

FABRICATING FACTS: HOW EXEGESIS PRESUPPOSES EISEGESIS

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Discussions of textual interpretation have long assumed that there is a clear contrast between eisegesis and exegesis. "Reading into" the text seems quite different from "reading out" of the text. In the former instance, the interpreter fabricates meanings; in the latter, the interpreter finds meanings within the text. Presumably the first interpreter invents meanings while the second discovers meanings already present in the text. Popular labels of "subjective" and "objective" interpretation are then attached to the two different cases.

The following essay diagnoses a latent ambiguity in talk of "reading into" texts and suggests that, once this ambiguity is recognised, the distinction between eisegesis and exegesis may be tenable but only as descriptive of the difference between conditions for *understanding* a text and conditions for *justifying* that understanding.¹ To anticipate later conclusions, the meaning of a text must first be fabricated, invented, or "read into" the text; however, if an interpretation is ever

¹ This essay is a rudimentary effort at the functional specialization of dialectic. Following Lonergan's maxim in *Insight* to develop positions and to reverse counterpositions, it takes a relatively simple puzzle about eisegesis and criticises some basic confusions about what goes "into" the reading of texts. In the process two counterpositions on the meaning of "text" are criticised and an alternative to both defended. A more elaborate exercise in dialectic that would draw upon a history of the positions and counterpositions regarding textual interpretation is what is actually needed even though it would be a massive enterprise requiring numerous collaborators.

justified, then the invented meaning may likewise be said to have been found or discovered. Put another way, every reading of a text is a “reading into,” but some readings are also “readings out of.” Understanding and defending these conclusions involve sorting through a preliminary puzzle about the multiple meanings of “text.”

What is a text? The question seems simple enough, but complications appear after even a brief survey of contemporary debates over the identity of texts. Think of quarrels about judicial interpretation of the Constitution or debates about “creative misreadings” of literary texts. While avoiding the details of these unresolved quarrels, this paper does ask two basic questions fundamental to such debates: What is the nature of a text and how is it known?

The “nature” one asks about is presumably unknown and so the focus of inquiry.² In asking how this unknown is to become known, one probably makes a common-sense assumption; namely, that a text is a kind of imaginable object “already out there” awaiting investigation. As I will argue below, this questionable assumption is a “counterposition” that leads to a familiar intellectual impasse, but eliminating this assumption and employing a different set of assumptions can help us avoid the impasse.

How can we detect the problematical assumption and the resulting impasse? A shortcut to doing so is available in Nelson Goodman’s commentary on the phrase “a world well lost.”³ He remarks that the “world” seemingly misplaced is supposedly a real order of things already existing and awaiting discovery and description through human inquiry. That there is such a prior order to things seems, at first, to be a safe assumption

² “Just as in algebra the unknown number is x until one finds out what the number is, so too in empirical inquiry the unknown to be reached by insight is named ‘the nature of...’” *CWL 3*, 61. Throughout this paper I am indebted to Lonergan’s work, especially his criticism of naive realism and his argument that the proximate sources of all meanings of a text are in the intelligent subject.

³ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 4. See also Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin, “Interpretation and Identity,” in *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 49.

since we commonly believe that, by careful inquiry, we make discoveries and uncover patterns and regularities among events. A simple appeal to common sense makes the assumption clearer: we say that Newton discovered the law of gravity, not that he invented it.

