is the raw material upon which the human intelligence can create a variety of semantically sound forms. Literature is one such distinctive form created on the matter of language. It is in this sense of creativity that it is quite apposite to talk about a work of literature, where 'work' is defined as an activity through which the human mind gives (artistic) form to (linguistic) matter.

A work of literature, like other works on language, consists of a text. And a literary text, just like its nonliterary counterpart, is an object of understanding: that is, the text has meaning. Meaning attests to texts. But how? What determines the meaning of a text in general, and of a literary text in particular?

### Discourse and Writing

Much depends upon the idea of a literary text. One way of elucidating the idea of a text is in terms of two further ideas, namely *discourse* and *writing*. The very point of a discourse is the message which is produced in and through the structure of language. There is a triangular relationship in a discourse involving the speaker, the listener and a 'world of things' that is talked about. The message is about this 'world of things'—a dimension of reality articulated by the discourse. The listener understands, or is supposed to understand, the quality or dimension of the world opened up by communication.

When the message is written up, the discourse slips away from the speaker, as it were, since the write-up has the power to preserve the discourse even after the disappearance of the speaker. By being written, the discourse gains the *autonomy* of a text. Thus the written text survives the death of the author, and pursues its own career in the intersubjective course of history.

Just as the text gains a new lease of life after being freed from its author or speaker, so also it opens itself up to an unlimited audience or reader. The text, once written, is open to whoever is a potential reader. It thus

becomes a literary work available for an unlimited number of readings. The 'free' text is interpretatively promiscuous as it were: it is poised for being grasped by any reader. One might also say that every reading gives the text a new actuality, a new meaning.

Correspondingly, the 'world of things' which is opened up by the act of writing (i.e., by the text) is also a 'free' world, unlike the 'bound' world projected in a dialogue between the speaker and the listener. The text as writing embodies a world which has an infinite horizon, not delimited by actual spatio-temporal contexts. It is in this sense that a literary text is said to create a world of fiction, or possibility. And our sense of reality, of the quality of the world, is said to be 'multiplied' by the literary world of fiction and possibility.

Writing is thus at once responsible for according a double freedom to the text. One is the freedom from authorial signature and possession; the other is the freedom of the text's message to configure a world unlimited by any specific contours of context, time and space. Therefore, a literary text is pregnant with content that has to be interpreted. In fact, there is no meaning which is the meaning of the text, because it is free for an unlimited number of possible readings. And the fictional world projected by the text is a world of multiple possibilities susceptible to multiple interpretative encounters.

The availability of the text for unlimited readings has actually led to what has been called the 'reader-response' theory of literary criticism, according to which the meaning of a given text is the experience of the reader, where the experience includes the reader's hesitations, conjectures, and self-corrections. To interpret a text is to tell a story of reading, a story of the reader's process of making sense of the text. It is a story of how the reader brings various conventions or expectations into play, of how different connections are posited, and expectations defeated or confirmed.

Theorists have talked about the reader's 'horizon of expectations' upon which depends the story the reader can tell about a given work. The 'horizon of expectations' lays down criteria for interpretation of texts, and a text is reckoned as answering questions posed by this horizon. There is a whole range of factors that can enter into the reader's horizon of expectations: Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, mythical, and so on.

Given the plurality of perspectives of reading, plurality of interpretation is inevitable. If the promiscuous interpretative content of the text is available for use to make multiple meanings out of it, does the text forebode an anarchy of literary meaning?

However, one cannot make a work mean just anything. The work resists facile interpretative access because one has to labour to convince others of the pertinence of one's reading of a given text. Which means that the reader's interpretation has to 'earn' a meaning for the text, and it would be a 'hard-earned' meaning. What, then, actually determines literary meaning?

### Intention and the Event

Belief in the determinacy of literary meaning has led some prominent theorists to proclaim that the meaning of a text is determined by the unique act of the literary intention of the author. Meaning is from this perspective a function of the authorial intention that casts it. Nevertheless, meaning is essentially intersubjective, because individual meanings conform to a shared structure of meaning. The particular meanings an author intends are held to be *shared categories*.

While the role of intention in determining literary meaning is a long-standing argument in literary theory, it has been discredited as involving what is well known as 'the intentional fallacy'. The meaning of a work is not what the author had in mind at the time of composition of the work. And arguments about interpretation are not settled by consulting the oracle (i.e., the author). Rather, the question of meaning relates to what the author succeeds in embodying in the work; and what is so embodied in the work may very well be quite other than, or over and above, what was intended by the author. More often than not, a particular work is pregnant with an interpretative content that overdetermines the intended content, and is underdetermined by prevalent

interpretations of it. Indeed, it would be to the credit of the author or the work if the work generates interpretations which far outreach the meaning-content intended by the author.

