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Literary Interpretation

DONALD G. MARSHALL

HEDEL characterizes a profession as an institution that mediates between the individual's work and an encompassing social structure. One way it does so is by offering models that exemplify the practices of competent professionals. The scholar and the critic are two traditional models for literary professionals, and the theorist is a recent addition. Yet the salience of these figures obscures a professional practice that pervades all three and gives literary study its special character: the practice of interpretation. Few literary academics would identify themselves as "interpreters," yet most spend much of their careers training students in the practice of interpreting, presenting interpretations of literary works to students and to one another, and trying to make their own practices as interpreters subtle and penetrating enough to respond to the capacity of serious writing to provoke endless thought.

What is interpretation? The term's use outside literary study may furnish some guiding hints. Interpreter is the ordinary name for someone who translates, particularly in face-to-face situations.¹ Similarly, an interpreter is one who translates spoken words into sign language for the hearing impaired. In the performing arts, critics and audiences want to hear how a performer interprets a well-known musical composition or play. At parks or restored historic sites, an interpreter explains the sights or exhibitions to visitors. Despite variations, we find here a basic structure. An interpreter is someone who helps another understand the meaning of something. What is to be understood is already there, but it is ~~unlike~~ ^{herm} knowledge and skill. In Latin, the word *interpretus* refers to a negotiator, mediator, or messenger, as well as to an expounder or explainer. The name for reflection, on interpretation, *hermeneutics*, comes from a Greek word meaning variously to translate, to put into words, or to explain.

Literary interpretation is another specification of this basic structure. The literary interpreter helps someone understand the meaning of a text. Knowledge of a text's language and of relevant historical contexts and references is presupposed or must be supplied before interpreting can begin. But alienness is also presupposed: something in the text or in our distance from it in time and place makes it obscure. The interpreter's task is to make the text speak again. This task is accomplished by "reading" the text and by helping students learn to read it. Interpreting is reading; what makes professional literary study distinctive among the academic disciplines is its deployment of extremely complex skills of reading. What then is "reading," and where does it go wrong or fall short so that it needs the disciplined help interpreting gives it?

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Before we can answer, we need to notice that this description—that the literary interpreter helps someone understand the meaning of a text—is not a definition in the classic sense of stating a genus and differentia or pointing to essential qualities of a thing. Instead, this description tells a story, inviting us to think about interpreting as an activity and to ask when and where it takes place and under what circumstances, who participates in it and with what commitments, interests, and purposes; and what practices it involves, how they came to be devised, and what their relations are to the whole of our ethical and political, that is, practical and active, lives. These are far-reaching questions, showing us the importance and scope of the topic.

Since the early nineteenth century, philosophers of interpretation have pointed to three closely related "hermeneutic disciplines," each centered on the problem of interpreting texts: law, religion, and literary study. Each of these has a long and complex history, and the nature of legal and religious interpretation continues to be vigorously debated. More recently, the importance of interpretation in anthropology, sociology, history, and other disciplines has been recognized. But comparing the fields of law, religion, and literary study may serve to bring out some key features of literary interpretation that are less evident when historical and cultural study:

A law is a general formulation. Its meaning becomes concrete only when it is applied in a particular set of circumstances—a "case"—by those who regard themselves as under its jurisdiction. Cases often involve a potential or actual dispute over this application, and a social institution exists for deciding these disputes: courts of law. The decision has to be rendered by particular persons, the judges. They are not free simply to decide what seems just without reference to the law. But the law cannot speak for itself, nor can those who originally made it be summoned. The judge's fundamental responsibility is to see that justice is done, but the specific task is to make justice speak through the law to the particular dispute. A judicial interpretation is not a statement of fact but a decision, an act that can have grave consequences for many more people than those engaged in the case under consideration. Judges are supposed to set aside personal interests and biases, yet human decisions always implicate values and beliefs. Consequently, controversies arise not only about particular decisions and understandings of the law but about these implicit values and beliefs. For a literary interpreter, what seems especially relevant is the judge's double responsibility to adhere to an existing text and yet also to make that text speak actively in a present situation that ordinarily involves deeply rooted disagreement.

In religion, the universal idea seems to be that a divine will can be expressed in signs, whether omens and oracles or sacred scriptures. A religious interpreter's task is to enable that will to reach its intended audience. Here, too, meaning is an act to be performed rather than a mere idea to be disclosed. The message may be good news, but it often imposes unwelcome demands, so that interpreter and audience may be in an antagonistic relation. Since religion . . .

ambiguous and enigmatic yet also demand a strong response from believers, intense controversy often arises over how to interpret them, sometimes with dire historical consequences. As in law, religious interpreters claim to be reading sacred signs, not stating *personal opinion*.² Even more than in law, religious interpretation raises problematic questions about what community is addressed by a divine message. A tribal religion generally asserts authority only within the specific group that acknowledges it, so that unresolved disagreements over interpretation can produce schisms in the community. A few religions claim to address all humankind, and they proselytize among nonbelievers, that is, other communities who may refuse to accept that claim or even find it highly offensive. Religious interpretation thus forcefully raises issues about the source and authority of its signs and messages, about the authority of an interpreter and an interpretation, and about the claims of that authority on communities of believers and nonbelievers.

In both law and religion, a number of paradoxes emerge. Understanding the meaning of a legal or religious text is vital to right action, yet the text is unable to speak for itself. Understanding comes about through the interpreter's agency, yet the meaning *conveyed* is ascribed to belong to the text, not the interpreter. The meaning is something to be done as well as to be known, yet the audience may not welcome this demand to turn meaning into responsive action. Meaning is addressed to a community, but specifying the community may be controversial, and those addressed may refuse to acknowledge the authority of either the message or the interpreter. While literary interpretation has neither the law's power to enforce decisions nor religion's claim of divine sanction, it contains its own versions of these paradoxes.

In thinking about literary interpretation, one may be tempted to move immediately to a practical concern with the contemporary variety of *interpretive methods or approaches*, such as deconstruction, formalism, new historicism, and so on. But it may be more useful in the long run to begin by reflecting on the basic components of interpretation so as to bring out what belongs to all interpretive practices. In the description I propose, these components are text, interpreter, the audience to whom interpretation is directed, meaning, and the resources that help achieve understanding. Whatever the approach or the debate about approaches, interpreting remains a complex social practice situated within a historical moment.

