

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 13 (2000)

**Artikel:** When Lucy ceas'd to be : optimally and manifestly relevant meanings  
**Autor:** MacKenzie, Ian  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99978>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 16.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# When Lucy ceas'd to be: Optimally and Manifestly Relevant Meanings

Ian MacKenzie

A slumber did my spirit seal,  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks and stones and trees!

Wordsworth's short lyric "A slumber did my spirit seal" has become something of a paradigmatic text for critics who wish to demonstrate theories of meaning, intention or interpretation. It has given rise to a number of readings that have been compared, contrasted and trumped in succeeding critical articles. I will consider some of these readings – including those of a venerable New Critic, Cleanth Brooks; a notable defender of authors' intentions, E.D. Hirsch; a psychoanalytic critic, Norman Holland; and the deconstructionist readers Paul de Man and Hillis Miller – from the viewpoint of a pragmatic account of language, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory, and in particular its claim that literary *communication* involves a reader's inferential recognition of an optimally relevant intended meaning. Relevance theory is also a theory of *cognition*, designed to explain how individuals make sense of the phenomena around them (including literary texts), independently of anyone else's intentions, according to a notion of maximal (rather than optimal) relevance. I will suggest, however, that there are generally advantages in trying to take account of intended meanings and implicatures in literary interpretation. In particular, I will oppose an account of literature and "aesthetic responses" given by Henry Widdowson at the previous SAUTE sym-

posium, such that literature is by definition irrelevant, implicatures are wholly unresolvable, and recourse to intended meanings has no logical priority.

1. Widdowson: literature is untrue, uninformative, irrelevant and obscure

In "Reading the Signs: The Critical Interpretation of Texts," Widdowson states that literature neither refers to the real world nor combines with it, and that consequently

You do not have to worry about whether your interpretation corresponds with the author's communicative intention; you assume that the very existence of the text implies intentionality, some claim to significance, but you are free to assign whatever significance suits you. . . . Literary analysis, therefore, is not concerned with what the writer meant by the text but what the text means, or might mean, to the reader. One might indeed hazard the proposition that what defines a literary text is that it is essentially vacuous, in the sense that it creates a vacuum for the reader to fill. (148, 150)

He gives the example of Krishna, the eponymous *English Teacher* of R.K. Narayan's novel, who, prompted by his wife Susila, writes a poem about her, which begins:

She was a phantom of delight  
When first she gleamed upon my sight  
A lovely apparition sent  
To be a moment's ornament . . .

He reads it to her and she says "I never knew you could write so well" (46). He replies:

"It is a pity you should have underrated me so long; but now you know better. Keep it up. . . . And if possible don't look at the pages, say roughly between 150 and 200, in the *Golden Treasury*. Because someone called Wordsworth has written similar poems." This was an invitation for her to run in and fetch her copy of the *Golden Treasury* and turn over precisely the forbidden pages. She scoured every title and first line and at last pitched upon the original. She read it through, and said, "Aren't you ashamed to copy?"

"No," I replied. "Mine is entirely different. He had written about someone entirely different from my subject." (47)

Widdowson endorses Krishna's logic, because "she" can indeed refer to "all women of all ages and from all ages, and at the same time none of them, a particular female and femininity in general at the same time" (152). This is because, for Widdowson, "the normal contract between parties which enables them to converge on agreed meaning is necessarily in abeyance" (152) in literature, which involves the abandonment of what Grice called the "co-operative principle," with its maxims stipulating that one does not normally say things which are false, obscure or irrelevant. Grice of course added that we can and do regularly and deliberately flout these maxims, thereby giving rise to effects or what he called *implicatures*, but Widdowson argues that we can only flout the maxims against the background of normal expectation, and literature is not normal communication:

Literary texts are not bound by the co-operative conditions of contextual communication. . . . They are of their nature untrue, uninformative, irrelevant and obscure. The maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner are consistently denied, and consequently literary texts give rise to complex and unresolvable implicatures on a vast scale. (153)

Widdowson insists that

[w]e assume intentionality, but there is no way of assigning intentions . . . the literary text is designed to be dissociated from context, and so to give rise to divergent interpretations. Here, there can be no co-operative engagement whereby the text is read as mediating between writer and reader. . . . Since the literary text floats free, you can appropriate it in any way you choose: you are not bound by the co-operative principle because there is nobody to co-operate with. You can perform the text by investing it with your own identity. And this, it seems to me, is what an aesthetic response means. (153)

