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## The Debate between Monism and Pluralism



The term “interpretation” can be applied to a wide range of activities. Biologists interpret data, and journalists interpret events. Similarly, any object of interest can be considered to be a text to be deciphered, whether it is nature created by God (the famous book of nature for the medieval fathers of the church), the structures of kinship (Lévi-Strauss 1967, Bourdieu 1977), or a landscape to be painted. Furthermore, interpreters can decide how to treat their object of interest: Homer’s *Iliad* was taken as a topographic manual by Heinrich Schliemann in his search for the city of Troy (1976), the Gospels have been submitted to a psychoanalytic reading (Dolto 1977), and many novels have been analyzed as a manifestation of male prejudices against women (for example, Morris 1993). It comes as no surprise that many trends in the theory of interpretation have subscribed to a form of relativism: any interpretation makes use of notions, values, and interests that are cultural, so that an interpretation can only be relative to a framework, which is specified historically and culturally. Such a view, which takes the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same text as a given and which in addition rejects the possibility of an ultimate court of appeal that could adjudicate the validity of an interpretation, is defended in both the continental and analytic philosophical traditions.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, following Martin Heidegger, claims that there is something absurd in the idea of one correct interpretation of a text (1998, 120). This view has become almost standard in the tradition of philosoph-

ical hermeneutic. “Hermeneutic thinkers are . . . multiplists insofar as they hold that there can be a number of different true interpretations of the entities studied by the human sciences” (Guignon, 2002, 280). In the contemporary debate on interpretation, this view has received different labels with different emphases: critical pluralism, multiplism, constructivism. Critical pluralism holds that there are a multiplicity of equally valid interpretations, resulting from the different backgrounds of interpreters who do not read with the same interests, concerns, and knowledge. Michael Krausz defines what he calls multiplism as “the ideal of a multiplicity of admissible interpretations,” while singularism is “the ideal of a single admissible interpretation” (2002b, 1). Constructivism, according to Torsten Pettersson, “holds that interpretations of literary works are not accounts of their objects but projections from critical stances and sets of values” (2002, 217). Stanley Fish is one of the most vocal representatives of such a view. In his book *Is There a Text in this Class?* he grants communities of readers the power not only to read, but in reading to construe the objects of interpretation so that readers or interpreters “do not decode poems, they make them” (1980, 327). The text does not provide any anchor for agreement among readers on what the text means. Interpretive communities come to a text with their strategies of reading, and the text serves as an occasion for those strategies to play out.

The reason for such a possible multiplicity of equally valid interpretations lies in the nature of the object of interpretation. As Joseph Margolis puts it, “the problem of interpretation is precisely what it is because there is no formal demarcation line between what is descriptably present in a work and what may be interpretively imputed to it” (1980, 127). Since cultural objects have many properties, the existence of which depends on the background against which they emerge (Margolis 1974), there is no stable framework in which the truth or falsity of an interpretation can be decided. Margolis defends what he calls a robust relativism: the claim that interpretations are not submitted to truth values does not amount to the claim that interpretations are epistemically indeterminate. Interpretations have “to meet criteria of critical plausibility which entails (a) compatibility with the describable features of given artworks and (b) conformability with relativized canons of interpretation that themselves fall within the tolerance of an historically continuous tradition of interpretation” (Margolis 1980, 163). As David Novitz concludes, “Since these properties are discerned only in terms of certain historically located cultural principles, both Krausz and Margolis believe that there can be no neutral way of deciding between com-

peting interpretations as there are ‘preferred’ (Margolis) or ‘pertinent’ (Krausz) cultural principles in terms of which the work may be interpreted. . . . And since there may be different yet undeniably pertinent or preferred cultural principles, it follows that there is no single right interpretation of a cultural object” (2002, 118).