In criticising this common assumption, Goodman asks: “Tell me what this pre-existing order is independently of your variable classification schemes, measurement scales and entrenched metaphors?”⁴ The request is, of course, impossible to satisfy. To begin speaking and making sense of any object whatever is to employ the various symbolic devices one is requested to leave aside so as to “get at” the “already out there” in its pristine independence from such devices.⁵

Goodman’s conclusion is that “world” as antecedent to meaning-giving descriptions is unavailable to us; it is “a world without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern - a world not worth fighting for or against.”⁶ An alternative stance which he recommends drops the singular “world” and endorses talk of a plurality of worlds or versions. Reaching “behind” this plurality for a privileged or fundamental reality he likens to peeling an onion in search of a residual core.⁷

Given the limited focus of this paper, I am not interested in resolving the secondary puzzles Goodman generates for himself and his readers by his alternating uses of “versions” and “worlds.” The puzzles are, I suggest, symptoms of how difficult it is to excise our common-sense faith in an imaginable world “already out there.” As long as we operate with this assumption, we can give no satisfactory account of such a world and are likely to believe we have only two options: either retain an unjustified common-sense belief or embrace a multiplicity of worlds or versions as the referents of our inquiries and understanding. Goodman chooses the second

⁴ Goodman and Elgin, 52-53.

⁵ The request here is that a “world mediated by meaning” be somehow presented as a “world of immediacy.” The background assumptions are that the latter is what is meant by “real” and some type of “showing” of it, independent of understanding and its expression, is the measure of what is real. For the various permutations of these assumptions, see *CWL 2*, 20.

⁶ *Ways of Worldmaking*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

option. The puzzles that result are fairly easy to state. What are these versions “versions of”? If any answer to this question is just another version, how can we be said to be talking about something more than our talking?⁸

Similar puzzles await us if we try to understand the nature of a text all the while assuming that texts are imaginable objects out there awaiting discovery. To vary the earlier question: What is the text aside from any interpretation? If any answer to this question is another interpretation, what is it an interpretation of? Is all that we ever reach just another interpretation? So the impasse reappears.

A first attempt to evade the impasse may appeal to syntax and an ordered script that antedates the interpreter’s comments. This is in fact the direction Goodman takes in trying to preserve the identity of a text across multiple interpretations.⁹ The syntactical markings offer an imaginable and ordered presence “already out there” providing a public reference point for differing versions or interpretations. Does this save the text from being “well lost”?

I doubt the manoeuvre succeeds. Suppose that in a particular case we pick up what we recognise to be a sheet of paper containing tracings which, if they are linguistic symbols, belong to a language unknown to us. What is “given” are *not* syntactical markings or linguistic symbols but a set of ink marks. (Note that even here we draw upon prior understanding in classifying something as a sheet of paper with inked inscriptions that may be meaningful.) To recognise these markings as rule-governed signs or linguistic symbols, we must bring to the reading a prior understanding of such markings. Absent that understanding we might just as well guess that the markings are the random scribbles of a child with no more claim to being a text than water-etched lines in beach sand or wind-driven shapes in clouds.

⁸ The frequently discussed limits of a coherence theory of truth are a topic beyond the scope of this essay.

⁹ Goodman and Elgin, 54-57. Is this attempt to “locate” the identity of the text in written symbols another version of the common-sense assumption Goodman criticises? “Something out there” is still made the touchstone for claims about what the text really is without any advertence to the operations of intelligent inquirers.

Why should Goodman want to locate in the syntactical content of a document something retaining its identity across variable interpretations? Presumably we are back to the common-sense assumption that interpreters find texts; they do not invent them. While they may invent diverse versions of any text, there still is a residual text to which these versions refer.¹⁰ But then the impasse returns: Can you tell us what this residue is independently of any prior scheme of interpretation? To respond by talking about syntactical markings may help account for the possibility of consensus about the range of meanings plausibly attributable to a text. The shared meanings of some language group make such consensus possible. That is, the shared linguistic conventions and understanding of the group allow its members to recognise the markings as meaningful. But to ask what the text is aside from such a group's conventions or prior understanding is a request for the impossible.

I suggest that a way beyond the impasses about "world" and "text" lies, first, in dismissing the assumption that a world or a text is something imaginable "already out there" and, second, in making an alternate assumption; namely, that such terms are syncategorematic; they are terms which are *defined relationally*.¹¹ Let the focus narrow to just the second term. Suppose we define "text" provisionally as that upon which a reader's inquiry focuses. A text is what is intended by the reader's questioning, and in turn the reader's questioning is defined as that for which the text provides a focus.