In fact, Widdowson's suggestion that we are free to assign whatever *significance* we like to a literary text is rather tame: the most famous defender of authors' intentions, E.D. Hirsch, has argued that a reading such as "she = Susila" could even constitute the poem's *meaning*. Although in *Validity in Interpretation* Hirsch famously (or notoriously) argued that *the* meaning of a literary text is that willed or intended by its author, so that to relate textual meaning to any context beyond itself is not to create *meaning* but only *significance*, in the later "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted" he amended his previous claim that future *applications* belong to the realm of significance, and accepted that they can be part of meaning. He attributes his revision of the distinction between meaning and significance to the realisation



that “we language users, being limited creatures, intend our verbal meanings to go beyond what we can pay attention to at any moment. We intend our meanings to transcend our momentary limitations of attention and knowledge” (202). Thus the originating moment of willed utterance fixes only the *principles* of further extrapolation, leaving unforeseen possibilities. Using Shakespeare’s 55th sonnet as an example, Hirsch writes, “The author’s intention in this poem (and this is characteristic of literature, law, and religion) includes an intention to communicate effectively in the future. Not death nor time shall conquer the powerful speech event.” Shakespeare’s is “a historical intention . . . that apparently refuses to fix itself in its originating moment” (205). So

[i]f you think of your beloved in reading Shakespeare’s sonnet, while I think of mine, that does not make the meaning of the sonnet different for us, assuming that we both understand (as of course we do) that the text’s meaning is not limited to any particular exemplification but rather embraces many, many exemplifications. (210)

Moreover, Widdowson’s example of the freedom “to assign whatever significance suits you,” which centres on the deictic pronoun *she*, is clearly loaded: most other words have much more limited reference, and Widdowson goes on to suggest that there *are* “textual constraints on interpretation, and a linguistic basis for consensus” (156), namely the semantic encodings of the language in which the text is written. Yet interpreting the implicatures – including metaphor and irony – that Widdowson describes as “unresolvable” is rarely a matter of semantic decoding. For example, Krishna’s instruction to Susila not to look at the *Golden Treasury*, meaning the exact opposite, was a perfectly resolvable implicature. I am going to suggest that although we *can* appropriate texts in any way we choose, and invest them with our own identity, we can also, as relevance theory suggests, seek to assign authorial intentions and resolve implicatures in literary texts just as much as in ordinary conversation.

## 2. Relevance Theory

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s Relevance Theory seeks to demonstrate that linguistic meaning always depends on context-related inference rather than on semantic and grammatical codes alone. Sperber and Wilson (hereafter S&W) argue that utterances and sentences are only interpretive representations of thoughts, so there is necessarily a gap between the semantic

representations of sentences and the thoughts they actually communicate, but this gap can often be filled by a hearer or reader's inferential recognition of a communicator's intentions, guided by contextual clues. As S&W put it, "languages do not encode the kind of information that humans are interested in communicating. Linguistically encoded semantic representations are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent anything of interest" (174). Relevance theory takes it for granted that utterances and written sentences are generally full of semantic ambiguities and referential ambivalences, and open to innumerable figurative interpretations. Sentences tend not to correspond very closely to thoughts, and even if a sentence does explicitly convey one thought, it might very well implicitly convey others.

A communicator whose informative intention involves making a particular assumption strongly manifest will strongly or explicitly communicate that assumption. An explicitly communicated assumption (a development of the logical form of the utterance; a combination of linguistically encoded and contextually inferred conceptual features) can be called an *explicature*.

But although the use of language *can* achieve explicit communication, this "is not a typical but a limiting case" (55). S&W suggest that "In many – perhaps most – cases of human communication, what the communicator intends to make manifest is partly precise and partly vague" (59). As well as explicatures, speakers can implicitly communicate *weak assumptions* or *implicatures* – contextual assumptions or implications "which a speaker, intending her utterance to be manifestly relevant, manifestly intended to make manifest to the hearer" (194-95). Implicatures are not recovered by the linguistic decoding of semantic representations, but "by reference to the speaker's manifest expectations about how her utterance should achieve optimal relevance" (194). Some implicatures are made so strongly manifest that the hearer can scarcely avoid recovering them. In these cases, speakers can leave implicit everything their hearers can be expected to supply with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt. Other implicatures are deliberately made less strongly manifest, and are designed to increase marginally the manifestness of a wide range of weakly manifest assumptions.

S&W explain stylistic and poetic effects in general in terms of weak implicatures (and the pursuit of relevance): "Let us give the name *poetic effect* to the peculiar effect of an utterance which achieves most of its relevance through a wide array of weak implicatures" (222). Stylistic and poetic effects and tropes can have rich non-propositional (i.e. unparaphrasable) effects,

leading to an unpredictable and diversified expansion of the context by way of a range of weak implicatures. This is especially the case with devices like poetic metaphors, which can generate so many weak implicatures that after a certain point they can no longer be described as intended, and the hearer or reader must be considered responsible for choosing them:

In general, the wider the range of potential implicatures and the greater the hearer's responsibility for constructing them, the more poetic the effect, the more creative the metaphor. A good creative metaphor is precisely one in which a variety of contextual effects can be retained and understood as weakly implicated by the speaker. . . . [T]he hearer [*sic*] has to take a large part of the responsibility, but the discovery . . . has been triggered by the writer. The surprise or beauty of a successful creative metaphor lies in this condensation, in the fact that a single expression which has itself been loosely used will determine a very wide range of acceptable weak implicatures. (236-37)

Thus if the understanding of written texts is in any way similar to that of spoken communication (and if S&W are right), the reader will assume that the words on the page provide evidence about a writer's informative intentions, and are there to lead him towards an inferential recognition of those intentions. *Communication* is successful not when hearers recognise an utterance's linguistic meaning, but when they infer the speaker's meaning from it (although with weak implicatures, communication shades off into cognition). By extension, for literary communication to take place, a text must be inferentially combined with optimally relevant contextual assumptions – which are those envisaged by the writer.

But of course some readers are simply *uninterested* in whether their interpretation somehow reconstructs a posited original meaning, because they do not believe in the authority of the author and prefer to pursue their own thematic readings, either in accordance with the linguistic potential of the text (and an unlimited number of "intertexts"), or with their own political, psychological or philosophical beliefs and interests. This transforms the literary work from a product to a site of productivity, a heuristic stimulus for the production of new meanings. Relevance theory, however, can equally account for such readings as it is also a theory of *cognition*, designed to explain how people automatically and probably instinctively create contexts which maximise the relevance of perceived stimuli. The principle of relevance was originally defined in terms of acts of ostensive communication communicating the presumption of optimal relevance. The theory of cognition, involving the notion of *maximal* relevance, was given rather less prominence. However, in the second edition of *Relevance* (1995), S&W re-

wise this, calling the claim that "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance" the *First (or Cognitive) Principle of Relevance*, and the claim that ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance the *Second (or Communicative) Principle of Relevance*.<sup>1</sup>

I will now turn to competing readings of Wordsworth's poem and consider them in the light of the notions of optimal and maximal relevance.

### 3. Death, Pantheism, and Wordsworth's Murderous Spirit

For a long time, the most widely advanced reading of "A slumber did my spirit seal" was that the poem is about the sudden shattering of a lover's vain illusion that his beloved is immortal. His spirit sealed in a slumber, the poetic speaker ignored all mortal fears, thereby becoming less than human. At the same time, he made his beloved (in shorthand, "Lucy") more than human, while also, ironically, diminishing her by calling her a "thing," as if she were already an inanimate object that could withstand the touch of time. Nemesis strikes when Lucy dies, but the lyric is an expression of grief recollected in tranquillity, in which present wisdom and an awareness of mortality are contrasted with previous (past tense) innocence.

Then in 1950, F.W. Bateson famously found "pantheistic magnificence" (33) in the poem's last two lines: "Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now a part of the life of Nature, and not just a human 'thing'" (80-81). This makes the poem an occasion for happiness rather than despairing resignation: Lucy's return to the earth is an apotheosis, since eternal oneness with the world constitutes a release and a fulfilment that amply compensate the loss of motion, force, eyes and ears. Such a pantheistic reading almost certainly depends on an awareness of sentiments Wordsworth expresses in *other* poems. Bateson mentions *The Prelude* (1805) 3.124-26 –

---

<sup>1</sup> This dual theory of communication and cognition thus accounts for *all* possible literary interpretations, from those predicated on inferred authorial communicative intentions to those entirely based on individual readers' strategies. Relevance theory is thus wide open to the Popperian objection that it is wholly unfalsifiable. Yet Duhem pointed out in 1906 that there are serious drawbacks to the logic of falsification, and more recently, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend and Quine have all provided compelling arguments against slavishly following Popper's version of scientific method. From a pragmatic perspective, the utility of a theory lies in what one can *do* with it, irrespective of its scientific status as defined by Popper.

To every natural form, rock, fruit or flower,  
 Even the loose stones that cover the highway,  
 I gave a moral life . . .

– and one might also mention lines 101-3 of “Tintern Abbey” where Wordsworth writes of

A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things.

The practice of going to an author’s other works so as to specify the meaning (or the informative intention) of a particular poem is, of course, perfectly acceptable from a relevance theoretic perspective: if we are familiar with Wordsworth, reading “A slumber” will bring to mind “encyclopaedic entries” based on his use of “rock” and “roll” elsewhere.

E.D. Hirsch reactivated and publicised Bateson’s reading a decade later by contrasting it with Cleanth Brooks’s New Critical reading, which had concentrated on the lover’s use of the word “thing,” to which Lucy’s death gives a bitterly ironic sense. Since *meaning*, for Hirsch, depends on an author’s intentions, he claimed that Bateson’s interpretation was more historically concrete than Brooks’s: “everything we know of Wordsworth’s typical attitudes during the period in which he composed the poem” shows that “inconsolability and bitter irony do not belong in its horizon” (*Validity* 239). In Gricean terminology, Hirsch is claiming that the pantheistic reading is an implicature – a contextual implication that the poet manifestly intended to make manifest to the reader, by way of which the poem will achieve optimal relevance.