Let me begin with text. The word *itself* is somewhat strange and of recent vintage. Its increasing use in literary study reflects a sizable theoretical debate over how we should think of literature (see Barthes; Foucault). Until recently, literary interpretation focused on so-called great imaginative works, most often within a single country and language. The term *work* suggests that a poem or novel is an object that already has a determinate and permanent form crafted to express its maker's intentions to . . .

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to the work as a structured whole; and should understand a work as an expression of an author's or creator's originating idea. This conception may seem the obviously reasonable one, but the term *text* challenges it. As Robert Scholes' Chapter "Canonicy and Textuality" in this book makes clear, literary interpreters increasingly question the designation of only a few works as "great" and therefore deserving of special attention or a special kind of attention. They want to read "noncanonical" literary works from American, European, and all other cultures, and, indeed, they want to read "texts" of all kinds, from philosophical works to psychological case histories; from legal cases to ethnographic reports of other cultures and other works of reportage; from sacred scriptures to song lyrics, bumper stickers, graffiti, music videos, and soap operas. They often connect "literary" texts with historical documents or with descriptions of historical events, and they do not feel obliged to read "whole" works or to keep different works separate.

The term *text* thus deliberately permits the interpreter wide scope. It encompasses the continuous substance of all human signifying activities and allows us to point to something very general, namely, to whatever seems to invite interpretation, or to whatever the interpreter sets up as an object for interpreting. Academics speak of "reading" films, paintings, buildings, the urban landscape, argues that all social action is "text" insofar as it contains and conveys a meaning ("Model of the Text"), and some literary academics treat current affairs, such as issues of nuclear policy, as texts to be interpreted. Perhaps the furthest extension is expressed in a now famous phrase of the philosopher Jacques Derrida: "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte," a rather carefully worded maxim that has been translated as "There is nothing outside the text" (*Of Grammatology* 158). The term *text* thus reminds us that interpreters decide, on the basis of their own interests and questions, what materials to interpret and what practices will satisfy the need or desire to interpret them. It lessens the implied gap between what interpreters write and what they write about—both are "texts." It reminds us that we focus our attention on a text for some purpose, to ask some question of it, and that these questions are as much ours as the text's. We must become active and decide where or even whether a text begins and ends, what questions we want to ask, how we will go about answering them, and so on.

D. C. Greenham's chapter "Textual Scholarship" in this book shows that texts are not simply there, waiting for us to find and interpret them. Every text emerges from a complicated historical process of creation and transmission. Its author may be anonymous or multiple. If "Homer" was a single poet, he assembled material that emerged in an oral bardic tradition. In Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, as in Renaissance and baroque painting, collaboration was common. Ezra Pound's editing and revision of T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* made it a very different poem. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* translates, adapts, and expands a poem by Boccaccio. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of the mad Mrs. Rochester. Texts are constituted

and reconstituted in a series of copies and editions that may vary significantly. William Wordsworth's *Prelude* exists in several manuscript revisions, one of which became the basis of the posthumous 1850 edition, but modern commentators often prefer to base their interpretations on an earlier version copied out in full. They sometimes print materials Wordsworth never worked into the *Prelude* or even assemble poems out of several drafts Wordsworth never brought to a fair copy. Moreover, a text reaches us already saturated with the purposes and estimates of those who transmitted it. Some biblical writings became the official canon of Jewish and Christian scriptures; others are apocryphal, accepted by some sects, rejected by others; yet another mass of writing is granted authority by no modern sect. Some texts or writers (Shakespeare, Homer, Plato) are already acclaimed; others (*Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Marx, Freud) are surrounded by controversy. The way a text is printed or bound, the scholarly apparatus of notes and commentary that may accompany it, the circumstances under which we first encounter it—whether we see it in a bookstore, library, or classroom or hear of it through a comment by a newspaper reviewer, a friend, a teacher, or in another book—all shape our initial orientation to it. Interpreters are therefore necessarily interested in how a text got put together and how and why it comes to us.

Yet if we cannot take for granted the text we interpret, neither do we set it up arbitrarily, willfully, or by individual fiat. A text is constituted and transmitted to us in a complicated social and historical process of which our act of interpretive attention becomes a part. This process and our participation in it presuppose interests that likewise have their own history (and consequently their own future as well). But even if it is not merely a given, the text does take the form of "signs," usually words but always some material bearer of meaning. What investigates interpreting is an interest in eliciting and appropriating this meaning.

The next components of interpretation are the interpreter and the audience. Some readers who find academic interpretations excessive or wrongheaded and who think such interpretations spoil direct enjoyment of the work may question the need for an interpreter. Students and even teachers may make sharp distinctions between texts to study and books to read for pleasure, that is, between texts whose interpretation is perhaps a duty but certainly a labor and texts where interpreting seems minimal and invisible. Pedagogy gives the interpreter an unusual authority: it is the teacher who grades the student's paper, not Sophocles, Jane Austen, or Wolfe. Soyinka. Students learn the methods and approach of the teacher, not "literature" directly. It is rarely immediately clear to students why these particular texts are chosen for interpreting, what the purposes and results of interpreting them will be, or what the origin and justification of the teacher's basic interpretive questions and practices are.

The relations of interpreters to their audiences are various. Sometimes readers care so deeply about a particular text or book that they are eager to hear it discussed and to offer their own views. Christianity, for instance, begins as

an interpretation of prophecies in Hebrew scripture and then of texts that record oral traditions of the life and teaching of Jesus. Christians ostensibly are a community constituted by a shared interpretation of texts regarded as sacred. Yet the development of interpretive practices and the debate over them has been central to Christianity, and these debates still offer important lessons for contemporary interpretive theory. Similarly, a student may be eager to know about Shakespeare but find his words, cultural context, and presuppositions alien. The history of interpretive commentary on Shakespeare tells us a great deal not only about Shakespeare but about the ideas and concerns of successive generations of interpreters and their audiences. Much modern poetry and fiction present a different kind of challenge to understanding; but, again, students may eagerly seek an interpreter's help. When a student reads a text and does not find it particularly puzzling, however, the teacher's interpretations may seem obvious or artificially manufactured. The interpretation may seem too detailed or picky or focused on questions tangential to the work, or it may seem to originate in a completely different agenda.