How is this decision to treat "text" as a correlative of reading, questioning, or some similar operation an improvement over Goodman's appeal to syntactical markings?

¹⁰ The puzzle of "reference" has a long and tortured history in the philosophical literature. The usual impasse takes the form of a claim that language must somehow "hook onto" a world assumed to be one of imaginable objects out there which words somehow point out or even show by "ostensive definition." So a text must be some object to which descriptions can refer. But what if there is an intermediate term such that (1) descriptions formulate and refer to (2) someone's understanding of (3) some object?

¹¹ For Goodman's discussion of "fact" as a syncategorematic term, see *Ways of Worldmaking*, 93.

More importantly, does this manoeuvre succeed in avoiding the earlier puzzles?

Grant that the initial meaning of “text” is defined by its relation to questioning. A text, then, is something to be understood, and the reach for understanding involves both the text which gives rise to a focused question (or series of questions) and the questioning which responds to the text. If we ask what the text is independently of the questioning, we are left with but half of the correlation; namely, the text as what is not yet understood, i.e., an *x*. If anything determinate is added, then some limited inquiry will already have occurred. For example, the earlier reference to a sheet of paper with tracings presupposed a prior understanding of paper, ink marks, and potentially meaningful symbols. That prior understanding presupposed an earlier series of inquiries with their own texts which once were things yet to be understood.

To reconstruct something similar to one of those earlier inquiries, suppose a teacher scribbles some marks on a chalkboard that are unintelligible to a class of attentive students. The question is, Is this a text for these students? Let me phrase the basic issue in a strange way. Are there any *imaginable* words on the chalkboard? What are words independently of someone’s prior familiarity with the relevant language? As strange as it may sound, words as *meaningful symbols* are not found written on any chalkboards; the imaginable data of words and symbols may be, but words as meaningful symbols require a correlation of understanding and data occurring within an intelligent subject.¹² Of course, the subject’s understanding may be minimal. For example, the attentive students may assume the lecturer is scribbling something they will gradually learn to understand; they presume the markings are meaningful to the lecturer, but

¹² In the classroom example, I am assuming that (1) the chalk markings provide the class with sensible data; (2) for these data to be meaningful symbols or words for any student, they must be related to the student’s operations as an intelligent subject reaching for understanding; (3) the operations immanent in the subject transform the data and images into words or meaningful symbols. (Cf. *CWL* 3, 557.)

initially the markings are not more than a puzzle, an unknown for them.

What if the class does learn to make sense of these jottings? Are there now words on the board for them? The imaginable chalk marks are the same. What has changed is the students' understanding. They have learned to some degree to correlate these marks with their own understanding of the meanings of some set of terms. Words are now recognised where previously there had been only puzzling scribbles.

What has happened in this hypothetical example is, I suggest, what happens in regard to texts. Note that the class *believed* that the markings were potentially meaningful. Their belief was reasonable given their prior experiences in classrooms, their acquaintance since childhood with writing, their awareness of other languages and scripts. In other words, they brought to the experience of puzzling over these chalk marks an elaborate history of relations among teachers, writing, chalkboards, and foreign languages which allowed them to trust that the teacher was inscribing more than nonsensical marks. So it is for adults in regard to any text. We begin as it were in midstream already having some familiarity with writing, depicting, calculating, sculpting, and their products. To ask what a text is aside from such prior understanding is a request which probably should be addressed to a two-year old. Then perhaps we could have a clearer instance of "text" as simply what focuses a question, what attracts the child's curiosity. Short of that exercise we find ourselves already assuming any number of things about a text, from type of document or style of writing, to quality of the digital imaging or age of the monument.