“A slumber” has since served as an example in other (more simplistic) intentionalist arguments by P.D. Juhl, and by Knapp and Michaels. Frequent repetition of (Hirsch’s account of) both Brooks’s tale of despair, inertness and the bitter irony of death, and Bateson’s affirmation of pantheism, have made both readings – which Hirsch declared to be incompatible – seem so familiar that some current commentators seem happy to accept them both. This would seem to be an example of Empson’s “ambiguity of the seventh type,” in which two opposing or mutually exclusive meanings are held in the mind (of both author and reader) at once, in what Jonathan Bate has described as “the literary-critical equivalent of quantum mechanics” (315) or



the wave-particle duality.<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, for one, suggests that we are not obliged to choose:

It does not matter whether you interpret the second stanza (especially its last line) as tending towards affirmation, or resignation, or a grief verging on bitterness. The tonal assignment of one rather than another possible meaning . . . is curiously open or besides the point. (188)

Hartman is implicitly describing these two interpretations as parallel weak implicatures triggered by the author. Hirsch, who considers the interpretations to be incompatible, is unlikely to accept this account of weak implicatures, and would thus be more prescriptive than S&W in the determination of meaning.

A more intractable interpretive problem involves the third and fourth lines of the *first* stanza, and the attribution of a referent to the deictic "she" in the third line. Most critics take it (or her) to be Lucy, equally the subject of four related poems, but in 1965, in "Another New Poem by Wordsworth," Hugh Sykes Davies pointed out that Lucy is not named in this poem, and denied that there *is* a Lucy group, simply by looking at the order of the poems in the collections that Wordsworth published. The "Lucy group" as such, consisting of "Three years she grew in sun and shower," "Strange fits of passion I have known," "She dwelt among th'untrodden ways" and "A slumber did my spirit seal" is the invention of Victorian anthologists such as Arnold, and Palgrave, whose *Golden Treasury* is mentioned in *The English Teacher*. In the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, and the 1815 *Poems*, Wordsworth did not place these poems together.

Consequently, Davies argues, "Lucy" can hardly be assumed to be the human antecedent for "she" in the first stanza of "A slumber." He thus offers a new interpretation which, with the mores of a bygone time, he claims to have kept to himself for "some years" because "the general impression it gave was of something over-ingenious, perverse, incapable of proof or disproof, and better forgotten" (135). He suggests that "she" in this autonomous poem refers to the speaker's spirit, which is in a state of trance. As in the moments that Wordsworth (in *The Prelude*) called "spots of time," the poet has transcended the boundary between his own being and the rest of the world, and he allows the great restorative principle of nature to assert itself.

---

<sup>2</sup> Bate reveals that Empson, originally a maths student, was fully aware of Heisenberg and Schrödinger and the new physics, and suggests that he brought literary criticism into the twentieth century, superseding the eighteenth and nineteenth century's need to choose between alternative meanings with a quantum-inspired logic of both/and.

Unfortunately this reading of "A slumber," based on Wordsworth's use of words elsewhere and his ordering of the poems that make up the so-called Lucy group, seems entirely to disregard the second stanza with its present tenses.

A different interpretation has been proposed by Brian Caraher, who draws on a grammatical possibility in the first line of the poem rather than the pronoun in the third. The verb form with "did" allows the meaning "my spirit sealed my slumber" as well as "a slumber sealed my spirit."<sup>3</sup> If the speaker's spirit did seal the slumber, he is neither a belated, slumberous, insensitive and imperceptive mourner of lost love, nor a passive undergoer of his own vicarious death fantasy, but rather an active, cold-blooded, inhuman agent. According to this reading, which Caraher claims supplements rather than supplants the other two, and articulates what is lacking in both, the slumber that his spirit has sealed is the (imagined) murder of a woman. The narrator is a self-involved, morbidly isolated solipsist, with an inhumane desire for power and control over others, who first conjures up an unearthly and insubstantial other, and then murders the object of his fantasy. (We only assume "she" to be a loved one if we look for a Lucy-like referent.) He dreams the death of the other and without a trace of human fears, moves towards imaginative fulfilment of this yearning, turning her into a thing, an unearthly, disembodied, ghostly (or immortal) object at his disposal.