Academics who share their interpretations with other academics through publication or presentation at professional meetings find themselves in a context quite different from that of the classroom. The profession takes the form of an ongoing conversation or debate over what to interpret and how, and a professor must become aware of the current state of this conversation and of what will be seen by other professionals as a contribution to it. As students advance in literary study, they join more fully in this conversation. Good teachers always try to discern and respond to the questions students at any stage actually have. But teachers also lead students to ask other questions and to find other ways of answering those questions — ways closer to those regarded as important in current professional work. Students may find this transition awkward and may at first feel as if they are learning to play a highly artificial game. This view has some validity: students' skepticism encourages even expert interpreters to ask whether the enterprise makes sense and why. But ideally, as students learn the varied interpretive practices within the profession, they come to see the genuine insights and issues that underlie those practices and that characterize the profession.

Because this professional conversation has its own history and logic, it is not always immediately intelligible to outside observers. Nonparticipants can easily mock it by picking out bits of jargon or strange-sounding titles of essays presented at meetings or published in journals. Such mockery is sometimes informed and unreasonable, as the hilarious but disheartening third book of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* demonstrates. In describing the absurd projects of the Academy of Lagado, Swift mocks modern science at its birth. But the subsequent achievements of science mock the mockery. Interpretation, too, may seem strange to nonprofessional readers, even those generally knowledgeable about literature. Like students, though in a different way, such readers may need an explanation of why a particular question or interpretation is...
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why expressing it may require a specialized vocabulary. Thus interpreters, whose aim is to help an audience understand, must take account of that audience's knowledge, interests, ways of talking, and membership — whether students, generally educated nonprofessionals, or other professional interpreters. But because interpreters are also responsible to the text and what they think it means, they often want to lead the audience to different questions and language. Interpreters not infrequently find themselves in the ethically perilous position of arguing or implying that their audience ought to care about this particular text, ought to feel the presence of these particular questions and problems, and ought to try to respond in this particular way.

Both the audience's trouble with specific parts of a text and the interpreter's choice of words to make the text understandable are historically situated responses. The relation of interpreter to audience can be problematic: to say an interpreter helps another reader understand a text does not exclude divergent or even antagonistic elements in the relationship. Professional interpreters are part of a professional interpretive community (or a network of communities) within which some interpretations and interpretive practices have become widely accepted while others are the subject of intense debate. If we focus on an isolated person reading a single text fixed in print, we can easily lose sight of the social and dialogic character of interpreting. But its full nature emerges only in that context.

Texts

Perhaps no topic in the theory of interpretation has been more debated in our century than the nature of the meaning that emerges in the complex social process called interpreting and the relation of meaning to the various and variegated texts that occasion it. Meaning in these cases has a paradoxical character: it is not simply there and waiting for us; and yet, though it cannot come into being without our activity, it is not a product simply of that activity. This paradox emerges in Plato's dialogue the *Protagoras*, when Socrates and Protagoras discuss the meaning of a poem by Simonides in order to focus their inquiry into whether virtue can be taught. Commenting on texts was a staple of the Greek Sophists' pedagogy, and Socrates shows he can interpret the poem as subtly as they do, if need be. But in the end, he objects to the way the argument becomes inconclusive when it becomes a matter of puzzling over what a text means, and he compares interpreters to vulgar people who bring in "flutes" to entertain at a party, whereas properly educated people know how to entertain one another with their own conversation (347b–348a). Why not just examine our own ideas to see which are true or false? If a text's meaning is so obscure that it needs interpreting, why bother with it?

In fact, the word meaning is somewhat misleading. Interpretation does not just aim to state a "theme" in the form of a proposition about the human condition, or general social issues, a proposition that could be formulated separately from the text and with which we could agree or disagree on a...
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that "what the text says" has something of the character of a command, a word spoken to us whose consequences in and for our lives we feel obliged to consider, even if we decide to reject it. To say that an interpreter helps a text speak again underscores the complexity of interpretation's aim. In speaking, meaning has the form of an event in an intricate and historically situated social process with manifold ramifications that neither the speaker nor the hearer controls fully. A literary text is an instrument we can use to understand human experience which means that it enables us to take up a complex, detailed, and nuanced orientation toward our lives. In a well-known formulation, Cleanth Brooks has argued that interpretation aims not at paraphrase but at making the experience of the text available to the reader ("Heresy of Paraphrase").

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle already grasps the philosophical depth of this kind of meaning. Tragedy, he says, aims to arouse and "purge" certain emotions (ch. 6). But later, speaking in terms of knowledge, he remarks that poetry is more philosophical and serious than history; thus somewhat cryptic phrase asserts that, far better than records of fact, stories repay an attention aimed at gaining applicable insight into human experience. Stories, he adds, express the "universal," by which he means not some abstract proposition but the coherence of events in the story's plot (ch. 9). Aristotle does not explicitly coordinate the twin ideas of purging and the universal, but he seems to mean that the coherence of plot that gives tragedy its self-subsistence as a thing also gives to the flow of our feelings an exemplary formulation, an identifiable character we can call on in our ordinary lives.³ From this perspective, interpretation neither states a proposition as the meaning of a text nor anatomizes a fixed textual structure. It aims to trace the weave of thoughts, feelings, words, figures, sounds, and representations in a text, a weaving taken up into the thinking and feeling that constitute readers' diverse responses.

This difficult idea has been repeatedly lost and recovered in the history of interpretation, but unless we grasp it, we miss the aim of interpretation. What characteristically instigates interpretation is that the interpreter anticipates more meaning than a text appears to deliver. Thus anticipation may be due to a text's cultural reputation or standing. It may arise from a conviction that a text is symptomatic of larger cultural forces or that it embodies or illustrates some psychological or philosophical insight. But in any case, interpretation begins when a text appears to stand out from a background and invite commentary. Consequently, the enigmatic poetic text is exemplary for interpretation. What makes a text both poetic and enigmatic?