Where are we now in relation to the earlier puzzles and questions about multiple versions, about a privileged or pristine account of a text, about the "nature" of a text? To begin with the puzzle of an irreducible plurality of versions, I simply note that "text" as a correlative of inquiry is as diverse as the inquiries about it. Since different questioners bring with them different levels of understanding, diverse purposes, and varying cultural assumptions about the significance of texts (e.g., how one responds to books or Renaissance paintings may

well vary with cultural background), we should expect there to be multiple accounts of what a text means and how it stands in relation to other human interests and activities. What a text means for a publisher need not be what it means for an antiquarian. What a painting is for an artist need not be what it is for a sociologist. How a bound volume stands in relation to other works need not be the same for the archivist as it is for the literary scholar. In other words, any number of different versions of what a text means or how it “fits” a wider context are likely.

Is there, then, any privileged or pristine account to be had about what a text means? If one expects a single best account that fits all inquiries, the answer is no. If one expects some accounts to be far better than others, the answer is a qualified yes. Any account that achieves a superior ranking over others will do so within a field of inquiry where the standards of evaluation are relative to the purposes of inquiry within that field. When one operates as an archivist, the literary quality of a particular work is not relevant to one’s work in determining the physical condition of the manuscript. The archivist’s subsequent diagnosis of the manuscript’s condition may be technically accurate and the best available account within that field. Of course, if a field of studies, e.g., literary criticism, contains little consensus among practitioners about purposes and standards, there is less hope for agreement on what would be a better or worse account of a particular text.¹³

What of the opening question about the “nature” of a text? Is there any general understanding of what a text is that is more basic than all others? I began by noting that “the nature of X” refers to an unknown. The next step was to suggest that “text” be defined relationally so as to avoid an intellectual impasse. So an initial response to the opening question is that it is the nature of a text to be at first an unknown that is intended by questioning. Of course, the same thing could be said about the nature of a bird, a tree, or rain. The point is that a very general

¹³ In the history of the natural sciences, inconclusive and highly speculative debates about better and worse accounts of events are usually signs of the absence of agreed-upon standards and purposes and of the newness of a field of inquiry.

question about what something is will remain relatively unspecific or indeterminate until the questioning has begun yielding answers. But as noted earlier, we begin our questioning in midstream; we already have accumulated results of various inquiries. So we tend to think of texts as human artefacts the meanings of which are embedded in complex relations among shared understanding, conventional forms of expression, and social practices.¹⁴ Yet a quick survey of these accumulated results reveals multiple accounts of what a text is or how it is related to other texts. That is to be expected since the correlate of “text” is the question, and as questions vary so will the answers. To refer again to the simple classroom example of strange markings on the chalkboard - if one’s question is about the chemical make-up of the markings, answers about linguistic meanings will be beside the point. No one question serves every purpose, and no one answer fits every question.

If one still insists that all the diverse answers must be about the same text and that some basic account should be available for what underlies all these “versions,” then one is repeating the earlier question, “What are all these versions versions of?” As noted before, behind this simple question there usually lies the common-sense assumption: a text is something imaginable “already out there” which ideally should be identifiable without relying on variable purposes, linguistic conventions, or classification schemes. But this assumption is what leads to the intellectual impasse already described.

To avoid this dead end, I suggested that, at first, it is the nature of a text to be a datum, or better, a series of data correlative to the operations of some inquirer. If the data are to mean anything, there must be an intelligent subject ordering them and so trying to answer the questions: “What are these?” “How are they related to something we already understand?”

¹⁴ Let this generality, or some variation of it, be representative of our nominal understanding of the nature of a text. The understanding is “nominal” because we can recognise and label instances of texts and we can use the word “text” competently. However, if a Socrates shows up to ask for a clearer meaning, the outcome is easy to anticipate. Still, if a definition *omni et soli* is not to be had, we can try to clarify the multiple meanings of “text” in relation to human inquiry.

and so on. The standard worry may quickly be voiced that such dependence upon the questioner for the meaning of “text” limits any such meaning to subjective and relativistic readings. This worry gives voice to the familiar contrast between eisegesis and exegesis. A further concern is that locating the making of meaning in the subject condemns any effort to justify one’s reading to a circular proof. These complaints arise usually because one has not let go entirely of the earlier assumption. It is difficult to break with the expectation that a text is something imaginable “already out there” and should be accessible independently of whatever prior understanding a reader brings to the inquiry.