Unlike Brooks' and Bateson's interpretations of "inconsolability and bitter irony" and "pantheistic magnificence," it is difficult to explain Caraher's reading in terms of weak implicatures. Relevance theory states that hearers or readers begin their interpretation by assigning a sentence a unique propositional form, which involves, among other things, disambiguating the sentence by selecting *one* of the semantic representations permitted by the grammar. Yet if Caraher's interpretation involving the speaker's spirit is to supplement rather than supplant the well-known earlier readings, we are obliged to accept both the alternative readings of "did ... seal" (that "my spirit sealed my slumber" and that "a slumber sealed my spirit"). If this is not to contradict S&W's argument that only one possible semantic representation can be relevant, and that only *one* inferential hypothesis should be necessary, we must generously interpret "weak implicature" and "poetic ef-

---

<sup>3</sup> This reading has been put forward more than once in the past twenty-five years, including by Peggy Kamuf in "Floating Authorship," in which she takes pains to deconstruct Knapp and Michaels' suggestion that the author of "A slumber" was half a dozen men in white lab coats in a small submarine.

fect" to include such things as ambiguous verb forms that can invert subject and object.

All the readings mentioned so far take off from the words in the text, and *could* be described as intended implicatures. Their authors, looking for communication, suggest that they are intended meanings. But there are also a number of well-known thematic readings of this lyric, by critics who appear to use the poem in a way that is manifestly relevant for them, but without much reference to the author, in what seem to be examples of the cognitive process of maximising relevance rather than seeking the optimally relevant communicative intention.

#### 4. Lucy and Freud

Norman Holland has used "A slumber" to illustrate what he describes as three phases of psychoanalysis – the psychoanalysis of the unconscious, of the ego, and of the self. He offers splendid caricatures of the types of reading typical of literary critics influenced by the first two "primitive" phases. He says that in the hands of a literary critic, the *first phase*, which contrasted latent and manifest content, typically "hurls us from poetry to anatomy, from the words-on-the-page to the depths of the unconscious" (227). This would generate a reading of "A slumber" concerning castration, to which "she" at least was invulnerable, although unlike the sealed "I" she could be penetrated. The rocks and stones, meanwhile, would have to symbolise dirt or faeces, while the trees and rocks might also symbolise a phallus – which "she" has also become, but a castrated one, completely vital but completely dead.

The *second phase* of psychoanalysis, in Holland's account, begins with Freud's topographical model of superego, ego and id. A literary critic informed by this perspective "would try to find ego strategies as they are apparently embodied in the language of a poem" (228), and which in this case have transformed an unconscious fantasy about castration or turning a disembodied phallus into a conscious theme about pantheism, or cosmic indifference, or death-within-life. Thus the poem embodies the ego strategy or defence of denial: the speaker denies his awareness of his lover as a mortal being in danger, as someone who can feel or move or see or hear, and turns her into a nothing, a mere rock, stone or tree. Yet this approach still implies that mental processes are embodied in the poem rather than the poet's (or reader's) mind. Like both regular formalist reading and first-phase psycho-



analytic criticism, it is unable to account for differences in people's reading experiences.

The basic polarity of *third phase* psychoanalysis is no longer conscious and unconscious, or ego and non-ego, but self and non-self. Holland calls himself a third phase psychoanalyst, and has developed the notion of the identity theme (and its variations) that is our very essence and which wholly determines all our acts, perceptions and relationships. Thus when we interpret a poem, he says, although we may strive for objectivity that will command the assent of other informed readers, we are also, ineluctably, being subjective, and true to our identity. There will be a conscious in-mixing of the features of the poem with the reader's own feelings; "There can be as many readings as there are readers to write them. Can be and should be" (233).

In this case, Holland says he identifies with the speaker whose attempted denial of the abrasions of time and human relationships becomes a kind of monstrous indifference, for which Lucy's death is a sudden retaliation.<sup>4</sup>

Relevance theory, of course, explains communication in terms of manifest communicative and informative intentions without so much as even a parenthetical mention of the possibility of latent or unconscious intentions. Yet it also seeks to explain how human cognition involves the maximisation of relevance, and although S&W nowhere say as much, interpretations arising from a reader's wholly determining identity theme would clearly be part of that individual's habitual way of maximising relevance. Seen in this light, relevance theory, just as much as Holland's notion of an identity theme, will allow as many readings as there are readers.

---

<sup>4</sup> Not all psychoanalytic critics have followed Holland into the third phase. Richard E. Matlak has proposed a reading of the Lucy poems that depends entirely on the poet's biography. He explains most of the poetry Wordsworth wrote in Goslar in the winter of 1798-99 in terms of his anxiety at his separation from Coleridge, who was in Göttingen, while Wordsworth, because of the financial burden of keeping his sister Dorothy, could only afford to stay in a small village in the Hartz mountains. Matlak insists that the Lucy poems are fantasies of Dorothy's death, written not to ward off incestuous feelings, as Bateson argued, but to be rid of her inconvenient presence. For Matlak, the true (or optimally relevant) meaning of the poem can only be found outside the text, in biographical information and the *Collected Letters*. He does not seem to allow that the biographical evidence might be open to more than one interpretation, and his reading owes nothing to *his own* psychobiography, and leaves nothing for his students and other readers to do but agree. There is no suggestion that literary history, or issues of textuality or tropology, or the reader's mind or context, are of the slightest importance.