A student once told me he found, on the kitchen table in his apartment, an envelope on which his roommate had scribbled the following words: "Investigate the death of bears." As it happened, his roommate was a zoologist noting a possible dissertation topic. Yet the words are resonantly enigmatic. Encountered by chance, stripped of discursive context, they are bound together by an internal rhythm: a four-syllable latinate imperative verb balances four Anglo-Saxon monosyllables forming a noun phrase, the whole sentence in iambic

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meter. Such a sentence attracts the mind to linger over it, but it does not determine exactly what one might say. Anything we may feel stimulated to say aims not to dispel this attraction but to preserve it, along with the words to which it is a response.

This effect is even clearer with the far richer structures of poetry, as the following stanza by Emily Dickinson may illustrate:

Safe in their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—

Sleep the week members of the Resurrection—
Rafter of satin,
And Roof of stone.

(Poems 100; no. 216)

She sent this stanza in a note to her sister-in-law Sue Dickinson, along with a second stanza that Sue did not like. Emily replied with a different second stanza, but Sue again demurred and added:

It just occurs to me that the first verse is complete in itself it needs no other, and can't be coupled—Strange things always go alone—as there is only one Gabriel and one Sun—you never made a peer for that verse, and I guess your kingdom doesn't hold one—I always go to the fire and get warm after thinking of it, but I never can again—...

(Letters 162; no. 238)

Emily tried a third time, sending another second stanza to Sue with the question, "Is this frostier?" (162). The poem is usually published with this first stanza and at least one of the attempts at a second. But Sue heard the complex rhythms she interprets for Emily the atmospheric "frostiness" of the stanza. In this private exchange between two close friends, poet and interpreter are virtually collaborating in the creation of the text. In fact, it is written for just such an intelligent reading, but because she rarely encountered that response, Dickinson left virtually all her poems unpublished.

The nature of textual meaning and its implications for interpretive practice have been at the heart of debates in contemporary literary study. Earlier in this century, the Russian formalist and Prague structuralist schools, as well as English and American New Criticism, sought an interpretive language adequate to the linguistic structure and its imagistic rendering of experience. For the New Critics, interpretation meant revealing the coherence of the structure and the experience, both separately and together in the poem. Dissent from this conception fueled the important contemporary movement of deconstruction. Deconstruction calls into question the New Critical belief that a literary work synthesizes "experience" (that is, the themes and values literary works express) with the work's linguistic structures. In the deconstructive critic Paul de Man's terms,



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"a text's "grammar"—the syntactic structures of its language—contradicts its "rhetoric," its figurality and the metaphoricity it aims to project. De Man once condensed this view into the elliptical formula, "every text is an allegory" of its own unreadability." Literary theory, he argued, is the "Resistance to Theory," that is, a rigorous philosophical reflection on the way careful reading shows how every text's language undermines any attempt to articulate a meaning autonomous from that language that could be put to some further intellectual or practical use. De Man himself explicitly recognized that his ideas stood paradoxically close to those of Reuben Brower and other New Critics ("Return to Philology" 23-24). He shared their belief that literary study should focus on the reading of texts. But the New Critics went on to argue that interpretive reading, by demonstrating the insuperable asymmetry between meaning and the way meaning is conveyed in language, would reveal both the defining nature of literature and the unique identity of each literary text. De Man tried to show instead the impossibility of precisely that unity.

De Man returns us, though with an opposed inflection, to the peculiarity of interpretive meaning Plato disclosed in the *Protagoras* and in his objections to writing at the end of the *Phaedrus*. Texts produce endless meaning according to De Man, because they yield no definite meaning. This fact does not destroy the concept of text or of literature but defines a literary text as one that both evokes an anticipation of meaning and undercuts every meaning the interpreter proposes for it. De Man argued that this process was the essence of all language but that texts we call "literary" are distinguished by their knowledge of this unsettling state of affairs and their failure to disguise it ("Resistance to Theory" 9-11). His view forcibly captures the nonpropositional, undecidable, or indeterminate character of interpretive meaning, which is rather a way of lingering therapeutically in the presence of a text. But deconstruction is also too negative, meaning:

More recent developments in interpretive practice have not refuted deconstruction, but attempted to displace it by dislocating interpretation in relation to political, ethical, and social issues (see Cudler in this volume). Insofar as these developments do not turn into a kind of historiography or an intervention in current affairs that simply uses texts as a disposable launching pad for social commentary, they overlap with and yet also diverge from the twist deconstruction gave to New Criticism's central idea. I have already noted that the word text paves the way for regarding every kind of cultural or social phenomenon in an object of reading. This extension, by no means arbitrary, brings out the all-pervasiveness of meaning in human life. It follows that interpreters may read interpretations diverge from de Man's kind of deconstruction insofar as they wish to harness interpretive practices to a particular agenda of social reform. De Man would question, not the merits of that agenda but the subordination of reading texts to other sorts of aims. Deconstruction suggests that it is impossible

to confine interpretive practices to literary study, and yet the consequences of those practices cannot be controlled or guaranteed in advance.

This issue, however, is inescapable, and it is already apparent in ancient interpretive practice. As social conditions changed, the text of Homer or Vergil came to seem alien; though it remained highly respected and its study was the core of childhood education. In response to this alienation, "allegorical" interpretation emerged as a way of talking about the text to reconnect it with current ideas about human life and thus reinforce its relevance. Because of the wide gap between our understanding of the text and what its late antique interpreters say about it, the older allegorical way of talking can seem to us very strained. For instance, Vergil's *Aeneid* opens with a storm and shipwreck. Aeneas is crossing the ocean with a band of exiles after the fall of Troy, and the oracles of the gods have revealed that he will found a new and even greater city. For various reasons, Juno hates him and instigates the storm to destroy the Trojans or at least delay their new beginning. A modern interpreter might say various things about this opening. In generic terms, it follows Horace's advice to start an epic "in the midst of things," and the exciting event gives Vergil an opportunity for much vivid description. Theoretically, it shows the cosmic scale of the story, in which human beings live out their fates subject both to natural forces beyond their control and to inscrutable purposes of sometimes hostile gods who may or may not reward human virtue. Interpretively, by echoing a storm in Homer's *Odyssey*, it defines a tradition within which Vergil wishes to appear as a competitor for high rank.