Challenging this deeply entrenched assumption about understanding and about what is to be understood has been one of the purposes of this paper. A brief survey of twentieth-century psychology of perception can provide interested readers with massive evidence against this common expectation.¹⁵ On the positive side, that evidence supports a basic distinction between sensible markings and meaningful texts. The sensible data, e.g., the spatially arranged marks on a chalkboard, provide no more than a material determinant for an intelligible text. The “proximate sources” of the intelligibility or meaningfulness of the sensible data are immanent in the subject attending to them.¹⁶ Remote sources of meaning will,

¹⁵ Popular access to some of this evidence is available in the works of Oliver Sacks. See especially the chapter “To See and Not See” in *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 108-152. One implication of the case of Virgil is that what is given is at first no more than a datum for inquiry. Note Virgil’s difficulties in “seeing” the doctor’s face and in “correlating” his cat. Further case studies in V.S. Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee, *Phantoms in the Brain* (New York: William Morrow, 1998) support this distinction between sensory input and the sometimes strange meanings we make of it.

¹⁶ “If objectivity is a matter of elementary extroversion, then the objective interpreter has to have more to look at than spatially ordered marks on paper; not only the marks but also the meanings have to be “out there”; and the difference between an objective interpreter and one that is merely subjective is that the objective interpreter observes simply the meanings that are obviously “out there,” while the merely subjective interpreter “reads” his own ideas “into” statements that obviously possess quite a different meaning. But the plain fact is that there is nothing “out

for example, be the social practices conditioning the subject's earlier and ongoing development in reading, calculating, assessing evidence, and so on.

If we accept the old distinction between the *ordo cognoscendi* and the *ordo essendi*, these claims about the making of meaning should not be too controversial. Recall the commonsensical claim that Newton discovered the law of gravity; he did not invent it. To detect the oversight in this claim, consider how, in the *ordo cognoscendi*, Newton first puzzled about objects in motion, made some guesses, invented possible explanations, formulated them, checked the guesses further, revised the formulations, and so on. Such inventive operations sometimes succeed; they produce acceptable solutions to the original puzzles. Then the invention becomes the discovery. That is, in the *ordo essendi* we claim to have found something; we affirm that something is the case; we know it to be independent of our own thinking. In regard to our understanding of what a text means, the choice is not between: "Is this an invention (something fabricated)" and "Is this a discovery (something found)?" In some cases we correctly understand and so may affirm that what we first invented (e.g., guessed as to what a text might mean) turned out to be what in fact is the case. We can have it both ways: Newton both invented and discovered the law of gravity. Or, to return to the beginning of this paper, eisegesis is a prerequisite for understanding any text, but sometimes the understanding may be correct and so deserving of being called a product of exegesis.

there" except spatially ordered marks; to appeal to dictionaries and to grammars, to linguistic and stylistic studies, is to appeal to more marks. The proximate source of the whole experiential component in the meaning of both objective and subjective interpreters lies in their own experience; the proximate source of the whole intellectual component lies in their own insights; the proximate source of the whole reflective component lies in their own critical reflection. If the criterion of objectivity is the "obviously out there," then there is no objective interpretation whatever; there is only a gaping at ordered marks, and the only order is spatial. But if the criterion of objectivity lies in intelligent inquiry, critical reflection, and grasp of the virtually unconditioned, then the humbug about the "out there" and the simulated indignation about "reading into" are rather convincing evidence that one has very little notion of what objectivity is." CWL 3, 605.