Opposed to pluralism in interpretation, critical monism or singularism defends the view that for a given text there is ideally only one correct interpretation. A version of monism specifies the correct interpretation as the author’s intention. Monists can claim to discover the psychological states of the writer and thus attempt to relive what the author experienced while creating the text, as Friedrich Schleiermacher, the founder of romantic hermeneutics, believes they do (1977); or, following E. D. Hirsch’s views as influenced by Edmund Husserl, monists can claim to access the idealities that writers put into words (1967). These two types of monism would fall under what Noël Carroll calls actual intentionalists as opposed to the hypothetical intentionalists (2000, 2002). The former “contend that the authorial intentions that are relevant to the interpretations of artworks are the actual intentions of the pertinent artists,” while the latter “claim that what is relevant for interpretation is merely our best-warranted hypotheses concerning the intentions of actual authors” (Carroll 2002, 321–22).

What is remarkable is the fact that the views defended by critical monism and critical pluralism are from a theoretical point of view almost mutually exclusive, while in the practice of interpreters they have cohabited somewhat peacefully. Most interpreters in their practice would assent to points made by monists and pluralists alike. With the pluralists, they would assent to the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same text.

Usually interpreters do not claim that a particular text means this and that without qualification, but are careful to specify the type of meaning they are interested in, the perspective they take, and the methods they use. In addition, interpreters can pursue different goals, take different perspectives, and use different methods. It would thus be difficult to argue, for example, that a feminist reading of Ernest Hemingway’s *Farewell to Arms* invalidates a structuralist reading of the same novel. Most interpreters would agree with the pluralists that the two readings can be legitimate. In Margolis’s words, “The collective practice of critics shows a distributed tolerance for competing canons—without any loss of rigor” (1980, 157).

However, while recognizing a disseminating factor, most interpreters in their practice would also side with the monists and claim that, with the aim they have and the method they use, and the perspective they take, what they

offer is the best interpretation they can think of. Furthermore, if interpreters claim validity for an interpretation, they have to make clear to others what the object of interpretation is, and, in the case of texts, they can only define or identify the object by using the author: this novel by Hemingway or those texts by German romantic novelists. Interpreters have to posit an intention behind the object of interpretation, even if it is a minimal intention—having written the text—and even if it is to dismiss it, because they are interested in figures of style or in a Freudian unconscious or in cultural stereotypes. Even those who interpret a champion of indeterminacy of meaning such as Jacques Derrida are very careful to explain a text by Derrida through the use of other texts by the same Derrida, and not by appealing to a speech by Tony Blair or NASA's pictures of the planet Mars.

I take this capacity for monism and pluralism to cohabit at the empirical level of the practice of interpretation as an indication that the debate between monism and pluralism is formulated in the wrong terms. The two positions constitute not a dichotomy but rather two theoretical positions on two different aspects of interpretation. I call these two aspects act and event. By event I mean the fact that we as speakers and interpreters participate in a culture and a language that carry with them concepts, values, and habits of which we might not be aware, so that our interpretation is also something taking place in a tradition. By act, I mean an act of consciousness: someone interpreting a text makes a statement or an utterance and through his or her act is committed regarding the truth of what is said, his or her truthfulness, and the rightness or appropriateness of what is said, so that, if prompted, the interpreter must be ready to defend the interpretation made regarding these three claims.

As an event, interpretation is situated in a cultural and historical framework where historical writer, interpreter, audience, and text are parameters of something that happens. Situated in a particular period and permeated by cultural and historical forces, interpreters come to a text with questions, concerns, and methods of which they are not fully conscious, so that they are instances of cultural forces and historical trends: we do not interpret Homer now as he was interpreted in the eighteenth century, because we do not share the worldview of the eighteenth century.

