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Which Interpretation Is the Right One?
A Workshop on Literary Meaning

The problem I want to address in this chapter and workshop is the problem of differing and contradictory interpretations and the ways they challenge instruction and raise questions about the validity of the interpretative enterprise in classrooms. To describe my aims in terms of more practical results for students and teachers, I want in this chapter and workshop to provide an opportunity to interrogate and correct two common and closely related misperceptions that students bring with them to my classes. The first is the widely held idea that there is only one authoritative and best interpretation for most literary texts, what Susan Hynds (1991) calls "the myth of the one correct response." That is the response or interpretation taught by teachers and presumably authorized by the scholarly community and represented in such reliable sources as lectures or essays by eminent literary scholars or study guides (presumably written under the authority of respectable professors) like Cliffs Notes. The other, equally common in recent years, is the opposite belief, which many students and some respected scholars think to be the logical alternative to the first position (cf. E. D. Hirsch 1967, Chapter 1; Fish 1980; and Derrida as explicated in Scholes 1989, Chapter 2). It is the position that if there is no single or authoritative interpretation for a literary text, then the discipline of literary study is one in which any and all interpretations have equal authority. Or, as many students put the case, a poem (or any other literary work) can mean anything you want it to mean.[1]

The Workshop

With no further introduction, except the observation that the workshop I am about to present can usually be completed within the compass of an ordinary fifty-minute

class period and is best presented with no introduction at all, let's proceed to the workshop, which I would describe in my syllabus or in talking about it for students merely as an experiment in interpretation. The poem to be used here and passed out at the beginning of the workshop is Theodore Roethke's widely anthologized "My Papa's Waltz," a poem that I have seen in literature texts for all grades from ninth through college. The poem was first published in a Hearst magazine in 1942 and next appeared in 1948 in the second collection of Roethke's poems, called *The Lost Son and Other Poems by Theodore Roethke*. By the mid-fifties, it was already showing up in college anthologies of poetry.

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.
—*Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)*

Activities

Reading and Writing

T: Please read the poem by Theodore Roethke (which some of you may have read before) a couple of times to make sure you have read it fairly well, and then do two things with it. Identify any lines you are still having trouble understanding and write out your question or questions about them, and then pick the line you regard as the most important line in the poem. Copy out that line in your log and write a paragraph on why you think it's the most important line.

Commentary: The assignment to select the most important line, which I adopted from workshops conducted by David Bleich, is almost a fail-safe way to foster useful discussions

of a text among students. But any way of initiating a discussion of the poem will be satisfactory here, as long as it encourages enough interpretive discussion to enable students to see how they and the different members of the group are interpreting the poem. The problem with simply asking students to write a brief response to the poem is that such responses often mask interpretive differences.

SHARING IN GROUPS OF FOUR

T: Now move into groups of four, making sure your groups are as diverse as possible—in gender, ethnicity, region of origin, age, and whatever else you can think of. In your groups your task will be simply, first, to share any problems you had with specific words or lines and clear them up as quickly as possible. Then share (which is to say, read aloud to your group) the line you picked as most important and what you wrote about why it is the most important line. Then talk about differences and similarities in your reading.

Commentary: I always try to make my groups as diverse as possible for this exercise on the outside chance that sociocultural perspectives will play a role in what sorts of readings emerge in discussion of this poem. What I am looking for are different readings or disagreement about this poem in every group, not agreement. So I do whatever I can in advance to foster disagreement and, finally, as will be evident below, I directly ask for it. But not until students have had a chance to take positions and begin arguing for them. I also insist that students in their groups read aloud what they have written, rather than merely talk about it.

T: (About 10 minutes into the exercise) Ladies and gentlemen, please forgive me for interrupting. I have been walking around the room listening to your conversations, and I can see you are quite engaged and still working. I would like to ask you to monitor your own thinking at this point and, especially if everybody in your group seems to be reading the poem in the same way and you have been silent or reluctant to disagree, yet feeling some reservations, ask yourself if you really agree. If you don't, please speak up. Please make your private reservations, doubts, or disagreement known to your group members now.

REPORTING OUT

T: Are there any groups that found themselves in complete agreement in their interpretations of this poem? I see that only one group found itself of one mind. Can someone from one of the groups where there was disagreement characterize, very briefly, the nature of the disagreement in your group?