## 5. From Beyond the Grave

For Paul de Man, the death in "A slumber" is that of the poet himself. He states that for the informed reader it is clear that "Wordsworth is one of the few poets who can write proleptically about their own death and speak, as it were, from beyond their own graves. The 'she' in the poem is in fact large enough to encompass Wordsworth as well" (*Blindness* 225). Elsewhere, de Man makes the same claim for another Wordsworth poem, "The Boy of Winander," who in an early manuscript was identified with the poet himself. De Man argues that in the second part of this poem, Wordsworth is reflecting on and anticipating his own death. Although the poem appears retrospective – a memory of the boy, who "was taken from his mates, and died / In childhood, ere he was full ten years old" (1805 *Prelude* 5.415) – it is in fact proleptic autobiography: the poet is writing an epitaph for himself, and "anticipating a future event as if it existed in the past" (*Gauss* 81). Moreover, de Man states, this temporal perspective of writing from beyond the grave "is characteristic for all Wordsworth's poetry – even if it obliges us to imagine a tombstone large enough to hold the entire *Prelude*" (82).

Thus in both "The Boy of Winander" and "A slumber," there is a temporal sequence in which an inauthentic past that repressed or forgot human temporality gives way to a demystified present; in both poems, "Wordsworth is retrospectively reflecting on a self that is proleptically bringing him into contact with his authentic temporal destiny" (*Gauss* 102).

But the hyperbolic claim that this is "characteristic for all Wordsworth's poetry" is as reductive as any reading determined by what Norman Holland calls an "identity theme." If de Man could be said to have an identity theme, however, it would be less a concern with reading from beyond the grave than a concern to provide an overall thematic envelope, of whatever kind, for Wordsworth's poetry. In a remarkable revision of "Time and History in Wordsworth" in the early 1970s, de Man displaced the theme of time by that of rhetoric. The prolepsis – the temporal perspective of speaking from beyond the grave, formerly characteristic of all Wordsworth's poetry – is re-described as *metalepsis*, a rhetorical substitution. "The Boy of Winander," in this version of the essay, "does not reflect on death but on the rhetorical power of language that can make it seem as if we could anticipate the unimaginable" (201). As Don Bialostosky has put it, dryly, "The object of reflection changes, but Wordsworth again turns out to be reflecting on what de Man is reflecting on" (174).

## 6. Miller's Tale

While de Man makes the whole of Wordsworth mean one thing, J. Hillis Miller, in "On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism," proposes an iconoclastic reading of "A slumber" that allows it to mean just about anything. Rather than speculate as to the poet's intentions, or analyse his own response, Miller uses the poem to illustrate deconstructionist claims about tropology and aporias. Before offering both an "orthodox" paraphrase and a deconstructionist reading of "A slumber," he suggests that no fewer than eighteen genuinely exclusive binary oppositions, which allow no dialectical resolution, are present in the poem. For example, the poem presents "mother as against daughter or sister, or perhaps any female family member as against some woman from outside the family, that is, mother, sister, or daughter as against mistress or wife, in short, incestuous desires against legitimate sexual feelings" (177).

Miller finds "an obscure sexual drama . . . enacted in this poem" (180). Wordsworth's mother died when he was a child of eight, and "In the Lucy poems the possession of Lucy alive and seemingly immortal is a replacement for the lost mother. It gives him again that direct filial bond to nature he had lost with his mother's death" (180-81). Dismissing a major preoccupation of the psychobiographers, Miller blithely writes that

It perhaps does not matter greatly whether the reader thinks of Lucy as a daughter or as a mistress or as an embodiment of his feelings for his sister Dorothy. What matters is the way in which her imagined death is a re-enactment of the death of the mother as described in *The Prelude*. (181)

Miller describes Lucy as a virgin "thing" who seemed untouchable by earthly years, by time, by death (although the justification for describing Lucy as a virgin child would seem to come from "Three years she grew in sun and shower," rather than this poem). But for Miller, the

touch of earthly years is both a form of sexual appropriation which leaves the one who is possessed still virgin if she dies young, and at the same time it is the ultimate dispossession which is death. To be touched by earthly years is a way to be sexually penetrated while still remaining virgin. (182)

The male, adult speaker of the poem is the displaced representative of both Lucy herself and of nature or death. Miller continues:

Lucy is both the virgin child and the missing mother, that mother earth which gave birth to the speaker and has abandoned him. Male and female, however, come together in the earth, and so Lucy and the speaker are "the same," though the poet is also the perpetually excluded difference from Lucy, an unneeded increment, like an abandoned child. (182)