The second aspect of interpretation tempers the historicism or relativism that seems intrinsic to an exclusive focus on interpretation as an event. Interpretation is also an act of consciousness where an intention is expressed through statements, so that interpretation is a performance by a real person who relates to other people. Through their performance (writ-

ing a series of statements, presenting those statements in an ordered fashion, justifying the validity of those statements, etc.), interpreters are implicitly bound by what they wrote and committed to their audience, so that, if prompted, they must be ready to justify their interpretation. The mistake of many advocates of pluralism is to focus exclusively on the event of interpretation and overlook the pragmatic aspect of interpretation as an act. They take a third-person perspective on what happens when an interpretation takes place, and from this perspective they can assess or make assumptions about what influenced interpreters and the prejudices they had. If we take the first-person perspective of the interpreter when presenting a new interpretation, we see that the interpreter does not have available a knowledge of the influences and prejudices marring the enterprise of interpretation.

My intent is to illustrate the way monism and pluralism play out and cohabit in the practice of interpretation and to offer an appraisal of monism and pluralism. I confine my investigation to the interpretation of texts and take no position on what is at stake in other types of interpretation, such as psychoanalysis or legal hermeneutics.

Any study of what interpretation is faces external and internal difficulties that need to be recognized. The external difficulties have to do with the way disciplines of knowledge are structured in academe and the different traditions that have taken possession of the ways and means to approach a problem. The internal difficulties concern the different levels of meaning lying in a text.

Most disciplines in human sciences are interpretive and have developed their own methods, so that practitioners of theology, for example, can perform their task successfully while ignoring the reflection on interpretation developed in literary criticism or philosophy. Or a practitioner can make an ad hoc use of a theoretician or philosopher by applying selected concepts of such a theorist without having to deal with the whole theory defended by this theorist. When, for example, Hirsch (1967) makes use of Ferdinand de Saussure or Husserl, but only selectively, it is not an easy conceptual task to try to find out what other elements of Saussure or Husserl, if any, Hirsch also accepts or rejects. Many philosophers, for their part, have the bad habit of presenting their arguments without making sure that the subtle conceptual distinctions they draw correspond to real differences that are relevant in the practice of interpretation. Furthermore, they often content themselves with some short examples, which can only appear terse to practitioners of interpretation, who could meaningfully ask, would this example hold true for the interpretation of the whole novel?

This tendency of philosophers is not alleviated by the use ad nauseam of the same examples. The opposite interpretations Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson gave of Wordsworth's poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" have become a topos of interpretation theory, the equivalent of "the cat is on the mat" of philosophy of language. (After Hirsch 1967, 227–28, this example can be found in Margolis 1980, 115; Krausz 1992, 161; Levinson 1992, 239; Beardsley 1992, 29–31; and Stecker 1997, 209–11.)

Because of the different methods used in literary criticism, theology, and philosophy—methods that function as many codes of the profession—it is not easy to develop a theory of interpretation that would be recognized by all interpretive disciplines as relevant or convincing. That means also that practitioners in one discipline can somewhat easily dismiss theoretical reflections coming from other quarters on the basis that these reflections do not account for the specificities of their discipline.

In addition to the different interests at play in various disciplines, a difficulty more specific to philosophy consists in its division into several traditions that tend to ignore each other at best or dismiss each other at worst. Two prominent traditions are continental and analytic-pragmatic philosophy. There are of course many philosophers who have bridged these traditions or belong to both. Karl-Otto Apel, Jürgen Habermas, Paul Ricoeur, and Richard Rorty were in this sense pioneers in opening new avenues for doing philosophy. But despite the many researchers nurtured in both traditions, the divide remains quite strong in academe. Emblematic of this mutual ignorance is Peter Carruthers's preface: "I ignore the small minority who attempt to do philosophy in Continental mode—they will not, in any case, read this" (1996, xii).