Detached from authorial intention, the text or work is accorded a life of its own, and the independence of its life may then be correlated with a meaning-content that appertains wholly to the *structure* of the text itself—to the codes and conventions underlying the text. This is the arch anti-intentionalist, pro-objectivist position of what is known as 'structuralism'—a theoretical perspective on literary meaning moving diametrically opposite to the subjectivist perspective of intentionalism. Meaning in this objectivist perspective becomes a permanent textual fact, embodied in a word, or a series of words, whose meaning transcends particular acts of volition or intention, and can be apprehended in its structure by any individual sufficiently familiar with the language of the given text.

The trouble with such an objectivist theory, advocating the autonomy of literary meaning from human intentionality, is its 'scientific' construal of meaning and the interpretative enterprise. Apparently, it is a reification of meaning into formal properties of texts to the extent that texts are themselves reified into objective structures constituted of codes and rules. Most of all, structuralist objectivism betrays the plight of meaning as an *event*, something that happens between the words of the text and the mind of the reader or author. There is an undeniable subjectivism as a minimal essence of the very concept of meaning that is effaced by treating meaning as a thing-in-itself, an objective structural fact.

Reflections on the theoretical scenario of literary meaning thus seem to bring to light curious self-division of meaning itself. In other words, literary meaning seems to have two meanings, each of which entails a different, and frequently contrary, theory of literary text or work, as well as a distinct critical practice. This division is perceived as a tension between, on the one hand, meaning as a historically bound *act*, governed by a particular intention at a particular moment, and, on the other hand, meaning as a permanent structural *fact* of the autonomous text, available for comprehension by everyone possessed of knowledge of codes

and conventions that undergird the structure.

Countenancing the theoretical climate of literary meaning is therefore importantly a matter of appreciating the duplicity of meaning itself. It might be said that one effective step beyond the chasm between the subjectivity of intentionality or experience and the objectivity of structure is to recognize the need for a schizoid or duplicitous *vision* of meaning. Literary meaning has these two incarnations: one of structural *fact* pertaining to a system, and another of historical *instance* of reading. These two incarnations, which are dialectically related to one another, are expressive of meaning's double-aspect identity. And given this tension between the two aspects of meaning, or the duplicitous constitution of literary meaning, the problem of literary criticism is perhaps better described as *dialectical* criticism because literary meaning is describable as dialectical meaning.

The poststructuralist deliberations on meaning, particularly that of deconstruction, are a clear indication of such a dialectical tension within the life of literary meaning. What has been observed in a critical scrutiny of the structuralist project is that each instance of meaning contains as a structural possibility an infinite number of further systems, the inscription of which marks it from the outset as a structure of nonidentity. Post-structuralism dissolves the boundary between momentary instance or instantiation of meaning in a reading act, and meaning as a permanent structural fact of the text. Instead, it views both system and instance as continually interpenetrating one another. The deconstructionist talk about the 'self-differentiated' identity of meaning implies that meaning's 'identity within difference' is enacted into its structural definition, such that the possibility of its various 'other' meanings, in other places and other times (i.e., other instantiations of the text's meaning-content), becomes the condition of its identity.

#### Elusive 'Meaning'

What is expressed by deconstruction's critique of 'logocentrism' — that is, the postulation of a self-identical unified presence of meaning — is the explicit conviction that *both* meaning as presence or act *and* meaning as structured and structuring inscription are reciprocally

constitutive notions, neither of which can be granted priority over the other. The moments of opposition between structure and act are rethought as derivative traces of a more elusive 'meaning' that cannot itself be reduced to a structure or located in an originating act, since it is the condition of possibility of acts and structures themselves — i.e., of the spatialization and temporalization of experience. The interpenetration as well as interanimation of literary meaning by both structure and act, system and instance, makes it obvious that meaning is not something simple or simply determined. Perhaps it would be more proper to characterize meaning both as an experience of a subject and as a property of a text. While meaning is what we understand of a text, it is also what *in* the text we try to understand. And we might add that our understanding is at once both subjective and objective.

To the extent the meaning that is grasped of a text would always be the product of a particular *point of view* of the subject, it would not be objective as such. But such a meaning would also not be subjective as such because the point of view from which that meaning is grasped would always be broadly structured by beliefs which are social or institutional. In other words, the point of view of the subject is context-determined, and contexts are invariably related to social or institutional facts. Thus, the most that can be said about an overall determining principle of meaning is that literary meaning is determined by context. Context is inclusive of facts relating to the rules and conventions of language, the situation of the author and the reader, and anything else that might be conceivably relevant.

Since there is no determining in advance what might count as relevant, there would be a multiplicity of points of view from which the interpretative enterprise can be launched.

If context-boundness is agreed to be a determining principle of literary meaning, then it must also be recognized that context itself is boundless. To the extent that context is boundless, points of view are free, though not whimsical or anarchic.

Bijoy H. Boruah is professor of philosophy at the department of humanities and social sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.

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