What this means is that

[t]he poet has himself caused Lucy's death by thinking about it. Thinking recapitulates in reverse mirror image the action of the earthly years in touching, penetrating, possessing, killing, encompassing, turning the other into oneself and therefore being left only with a corpse, an empty sign. (183)

Miller deflects the charge that this reading is grounded in psychobiographical details of the poet's reaction to the death of his parents, by announcing that

it is the other way round. Wordsworth interpreted the death of his mother according to the traditional trope identifying the earth with a maternal presence. By the time we encounter her in his writing she exists as an element in that figure. His life, like his poetry, was the working out of the consequences of this fictitious trope, or rather of the whole figurative system into which it is incorporated. (183)

Moving to a higher level of generality, Miller explains that this poem, "in the context of the other Lucy poems and all of Wordsworth's work, enacts one version of a constantly repeated Occidental drama of the lost sun. Lucy's name of course means light" (183). Which is to say that her name – which of course does not actually appear in this poem – derives from the Latin root for "light." Miller suggests that the poem is an allegory of loss in which the speaker is not so much mourning the dead girl as "the lost source of light, the father sun as *logos*, as head power and fount of meaning" (183). Again more generally, "The loss of the radiance of the *logos*, along with the experience of the consequences of that loss, is the drama of all Wordsworth's poetry" (184).

Miller claims that

In expressing this, the poem leaves its reader with no possibility of moving through or beyond or standing outside in sovereign control. The reader is caught in an unstillable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything other than the activity of the poem itself. (182)

Except, of course, that the poem does *not* "express" any of this. Miller's is a thematic reading which moves way beyond the eight lines and fifty-two words of the poem. Many other readers *have* found satisfying readings that they grounded on the poet's biography or various of his other poems.

Miller insists that it is false to assume that in a literary text there is a plain sense, a fundamental level of grammatical meaning that is easily identifiable by any competent reader, to which is added a second, nonessential layer of figurative language, because, on the contrary,

figurative language goes all the way down. . . . All language is irreducibly and fundamentally figurative. . . . All good reading is therefore the reading of tropes at the same time as it is the construing of syntactical and grammatical patterns. Any act of reading must practice the two forms of interpretation together. (188)

Furthermore, "the inherence of tropes, including the trope of irony, in ordinary as well as in literary language has been known since Plato and the Greek rhetoricians" (191). Indeed it has; this argument causes no problem for a relevance theorist, and S&W make much the same point. Yet *all* interpretations of "A slumber" engage with what it means to say that a spirit slumbers or is sealed (or that a spirit sealed a slumber). Miller's interpretation in "On Edge" has nothing to do with tropes turning aside plain grammatical sense, or "the perversion of grammar by rhetoric which deconstruction patiently demonstrates" (191). It is rather a thematic reading which draws on Wordsworth's biography, his other poetry, an acquaintance with de Man's reading of the poem, a taste for Freudian symbolic inversions, displacements, and condensations, and a desire to find everywhere blank contradictions and aporias. The obscure sexual drama, the turning of Lucy into a sexually penetrated but still virgin, prepubertal girl and a replacement for the poet's mother, and the description of her death as a death fantasy of a surrogate mother, resulting in the loss of light, do not directly derive from particular grammar-subverting tropes.

Miller rejects M.H. Abrams' suggestion (in "Construing and Deconstructing") that he has first construed the poem, in much the same way as many other readers from Cleanth Brooks to Paul de Man, and then wilfully deconstructed it, by claiming that all language is figural, but the meaning of figures, just as much as the meaning of propositions, is grossly underdetermined. It would not be too difficult to duplicate Miller's reading of "A slumber" with reference to Lennon and McCartney's account of tangerine trees, marmalade skies, a girl with kaleidoscope eyes, cellophane flowers, a bridge by a fountain, rocking horse people eating marshmallow pies, news-



paper taxies, a train in a station, plasticene porters with looking-glass ties, and Lucy in the sky with diamonds. In short, I find Miller's account of "A slumber" implausible, and am inclined to agree with Abrams' description (in "A Colloquy on Recent Critical Theories") of deconstructive criticism of this kind as largely a mode of display oratory or epideictic rhetoric.