These two traditions use different approaches and different conceptual frameworks, so that the phenomenon of interpretation receives radically different treatments in the continental than in the analytic-pragmatic tradition. Influenced by Heidegger, for whom interpretation is an existential dimension of human existence, the continental tradition tends to treat interpretation in quasi-metaphysical terms: one speaks of "the sense of understanding" (Figal 1996) or "the ontology of the work of art" (Gadamer 1998). Interpretation is almost immediately categorized as belonging to the discipline of hermeneutics, with the accusation by the other tradition of indulging in generalizations and speculations. In the analytic-pragmatic tradition, interpretation is approached through multiple conceptual distinctions about the authorial intention (hypothetical vs. actual intentionalism and its "anti-intentionalism"), the possibility of multiple inter-

pretations (monism or singularism vs. pluralism or multiplism or their subcategories), the types of interpretation (meaning vs. relational, description vs. interpretation, etc.), or about the logical status of interpreters' statements. One of the common accusations made by the other tradition is that the analytic-pragmatic tradition unnecessarily multiplies distinctions that do not bear on real differences. Trying to solve the thought experiment that a monkey typed Hamlet before Shakespeare (Gracia 2002, 178–80) or that waves of the ocean composed a text on the shore similar to a poem by Wordsworth (Knapp and Michaels 1992) are not of much help in dealing with the actual and concrete problems interpreters encounter in their practice.

Not only does the phenomenon of interpretation appear quite different when analyzed in either tradition, but it is also very difficult for those who try to bridge the two traditions to be recognized by or even receive a hearing from practitioners of either tradition. For many reasons, one of them probably being intellectual comfort, some theorists in each tradition have adopted the habit of simply ignoring what other theorists in the other tradition do. Robert Stecker, for example, in *Artworks* (1997), discusses the issue of meaning and interpretation, but focuses exclusively on the contemporary discussion in analytic and pragmatic circles. There is not a single mention of Anglo-American authors who deal with interpretation in the continental tradition and no mention of classical continental theoreticians of interpretation such as Gadamer or Ricoeur. In addition, there is no mention of any work not written in English. We can find the same attitude in the continental tradition. In *Der Sinn des Verstehens* (1996), Günter Figal only deals with theorists of the continental tradition, most of them German, without any mention of the rich and sophisticated reflection made in the analytic-pragmatic tradition.

The unfortunate consequence of such an academic schizophrenia is that it perpetuates itself through students and publishing policies targeting specific audiences. The irony is that the most innovative works in the past twenty years or so have been made by those people who have crossed disciplines and traditions, both on the European and the American sides. These include Ricoeur, Habermas, Apel, and Rorty, who each in his own way formulated new problems and provided a new vocabulary for dealing with them.

Faced with these external difficulties, I have opted for a method that calls for crossing disciplines and traditions. Since the problem I am dealing with is interpretation, it would be irresponsible to ignore what other disci-

plines do and how particular practices of interpretation work. A study of interpretation is only credible if it is about the way actual interpretations are performed by real practitioners. Similarly, what theorists have said about interpretation cannot be ignored simply because they belong to a specific tradition. I appeal to theorists because of their views, regardless of the tradition from which they come. Although I had to choose among them, they were chosen on their merits.

Besides these external difficulties, there are internal ones as well. What is the question of the meaning that an interpreter tries to bring to the fore? Monroe Beardsley answered quite concisely: "He tells us what a literary work means. . . . So what the interpreter reveals is the meaning of a text" (1992, 24–25). The problem with this statement is the vagueness of meaning, already identified by Goethe in this ironic exchange with Johann Peter Eckermann: "There they come and ask: What idea did I try to incorporate in my *Faust*? As if I myself knew it and could express it! 'From heaven through the world to hell'—that would already be something, if need be. But that's no idea; it's the course of the plot. And further, 'that the devil loses the bet and that a man is to be redeemed who from grave mistakes constantly aspires to something better.' That's quite a powerful good, and very enlightening thought. But that's not an idea that lies at the basis of the whole play and of each individual scene" (cited in Kayser 1992, 219; my translation).

What Goethe's impatience points to is that the meaning of a text is not a monolithic entity. Most interpreters heed Goethe's suspicion and do not even use this kind of blanket formulation that, for example, *Faust* means this and that.