An obscure grammarian named Fulgentius, writing more than five hundred years after Vergil died, offered a quite different interpretation, suited to a cultural context that had changed greatly since Vergil. As a schoolteacher, he used the poem to teach young boys Latin and induct them into Roman culture, which retained its prestige even though the Italian peninsula had fallen to the Ostrogoths and had to be reconquered in the seventh century. As a Christian, Fulgentius had to reconcile the values implicit in pagan culture with the values of a still alien religion (Christianity was adopted by the emperor Constantine early in the fourth century, repudiated by Julian the Apostate, and reconfirmed only after his death in 363). Adopting a self-conscious and sophisticated form that maneuvered neatly through this tangled cultural situation, he stages his interpretive work as a schoolroom dialogue between himself and the ghost of Vergil, which he calls up for the occasion. Vergil can thus authoritatively explain the moral meaning, and Fulgentius can agree with it where it is consistent with Christianity. Where it is not, Vergil can graciously concede that Christianity's insights are superior. Instead of an epic beginning in medias res, Fulgentius was supposed to begin at birth. Therefore, Fulgentius contends, the storm and shipwreck symbolize the birth of the soul. Juno, Fulgentius points out, is the goddess of childbirth. The god who directly releases the storm is Acolus, and

he translates as "the destructiveness of time," citing as authority a verse from Homer's *Iliad* (though the verse makes no mention of Aecolus).⁴ By such devices, Fulgentius transforms the epic from the story of Rome's founding into a general allegory of moral development, preserving cultural continuity while rendering Vergil usable within a changed cultural context.

I do not suggest that we could endorse, still less adopt, Fulgentius's interpretive practice, though it was commonplace in interpretation from Plato to the Renaissance—and, indeed, this kind of symbiotic reconciliation of old and new through interpretation kept Vergil central to Western culture from Dante to T. S. Eliot and Hermann Broch's novel *The Death of Vergil*. The point is that interpreters do not just freely elicit meanings from texts; rather, they make interpretation the means of synthesizing and carrying on a whole culture. Interpretation always functions this way. If we ask, with Socrates, "why we should bother "discovering" our own ideas by reading them out of past texts, the apparent answer is that in cultural and moral life humans have felt a need for traditional ideas, that is, ideas that they see as continuous with time-tested experience and not unprecedented insights with uncertain consequences.

It does not follow that interpretation is always conservative. Indeed, just the opposite is true. Interpretation, we recall, presupposes that a text does not speak its meaning for itself. It holds itself back from us in some ways. Even when the meaning of a text seems self-evident to most readers, interpretation may aim to reveal the acquired practices on which that self-evidence is grounded. In any case, the interpreter must talk in a way that reorients readers—by supplying background information, descriptions of the text and its structure, or explicit statements of its thematic, cultural, or artistic presuppositions—thus leading them into a situation (what phenomenologists call a "horizon") within which they can understand and respond to what the text says. But this process has a paradoxical consequence, for the need to make meaning explicit and conscious makes it apparent that what is said could at every point be otherwise. By reflectively recovering meaning from its embeddedness in the text and in social processes, interpretation makes it something that can be chosen or rejected.

This paradox has been posed as the tension between a "hermeneutics of recovery," which aims to bring the reader to sympathy with the text and what it says, and a "hermeneutics of suspicion," which lays bare the presuppositions and processes of signification of a text and renders them questionable.⁵ Naomi Schor's essay "Feminist and Gender Studies" in this book shows some of the ways contemporary interpreters may unmask a text's refusal to question its own presuppositions and may dissolve its authority over its readers. But, in fact, both kinds of interpretation deploy the art of grasping what is questionable, in a text and also in the reader. The hermeneutics of recovery, directed to making the text speak again and speak to us, also presupposes a distance or alienation between text and reader. This kind of interpretation speaks on behalf of the text to people who have misunderstood it or who have understood it too reductively and failed to grasp it in its fullness. The hermeneutics of recovery brings the

text into the present, but as a force contrary to the presumed self-sufficiency of present opinion, and in this way brings into question the reader's presuppositions and whatever in a reader blocks responsiveness to the text's meaning.

Suspicious interpreters, however, do not aim simply to destroy an interest in the text and consign it to the trash heap of history. They assume that some important present concern needs to be addressed at least in part by grappling with past texts.⁶ Moreover, literary interpreters who wish to bring into question deeply rooted assumptions in our personal and social lives—assumptions whose depth lies precisely in the processes of language where we make meanings without being aware of doing so—have found a powerful inspiration and a powerful tool in the interpretive reading that has been the central achievement of literary study in our century. Accordingly, all interpretation has a doubly "critical" power: on the one hand, against readers who take their presuppositions and predilections for granted and, on the other hand, against the text, whose presuppositions and processes of signification lose self-evidence when brought to explicit consciousness. The specific nature of interpretation is still its commitment to bringing out a kind of meaning that remains indissociable from the structure of a particular text.

I have so far spoken of interpreting as a practice in which one person says something that aims to help another grasp the meaning and force of a text. But there are many interpreters, not just one. Interpretations accumulate over time and are not merely diverse but sometimes conflicting. If interpreting responds to a need to understand a text in our present situation, why attend to past interpretations, which may have become so alien as to need interpreting themselves? Is there some unity behind the various interpretations of a single text or behind the variety of interpretive practices? If interpretations contradict each other, how can we decide which interpretation is valid?