Relevance theory takes it for granted that signs do not coincide with what they signify, and that linguistic communication is not a matter of delivering determinate messages by way of semantically and grammatically coded signals. The linguistic meaning of an uttered sentence falls well short of encoding what the speaker means, and is merely the input to the inferential processes by which an addressee attempts to identify a communicator's intentions, guided by contextual clues. Utterances are only interpretive representations of thoughts, so the semantic representations of sentences have to be augmented by implicatures. Hearers or readers will consider implicatures as long as they yield cognitive effects that repay the processing effort. In interpreting "A slumber," Miller clearly expends a great deal of processing effort, offering an array of "meanings" which all appear to be equally relevant. He does not, as S&W say hearers of ordinary speech do, automatically choose the solution involving the least effort, in search of an interpretation that the communicator could manifestly have expected to be optimally relevant. He proposes meanings which strike many of his readers as having little to do with Wordsworth, and which therefore cannot be described as *implicatures*, as S&W define these as assumptions which a speaker manifestly intended to make manifest. His interpretations are enabled by the fact that the nature of language invariably allows the same linguistic structure to have innumerable incompatible references and meanings. But this is not because one can always add a rhetorical overlay to semantic and grammatical "codes," but because language use requires inference as well as decoding. I would thus contest Miller's insistence that "Derrida and I are right . . . about the enigmas introduced into even the most apparently simple passage by its permeation or penetration by figurative language" (190) by way of Sperber and Wilson's cognitive (and performative, and humanist) account of language. The poet, as Wordsworth put it in the idiom of his age, is a man speaking to men (usually figuratively). So is the critic, who can choose to make the attempt to infer authorial intentions in search of communicated meanings, and/or wilfully propose his own thematic meanings, by maximising relevance according to his own interests, regardless of anyone else's intentions.

Widdowson describes literary texts as vacuums for the reader to fill, and states that there can be no co-operative engagement between writer and reader, as there is no way of assigning intentions. Thus an aesthetic response involves appropriating texts in any way one chooses, and investing them with one's own identity, subject only to semantic constraints. Yet if, as Sperber and Wilson demonstrate, the very nature of language is such that it involves a mixture of explicatures and implicatures, intended implicatures could, and perhaps should, be considered every bit as constraining as semantic encodings. It is *not* impossible to assign intentions when reading literary texts, or to seek to infer communicative intentions and optimally relevant meanings. Of course one *can* choose to ignore the author, and simply interpret a text – or, as often happens, all texts – according to one's own particular interests, perhaps making them all manifestly relevant in exactly the same way. Yet a quick comparison of the various readings of Wordsworth's short "Slumber" poem reveals that the thematic interpretations, unlike those based on what are taken to be conscious implicatures, all tend to lose the specificity of the poem being read. They either seem to make the whole of Wordsworth mean one thing (as in Holland and de Man – though for de Man that one thing changes over time), or to make a single poem mean absolutely everything (as in Miller's epideictic rhetoric – or showing off). It may be, as Widdowson suggests, that implicatures are unresolvable (and the "optimally relevant meaning" irretrievable) – as the conflicting interpretations of Brooks, Hirsch, Davies and Caraher perhaps demonstrate – but the *attempt* to resolve them, and to co-operate with an author, often seems to produce the most specific, and indeed the most *pertinent*, readings.

## References

- Abrams, M.H. *Doing Things With Texts*. Ed. Michael Fischer. New York: Norton, 1989.
- Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador, 1997.
- Bateson, F.W. *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction*. London: Longman, Green, 1950.
- Bialostosky, Don H. *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Caraher, Brian G. *Wordsworth's "Slumber" and the Problematics of Reading*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.
- Davies, Hugh Sykes. "Another New Poem by Wordsworth." *Essays in Criticism* 15 (1965): 135-61.
- De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Methuen, 1983.
- . *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*. Ed. E.S. Burt, Kevin Newmark and Andrzej Warminski. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1930.
- Grice, H.P. "Logic and Conversation." *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. "Elation in Hegel and Wordsworth." *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Hirsch, E.D. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.
- . "Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted." *Critical Inquiry* 11:2 (1984): 202-25.
- Holland, Norman N. "Literary Interpretation and Three Phases of Psychoanalysis." *Critical Inquiry* 3:2 (1976): 221-33.
- Juhl, P.D. *Interpretation: An Essay on the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Kamuf, Peggy. "Floating Authorship." *Diacritics* 16:4 (1987): 3-13.
- Knapp, Michael and Walter Benn Michaels. "Against Theory." *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*. Ed. W.J.T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 11-30.
- Matlak, Richard E. "A Psychobiographical Approach to Teaching Wordsworth's Goslar Poetry." *Approaches to Teaching Wordsworth's Poetry*.



- Ed. Spencer Hall and Jonathan Ramsey. New York: Modern Language Association, 1986. 147-52.
- . "Wordsworth's Lucy Poems in Psychobiographical Context." *PMLA* 95 (1978): 46-65.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *Theory Now and Then*. London: Harvester Press, 1991.
- Narayan, R.K. *The English Teacher*. (1945). London: Minerva, 1993.
- Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson. *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. (1986). Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Widdowson, Henry. "Reading the Signs: The Critical Interpretation of Texts." *Performance*. SPELL 11. Ed. Peter Halter. Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999. 145-60.