In the tradition of text interpretation, several levels of text meaning have always been differentiated. One of the most famous distinctions was made in biblical interpretation between three and sometimes four levels of meaning. In contemporary discussion three levels of meaning are usually mentioned: (1) the meaning of the one who wrote, what we usually call the author's intention; (2) the meaning of the text, in the sense of what its words and sentences say; and (3) the meaning that readers see in the text, that is, what they take the text to mean or the representative content of the text. While most theorists would agree with the distinction of these three levels, none to my knowledge shows the interaction between the three. They usually equate two of the three or disqualify one of them. Schleiermacher distinguishes the grammatical from the psychological interpretations, each requiring its own method (1977), but he does not consider seriously



level three. Novitz draws an analogous distinction between elaborative interpretations, which “gratuitously elaborate by ‘filling in’ the indeterminacies of a work,” and elucidatory interpretations, which “seek specifically to understand and to explain” (2002, 106).

A similar distinction can be found in the work of Jorge Gracia, who differentiates meaning interpretation, the aim of which “is to provide an understanding of the meaning of the text,” from relational interpretation, which provides “an understanding of the relation of a text or its meaning to something else” (2000, 47). A Marxist or feminist interpretation of Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* would be an example of a relational interpretation. But these theorists do not distinguish the link between levels one and two. The dispute between actual and hypothetical intentionalists concerns the first level, what an author meant. But they conflate what an author meant with what a text means. Hirsch, who can be called an actual intentionalist (although with some qualifications), distinguishes between verbal meaning and significance, but he equates verbal meaning with author’s intention, level one, while significance is level three. Beardsley calls Hirsch’s position the identity thesis: “that what a literary work means is identical to what its author meant in composing it” (1992, 25). When Margolis defends his robust relativism on the basis of the fact that it is very difficult to demarcate a description of the features of the text from an interpretation of the features imputed to the text, he considers only levels two and three.

I consider the interaction among these three levels of meaning to be central to a theory of interpretation as well as to the practice of interpretation. It is my contention that much of the disagreement among theorists, especially monists and pluralists, comes from their simplified understanding of what an intention is and what a text’s meaning is.

The three notions of author’s intention, literal meaning, and representative content constitute in an ascending order what we encounter when we interpret. When we read a text, we treat it as an entity, and we can only do that when we presuppose that it conveys something. It must be the embodiment of an intention, whatever that intention may be and whatever we may decide to do with it. It only means that, if I read a text, I treat it differently than I would treat scrambled passages or letters put randomly on a page. (And if I try to interpret scrambled passages, I will try to find out the intention of someone who wanted to write a scrambled passage—such as a psychologist writing a psychological test for aphasia—or the intention of someone who wanted to convey something—like some Broca’s aphasia

patients who have lost the capacity to represent grammatical links.) What is puzzling regarding this notion of intention is that very few theorists seem aware of the distinction made by Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and later Husserl between an intention that is a psychological moment—what is going on in the author’s mind—and an intention that is a publicly available moment once this intention has been formed and articulated, in our case through words. The latter was what Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Husserl focused on.

When Gadamer dismisses the author’s intention, he only considers the psychological and private intentional moment. After him a whole generation of theorists in the continental tradition adopted this view as a canon. Replying to the view I defend in this book, a representative from this tradition once conveyed to me quite forcefully that Gadamer and Derrida had clearly undermined the notion of author’s intention.

When I consider a text as conveying something, I must have understood a minimal level of meaning. It is what our mastery of language allows us to grasp immediately: what the sequences of words mean, given the meaning of the individual words and the grammar of the language, even if we may decide to modify this level of meaning, because of an interest in cultural or individual unconscious, or downplay it to focus on ideas and concepts. Regarding this level of meaning—what a text means— theorists for the most part do not take into consideration the difference between what a sentence means in terms of what its components mean and what a sentence means in terms of the intentional state it expresses. Saussure is the linguist who most clearly showed that there is a level of meaning at the semiotic level of words distinguishable from the level of meaning of an intentional state. By the words I use I can convey an attitude of disrespect or of lack of sensitivity without being consciously aware of it at the level of what I mean. Regarding intentional states, John Searle has convincingly demonstrated their public character in his reflections on speech acts and intentionality such that, when I speak, I make use of a “fungible” intentionality.