Since interprets speak within a specific cultural situation, diversity is to some degree a function of varying contexts. Interpreting these interpretations may help us see the cultural situation within which an interpretive remark or practice had a local validity—and that interpretation may still seem valid to us, either because the situation has not changed or because we find something analogous in our own moment. The history of interpretation often reveals ideas about literature that authors shared or ways they anticipated their works would be read. In the famous letter to Can Grande della Scala (95–111; authorship is disputed), Dante applied to the *Divine Comedy* the complex allegorical interpretive methods that had been developed throughout the Middle Ages for reading the Bible. We may infer that he felt able to write a poem with such richly layered meanings in part because he knew at least some readers would be trained to read it this way. Studying past interpretations may thus help us understand how to approach past works. For example, when John Dryden in his "Essay of Dramatic Poesy" praises Ben Jonson's play *Epicoene* for observing the unities of time, place, and action, we can see that he is speaking within the context of a

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Renaissance quest for the "rules" of poetry. Since few modern critics speak this way, a passion to find the rules may strike us as misguided. We have to remember that the Renaissance brought profound changes in the audience for drama and in taste. Dryden observes that although critics attributed the "unities" to Aristotle, the concept was invented by Italian and French critics, who then interpreted classical authors so as to assert a legitimating precedent. More generally, writers always need some social contract with their audience to specify what good poetry looks like. The Renaissance quest for rules is an unusually explicit renegotiation of that contract. Contemporary arguments among black American writers over which poetic and fictional forms are best suited to express their experience and to combat racism serve a similar need (see Gates in this volume). Requiring that plays observe the unities expresses a demand that literary works render experience in a concentrated, intensified form. To that extent, T. S. Eliot argues, the doctrine of the unities may claim a universal validity (17-39).

Quite different issues are raised by the multiplicity of contemporary interpretations. The New Critics insisted that interpretive reading was the core of literary study, and they created a reading practice that could be easily learned. The result—not achieved without a struggle—was that, for literary academics, publishing readings of literary works became as legitimate as publishing philological and historical investigations. With the steady increase in the number of college teachers after World War II and the requirement in many universities that faculty members publish in order to gain tenure and advance their careers, published interpretations proliferated rapidly. By now, as much has been published about some famous works that reading it all and keeping up with recent additions would be a full-time job.

The sheer bulk of interpretation creates a problem for a reader, particularly one who wants to learn from it how to become a professional interpreter and join in the professional conversation. Reading it all is impossible, but sifting out what is most valuable is difficult. Since most of it must perform remain unread, one may be tempted to read none of it or as little as possible. The whole business of interpretation may come to seem pointless, as interpreters drown in the flood they have themselves created. Interpreters may cease to feel guided by a genuine need for understanding and may instead feel they are merely contending among themselves for professional recognition with no wider cultural significance.

Such discouraging conclusions seem to me unjustified. It is important to avoid misleading conceptions about both the production and the consumption of interpretive writing. Like all scholars, interpreters have a primary responsibility to the historical record. They need to know as much as possible about the author's life and other writings; the genesis and publication history of the text; the historical milieu, including contemporary writing; and the state of the language and relevant conventions and traditions of discourse. This kind of information does not render interpretation unnecessary, but situating the text in these various contexts opens interpretive possibilities.

The proliferation of interpretations usefully forces us to surrender the idea

that we can master a literary work or its interpretation. Within the humanities, we carry on a conversation that is partial and endlessly open; we do not speak from a position of authority based on total knowledge. It would be equally mistaken either to ignore what has already been written or to think one must read it all before saying anything. As in all modern social experience, we are members to a greater or lesser degree in an overlapping network of variously constituted groups. Interpretation is the practical activity, the concrete substance, of the social group or groups for whom the meaning of a text or a body of texts is a matter of concern. Professional interpreters are simply those who have given their working lives to that concern, and within the profession we find a further overlapping network of specialties. Some interpreters, of course, may misunderstand their profession and speak as though interpretations are new discoveries that contribute to collective progress toward a unified and final understanding of a text. And there is some justice to the fear that such a large and dispersed profession will lose its sense of common purposes, its mutually intelligible ways of working, and its shared standards for estimating which professional work is valuable. But if we set professional interpretation as a set of collective practices for holding in mind texts worth the effort of understanding, then joining in that profession requires only that we read widely enough to develop a sense for when our own interpretations may justifiably claim other professionals' attention. Above all, we should seek our interpretations that stretch and challenge our own understanding, because the more varied and diverse the contexts within which the text has been enabled to speak, the deeper that understanding will become.

To be sure, interpretations do not just coexist peacefully, as the following much debated poem by Wordsworth illustrates:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly year.
No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

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This short lyric may seem too obvious to invite much interpretation, but dozens of comments, often in sharp disagreement with one another, have been directed to it. A first-time reader might simply wonder who "she" is. An interpreter might point out that this poem is one of a series that Wordsworth wrote about a young girl he named "Lucy," who died

an institution that mediates between the
intention. One way it does so is
certainly. The

In saying these things, the interpreter has taken for granted that a reader feels it is explanatory to set a poem in the context of its author's other writings and method but a way of making sense that is deeply embedded in our individual and social life. That way could in theory be challenged; this particular text does not say how old "she" is, nor does it explicitly instruct a reader to give up this text with any others. To refuse historical explanations, therefore, is not indefensible in theory, though it may seem quixotic or perverse. The important point is that the force of even so "self-evident" an interpretive remark rests implicitly on practices that make sense to a social group.

The tone of the second stanza and the relation of the second stanza to the first stanza have evoked disagreement between interpreters. Some hold that the second stanza expresses the speaker's horror as he moves from illusion to the harsh reality that the girl has been reduced to a motionless, dead thing. This interpretation also rests on cultural presuppositions. Dying occasions grief, and the shattering of illusion is painful. But the text does not use the word *death*, nor does the second stanza name the speaker's feelings. Are other attitudes reassimilated into the endless cycles of nature. It would follow that the tone of the second stanza is resigned, perhaps to some degree celebratory. Some interpreters have tried to document that Wordsworth held such beliefs in the period when he wrote this poem. They are using a biographical and historical approach to support their side in a dispute over a psychological approach to the poem.