Perhaps it will be less controversial to remark that our reaching for understanding is corrigible (i.e. we can learn to improve our performance) and the results of our questioning are corrigible (i.e., we can improve upon earlier answers). Accept both these claims and there is nothing special to worry about when one notes that puzzling about a text begins on the basis of one's prior understanding.¹⁷ Even if that beginning is very inadequate, the first "versions" need not be where one ends.

Such first versions are one's early surmises or guesses about what something is or may mean. In conversations with others, through further reading and inquiry, one may revise or even discard these initial hunches. The simplified parallel is to good detective work where the data provide possible clues for inquiry, the initial list of suspects is a more or less educated guess about how to make sense of the clues, and through further investigation the detective may revise or discard the initial reading of the clues and the initial list of suspects. So a text is first a series of data focussing inquiry, but, once put in some meaningful order, the text is a determinate object of understanding. The "nature" of "text" is no longer an unknown but a possibly known, a possible meaning.

Note that this is where the ways of understanding a text are unavoidably multiple. Just as purposes in using a text vary, so will the questions relevant to those purposes.¹⁸ But as questions vary so will relevant answers, and, as appropriate answers vary (not to mention the diversity generated by inappropriate answers), so will the text as an object of understanding, a possibly known.

There is a third step to understanding the nature of a text. Given multiple versions of what a text is, we can ask which meanings are *justifiable*. At stake in this question is the transition from one's own guesses and bright ideas to what is

¹⁷ The claim is hardly a new one: *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*.

¹⁸ I am avoiding use of the problematical phrase "conceptual framework" to describe the origins of multiple accounts of a text. "Purpose" carries less theoretical baggage and allows the user to avoid debates (new intellectual impasses?) about how concepts "hook onto" a world.

actually the case in regard to the text. Trying to make the transition is a matter of further operations, e.g., raising more questions, surveying the range of possible answers, checking for “fit” with the available evidence. Is the transition ever completed? At least the general condition for it is identifiable. If understanding is primarily a matter of raising and answering questions, then one has understood what something means and can justify that understanding as correct if one has raised and successfully answered all of the relevant questions about it. Is this condition ever fulfilled? Given the difficulties in anticipating all the relevant questions about some issue, we usually settle for saying that all the relevant questions recognised at this time have been answered. We perhaps appeal to the informed opinion of experts in the field to support our reading of the text. Yet that informed opinion is also in the dark as to possible future questions. Thus, we settle for saying that our understanding is probably true. Here we claim to be doing more than guessing. We claim that the actual “nature” of this text is probably what we now understand it to be. In other words, our creative efforts of “reading into” the text have discovered or “read out” from the text what it probably means.

In summary, there are multiple meanings of “text.” I began by noting a common-sense assumption that “text” generally refers to some imaginable object “already out there.” This deeply entrenched belief is hopelessly entangled in the old problematic of trying to say what something is without already having anything determinate in mind. To escape this entanglement, I suggested a relational meaning of “text” as an unknown which is correlative to the operations of some inquirer. If these operations yield answers, then a text is a determinate object of understanding, a possibly known. What is determinate about the text as an object of understanding will be relative to the purposes, questions, intellectual development, modes of expression, and so on of the inquirer; hence the multiplicity of meanings possible for a particular text. Finally, whenever answers to the relevant questions about what a text means are correct, the transition from a possible meaning to a known meaning has occurred. The determinate meaning “invented” by the intelligent inquirer is “found” to be true.

What are the implications of the preceding remarks for the conventional contrast between eisegesis and exegesis? As noted at the beginning, what commonly appears as a pair of opposites becomes a distinction between the conditions for understanding or reading a text (eisegesis) and the conditions for justifying that understanding or reading (exegesis). The meaning of a text is not discernible in terms of being “fabricated” or “found” but becomes the more complicated question of whether the creative and inventive guesses of the interpreter have been on target.

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