When we put together these two levels of meaning, semiotic and intentional, it appears that these two levels of meaning in one sense precede the speaker: she has to make use of words as existing in her language and she has to borrow what are acceptable intentional states in her community; however, because there is on her part a choice both of words and intentional states, she is accountable for what she said and expressed. When we apply these considerations to a text, its meaning cannot just be either what the words and sentences mean or what the author meant. Meaning, in other

words, cannot just be either semiotic (language speaks) or mental (the author's thought). The meaning of the text is both semiotic and mental: it is what the sentences mean as made up of the words written and as chosen by the author as conveying those intentional states that a speaker of this language would understand. Because we have this interaction between two levels of meaning in the text itself, we cannot simply distinguish between two moments—for example, a verbal meaning and the significance this meaning has for readers—as Hirsch does, or between what lies in the text and what we impute to the text, as in Margolis. Before any significance (Hirsch) or imputation (Margolis), we already have two moments, semiotic and mental. The significance or imputation is in fact a third level of meaning, what I call the representative content of the text.

In addition to the literal meaning, we need to understand what is said in the sense of what is represented. For sometimes we wonder what a sentence means—“His theological position is a round square”—or what a text means: we understand the sentences of Franz Kafka's *Trial* and still remain puzzled as to what it all means. In most types of texts, the authors try to be as clear as possible so that readers can move smoothly from what the words and sentences mean to what the text represents. There are, however, other texts, such as literary fictions, which offer an opaque representation or invite several possible readings, as in the case of Kafka. We say that they are susceptible to multiple readings. That does not mean, however, that a self-identical meaning can be extracted from the text and then applied. We do not have, as in Margolis, an opposition or competition between the text's meaning and what readers impute to the text, but an interaction. Furthermore, it is not an interaction between two levels of meaning, but three: (1) the author's intention—what someone meant by writing the text to be interpreted; (2) the literal meaning—what the text says, given the individual meanings of words and the composed meanings of sentences; (3) the representative content—what the text as a whole means in the sense of what it represents.

Because we have an interaction—philosophers of old would say a dialectic—we avoid Margolis's relativism, however robust he claimed it to be: it is not as if one level is relative to another, since none of these levels has an independent existence. Neither of these levels can be identified independently of the others. We also avoid the choice Jerrold Levinson believes is necessary when we ask the question of what literary texts mean: “I think there are only four models to choose from in answer. One is that such meaning is akin to word-sequence (e.g., sentence) meaning *simpliciter*.

Another is that it is akin to the utterer's (author's) meaning on a given occasion. A third assimilates it to the utterance meaning generated on a given occasion in specific circumstances. And a last model pictures it, most liberally, in terms of what may be called ludic meaning" (1992, 222). If we distinguish the three levels of meaning we can see how these four models are compatible without entailing any relativism.

Since interpretation of necessity has to deal with these three fluctuating levels, what gives stability to an interpretation is not one level of meaning that would anchor interpretation, but something in the process of interpretation itself, what I call the claims made by interpreters, which force interpreters into a narrative of justification. Within this process of justification, the author's intention is a necessary device not of interpretation itself (interpreters can decide to ignore an author's intention and focus on style, vocabulary, what is described, or the collective unconscious of a culture), but of the justification of the validity of an interpretation: a case has to be made as to why an interpreter can decide to leave aside the author's intention.

I understand these levels of meaning as what interpretation encounters and do not claim that they are components of a text. Rather than belonging to any ontology of the text they are categories of interpretation. A text obviously includes other features: it belongs to a genre, it has stylistic features, contains intertextual references (Kristeva 1986; Guillén 1993), and so on. These three components of what interpretation encounters are three levels at which interpreters have to make decisions and must be ready to justify these decisions: how to treat the intention, how to understand the literal meaning, and how to construe the content of what the text represents.