It would be easy to add other examples of this interaction between detailed readings of a text and a more or less explicit, more or less systematically stated, body of orienting presuppositions. A feminist reading might attend to the silence of Lucy throughout these poems, to the male poet's particular variant on the traditional theme of the female muse, or to the association of the female figure with nature. Annabel Patterson's essay "Historical Scholarship" in this book discusses new historicism. Representatives of that approach might be struck by the poet's passivity or by his strong investment in rural nature as a locus of value, and they might seek to understand the political, social, and economic forces that influence the development of an individual writer who sees experience in these terms. Proponents of any of these readings might deploy several such approaches or draw on elements of them. In actual critical practice, however, we encounter not just disagreement within a single framework of assumptions but both a mix of approaches used to support or contradict interpretations and potential disagreement over the legitimacy of different approaches and of mixing them.

How can we settle these various disagreements? If the text's own words were decisive, the dispute would not have arisen in the first place. We seem to have no choice but to go "outside" the text. The author and the author's intentions seem temptingly close at hand. The New Critics argued that a poem is a public utterance, so that the author's intentions are irrelevant because

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private (Wimsatt and Beardsley). Their critics have argued that only the author's intention establishes meaning and provides a basis for validating interpretation (see Hirsch; Juhl; Harris). In our ordinary social experience, when we do not understand what others say, we ask them to explain their meaning. Wordsworth is long dead, but we might hope that documents in which he stated his opinions survived and could provide a substitute. But obviously those documents, too, need interpretation, as does their relation to the particular poem. We quickly find ourselves in a circle. To discover Wordsworth's intention, we have to interpret texts; but that intention was supposed to tell us how to interpret those very texts. In fact, what we are doing is not moving from texts to the author's intention but widening the circle of interpretation to include more and more texts and using those we find most clear to interpret those we find most obscure. We have not discovered facts that settle the dispute; we have widened its arena.

The idea that a text must have a single, clear meaning and that interpretation should aim to state it is highly questionable, but it has deep roots in our culture. When interpreters discover that what some other interpreters say either fails to capture their own understanding or even conflicts with it, they enter into disputes and eventually ask how to resolve those disputes. But the supposition that interpretive controversies should be or need to be "settled" ought itself to be examined. Ever since its origins in the seventeenth century, science has provided some modern intellectuals with an attractive model of a discipline that seems to have an effective method for settling disputes among its practitioners. It is tempting to suppose that if we could find the right method, we could be sure of our interpretive results. Yet many contemporary philosophers of science have argued that scientific inquiry is far more complex than the traditional model allows. It seems even more evident that our understanding of literary texts is open to the whole texture and activity of our lives.

In the materials collected in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observes, "In (11). What we call "science," he argues, consists not just of statements of presumed fact but also of elaborated ways of disputing facts and theories and resolving disputes. To try to subject matters of religious belief or aesthetics to scientific ways of talking would be to misunderstand and distort both them and science (53-59). But, Wittgenstein suggests, science is so pervasive a force in modern life that people succumb to this temptation over and over (19-20, 24-28). He argues that both artworks and what we take to be our immediate experience of them are rooted in "forms of life," that is, in an indeterminate background of theories, convictions, commitments, practices, and experiences. Controlled experiments or tests against numerically precise predictions are not possible here, and, consequently, disagreements in these matters cannot be brought to a narrow focus that could decide between competing hypotheses.

For instance, Wordsworth wrote his poem about "Lucy" during one of the coldest winters on record in the German village where he and his sister Dorothy

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He was living in dire poverty and studying the German language. He sent the poem in a letter to Samuel Coleridge, who speculated to another correspondent that "in some gloomier moment [Wordsworth] had fancied the moment in which his sister might die" (qtd. in Wordsworth 506-07n). Like the first-time reader I postulated, Coleridge asks who "she" is and then pursues a characteristic interest in the poet's creative process, which he locates in Wordsworth's amorous and imaginative life. Some recent interpreters take a psychoanalytic approach and say that by imagining that death has put Lucy, a symbolic substitute for his sister, beyond his touch, Wordsworth has defended himself against an incestuous wish. We might find this interpretation convincing if it seems consistent with what the text is saying. If we reject a psychoanalytic interpretation, we do so because the Freudian way of talking no longer seems plausible—perhaps because Freud's biologicalism seems reductive, perhaps because we find recent criticisms of psychoanalysis by feminists cogent, or perhaps for other reasons.

Rejecting the psychoanalytic interpretation is not quite the same as saying that psychoanalysis has been "refuted." Knowing how to interpret a text means knowing what to say about it to enhance a particular audience's understanding of it against the background of that audience's whole form of life. To understand a text is to find in our own form of life points of contact with the form of life of which the text is a witness. Where no such points of contact exist, we are simply at a loss for words, and ordinary modes of arguing will not fill the gap. We can understand how believing that the dead are rebosbed into nature could console someone, but a person who felt no grief at the death of a loved child would be unintelligible to us. Wittgenstein put it aphoristically: "If a lion could talk we could not understand him" (*Philosophical Investigations* 223e). Because understanding is rooted in the form of our life together as human beings, differences of understanding cannot be resolved by merely applying the correct method to determine the facts. Interpreters will certainly argue and cite evidence, and no clear line separates localized argumentation within shared assumptions from the tacit background of our individual and shared ways of life. Consequently, interpretive disputes rapidly lay bare the far-reaching contrasts among interpreters' orientations to the deepest realities of human experience.

Reflecting on these issues—the variety of interpretations and interpretive disputes—reveals that in interpretation, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, "the interpreter comes into play" (*Truth and Method* 491). The need for immediate absorption into the ongoing stream of practical life. In this moment of our incomprehension, understanding cannot be coerced by argument or manufactured by method or technique. It occurs when an interpreter finds a responsive word through which the text speaks to us again, so that the varied meanings and force of the text are activated in new and diverse contexts. What word will accomplish this reactivation cannot be predicted or guaranteed! But

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our capacity to find that word is interpretation's humane significance and the reason it remains at the heart of literary study.