To counter the view that my distinctions are mere philosophical speculations, I test them against concrete practices of interpretation. Do we find any evidence that practitioners of interpretation make use of the three levels of meaning I distinguish? I examine three practices of interpretation: translation, biblical interpretation, and interpretation of novels. These practices individually illustrate best the three levels of meaning I have presented: almost by definition translation has to take a stance on what the author intended or be denied its status as translation; biblical interpretation, which usually treats its object as originating from a divine source, has to account for the status of a level of meaning that lies in the words written; and the interpretation of novels, which are mostly fictional texts not referring to real events, is the best candidate to illustrate the status of what is represented and the manner in which it matters to us.

I do not purport to offer a new method for translating, interpreting the Bible, or interpreting events in the world or literature. Rather, I take a meta-critical or philosophical position in the sense that, instead of offering a method for interpreting texts, I examine what is involved in interpretation, what kind of decisions have to be made by interpreters, what the goals are when someone interprets a particular text, and how the validity of an interpretation can be assessed. Although I cross disciplines and bridge different traditions, the metacritical position I take is phenomenological in nature: I start with an investigation of a particular practice of interpretation, describe this practice, and then examine its rules and regularities. Thus, in addition to the claim to explain, I make a stronger claim that the description corresponds to what is accomplished at the empirical level of what an interpretation does: I show how different practices such as translation, biblical interpretation, and interpretation of literature each have their own method for determining what validity means and how to assess it.

I thus do not believe that we can lump together all forms of interpretation and subsume them under a unique schema to reconstruct in a rational manner what interpretation is and involves. Annette Barnes (1988) follows such a procedure, grouping together all types of interpretation of the arts and investigating the logical status of interpretive remarks, asking whether these are statements and whether they are defeasible. Similarly, Patrick Hogan (1996), Wolfgang Iser (2000), and Paul Thom (2000) attempt to outline the general structure common to all forms of interpretation, from literary criticism to executing a piece of music. Hogan and Thom even claim that interpretations in the humanities and in the natural sciences have the same structure. Diverging from these approaches, my goal is not to construe the knowledge necessary for understanding what interpreters do, but to account for the specific manner in which interpreters actually perform their task and do justice to the specific areas of interpretation. Although I acknowledge that there is a sort of family kinship among the different forms of interpretation, I try to show how translatability into another register takes different forms in different areas of interpretation. We cannot, as Barnes, Iser, Hogan, and Thom argue, compare, for example, the discourse of ethnography or the execution of a piece of music with the interpretation of literary documents. A translator does not interpret in the same way as one reads the Bible or a piece of literary fiction.

In the second chapter I present the argument in philosophical terms through a discussion of Hans-Georg Gadamer. In the third chapter I exam-

ine the notion of author's intention through an evaluation of the positions of monism and pluralism. I discuss the views of E. D. Hirsch and Alexander Nehamas and test these two notions by comparing fifty translations in English, French, and German of a passage from Homer's *Odyssey*. In the fourth chapter I examine the status of the literal meaning. I discuss the views of Gregory the Great and John Searle on the interaction between literal meaning and background.

In chapters 5 and 6 I turn to the practice of interpreting novels and examine the notion of representative content or the status of the story told. I discuss two versions of the content of representation, which are not mutually exclusive: when we read we construe narratives or we construe intentional states. In chapter 5 I analyze the first version. I discuss Paul Ricoeur's views on the role of literature and illustrate these views through an analysis of the novel *Dog Years* by the German writer Günter Grass. In chapter 6 I turn to the second version of the representative content. I examine the claim made by the Argentinian writer Ernesto Sabato that the duty of a writer of fiction is to tell the truth. I analyze his novel *On Heroes and Tombs* and discuss John Searle's understanding of fiction as a pretended speech act.