Hermeneutics is the term increasingly used for theoretical reflections on making understanding and interpreting meaning. Two philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, provide the most comprehensive and penetrating accounts of hermeneutics available. Among their many books, Gadamer's *Truth and Method* is long, difficult, learned, and immensely rewarding; while Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* is a concise but comprehensive summary. Richard E. Palmer's book remains a useful introductory survey. Among recent works on literary interpretation, those by Gerald L. Bruns, Christopher Butler, Walter A. Davis, Wendell V. Harris, Susan R. Houston, Hans Robert Jauss, and Joseph A. Mazzeo grapple with the full range of issues. Davis classifies the leading conceptions of various interpretive practices, gives a particularly useful demonstration of the different ways each practice would read William Faulkner's short novel *The Bear*, and then tries to integrate them within an encompassing approach to interpretation. Butler addresses the challenge to established interpretive practices from structuralism and deconstruction, as well as interpretation's relation to beliefs or ideologies, such as Marxism, that the interpreter may wish to promote. Anthologies by Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift and by Kurr Muller-Vollmer provide key selections on the theory of interpretation since the Enlightenment.

interpretation is nearly as old. In Western antiquity, three interpretive practices dominate. **Allegorical interpretation** arose among the Greeks as a way of forging a relation between current cultural realities and the poetic and mythological tradition recorded in Homer, Hesiod, and other poets. Plato was skeptical of allegory, and yet he also practiced it in his own way. As a result, philosophical schools after Plato elaborated various techniques for making an examination of traditional poetic texts the occasion for leading students into the philosophical life. A different strand of interpretive practice arose among the Jews, whose religious life was largely conducted by the elaboration and interpretation of meditating on, elaborating, and discussing the meaning and implications of Scripture. A third strand, which emerged among the libertarians of Hellenistic Alexandria in Egypt, was carried on among teachers of grammar and rhetoric. They worked to establish texts and developed techniques for analyzing and expounding them, usually line by line, in a school setting. Good introductions to the allegorical tradition include those by Jon Whitman.¹¹ Michael Fishbane is a leader

works, including those by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, Susan A. Handelman, and José Faur, have discussed midrash in its historical context and in relation to contemporary theory. The Cambridge History of the Bible provides excellent introductory essays on Jewish and Christian interpretation and interpreters. The philological or pedagogical tradition is only beginning to be studied in depth. Medieval Christian culture absorbed all three strands and added its own complications. Robert M. Grant's survey is brief and excellent. The headnotes in A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott's anthology provide a comprehensive short survey of medieval commentary.

The Renaissance and Reformation led to important developments in interpretive theory and practice. The scholarly resources developed for editing and expounding rediscovered ancient texts are the source of modern scholarship. The same techniques were applied to Scripture and other religious texts, with predictably controversial results. But even more important, Martin Luther rejected the practices of the Catholic church and insisted that religious doctrines be based on the Bible alone and that obscurities in the Bible be interpreted solely by reference to other biblical texts. As a result, the Reformation in its intellectual dimension largely took the form of a debate over how to understand the Bible. In the course of that debate, several interpreters came to stress the importance of the writers' original historical context. Hans Frei provides an overview of the rise of historical interpretation.

The post-Renaissance context of interpretation is defined by the emergence of a richly varied secular culture fully aware of non-Christian antiquity and of Christianity's power to provide an apparent common ground of understanding. theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher responded most fully to this situation, and his work is decisive for modern hermeneutics through Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. Mueller-Vollmer's anthology includes key selections and has a good bibliography.

Interpretive theory was transformed, however, by the recognition that interpreters' personal and cultural interests decisively influence their understanding. Friedrich Nietzsche stressed interpreters' will to dominate texts and extract from them what served their own lives and creativity. Karl Marx unmasked the ideological distortions rooted in class and economic relations. Fredric Jameson has most fully developed a Marxist model of interpretation. Sigmund Freud analyzed the force of instinctual and repressed impulses in all thought processes. In a number of his writings, Jacques Lacan synthesizes Freud with other currents of modern thought and exhibits the results in analyses of literary works. Probably the richest synthesis of these various hermeneutics of suspicion, with a strongly Nietzschean accent, is the movement known as deconstruction. The complex and sophisticated works of its founders, Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, offer no easy points of entry, but de Man's *Allegories of Reading* and Derrida's *Dissemination* and *Writing and Difference* contain extended examples of decon-

struction in action on texts. General introductions include those by Jonathan Culler, Vincent B. Leitch, and Christopher Norris. For a contrast between hermeneutics and deconstruction, see Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer's *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*.

University of Illinois, Chicago

NOTES

¹ Translation offers particularly suggestive parallels to interpretation. See Gadamer's discussion in *Truth and Method* 384-89.

² Of course, critics of religion treat this claim as self-serving mystification. See Ricoeur, "The Critique of Religion" (esp. 213). Religious communities themselves frequently warn against false prophets who let personal factors distort their reading of the divine message. Moreover, since different religions take different signs to be sacred, questions arise about how a sign's authority gets established. But in the narrower sense, controversy over a religious interpretation presupposes an agreement that some particular signs do indeed express a binding divine will and therefore that the task is to grasp the message expressed in them.

³ The richest explanation of Aristotle's insight has been given by Wesley Trimpi, who shows how the plot of tragedy stands between and mediates the abstract principles articulated in philosophy and the contingent particulars of actual life (see esp. ch. 2, "The Hypothesis of Literary Discourse").

⁴ The punning etymology and the Homeric citation run afoul of modern scholarly canons, but they enable Fulgentius to synthesize Greek and Roman culture. Moreover, he relies on a Stoic view that similarities between the sounds of two words reveal connections in their meaning that are obscured by their thoughtless and merely practical use in everyday speech (see de Lacy).

⁵ The distinction is already present in Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* 32-36 and 506-24. The terminology had become commonplace by the time of Gadamer's "Hermeneutics of Suspicion."

⁶ Thus, Fredric Jameson argues that "a Marxist negative hermeneutic" must be exercised simultaneously with a Marxist positive hermeneutic" (296). He also argues that Marxism provides the "absolute horizon" within which other current interpretive methods should be situated (17). He defends interpretation and the construction of a hermeneutic against recent theories, including deconstruction, which have been critical of such aims (see 21 and 21n5).

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