S1: Well, they all thought that when the father and son were dancing, it was some kind of act of violence or something, and I didn't think so.

S2: We didn't all say it was violent, but we felt that there was a lot of cruelty in it.

S3: Some of us thought it was violent.

S4: I thought the child in the poem was a little girl. They all thought it was a boy.

S5: "It says 'the whiskey on your breath could make a small boy dizzy.'"

S4: The child in the poem could still be a girl. She says "boy" to show how strong the whiskey breath was.

S6: But the author's name is Theodore. So he's a man. And the poem is a memory from the child's point of view.

S4: But that doesn't mean the speaker in the poem is a man. The poem has a persona.

T: That's right. We don't know for sure, do we? But it sounded to me as I went around the room that most of you assumed the child was male. Does it really make a difference anyway?

S4: It made a difference to me, because I identified with the child and maybe that's why I assumed it was a girl. I used to dance with my father that way.

T: Well, do most of you feel that the poem leaves a gap there, not requiring us to identify the child as necessarily male or female? Poems leave gaps that readers have to fill in (Iser 1974, 274–94). Like, how old is this child? The poem constrains our imaginations but doesn't tell us exactly, does it? Could the child be fourteen or fifteen? No? Why not?

S5: He has to be waist-high on the father—to scrape his ear on the belt. So he can't be three or four either.

T: So what are you imagining? What age is the child you visualize in the poem? Older than, say, five? Could he be six? No? Maybe? Seven? Some of you imagine seven. Eight? OK. Twelve? No? Ten? Is that the outer limit? Somewhere between five and ten? But you can't say exactly and we'll all fill in the gap through our own experience. What color is the child's hair? What sort of clothing is he wearing? What's his color or ethnicity? I assume you are visualizing a child, making your own movie in your head, and it's slightly different for each of you, though quite similar insofar as it is consistent with the facts of the poem or maybe what you know about Roethke. So is the gender of the child also a gap in the poem that you can fill in your own way? Some of you apparently think it is. And isn't it pretty much the same poem whether the child is a boy or girl?

S6: I don't see how it could possibly be a girl.

T: Well, if you feel strongly about this issue (as some of you apparently do), you may be interested in knowing that in the first draft of the poem (which is housed in the University of Washington library and may be seen online at <*www.bedfordstmartins.com/virtualit/cultural.html*>), you can see that Roethke had initially written "girl" and then crossed it out and wrote in "boy" in the line that

says "make a small boy dizzy," though I'm not sure how that fact might influence your reading or your feeling about the poem.

S4: See? It could be a girl. That's really interesting!

S5: No, it shows that he intended it to be a boy and he made a definite choice.

T: I thought you might have different interpretations of that interpretive evidence, too. But let's get back to the major grounds for debate. Could someone characterize the different readings in any group that found itself divided? How would you name the different sides people took?

S7: In our group, some of us thought that when the dad beat time on the boy's head, it meant that he was beating the boy, but the other people said that it was a loving gesture.

T: How about if we hold up for a minute on details and just try to give a characterization, sort of a label for the different readings that emerged in your groups?

S8: OK. Some of us thought it was a happy poem and some thought it was tragic.

S9: Well, not tragic, but sad.

S3: Not just sad, either. It's violent.

S4: Most people thought it was about abuse. But I thought it was a sweet memory.

S10: Or bittersweet.

T: So I'm hearing at least two main and competing readings. For convenience, can we for the moment call one the "abusive" reading and the other the "happy" reading? All right. So let's see how it breaks down by numbers. How many of you thought that this poem was a poem about abuse or at least a poem with serious abusive elements in it? That looks to be maybe three-quarters of the group. OK. How many of you found it basically a happy memory, a memory recalled fondly of an event that was, when it happened, largely a happy event? A handful of you—maybe 20 percent of the group. How many of you are reading the poem in some third way? All right—a couple. Aren't we missing some voters here?

S11: I started out thinking it was happy, but then in the discussion was persuaded that it was about abuse. And now I can't make up my mind. Maybe it's both.

S10: I think the poem has both elements in it. It's basically happy, but it's bittersweet, you know, because the dad is an alcoholic, but this is probably the best attention the kid can get.

S3: How can that be best if the dad is beating him?

T: You're reading the poem as the dad inflicting a beating?

S3: Isn't that what the waltz is?

T: How many of you are reading it that way: the waltz as a metaphor for a beating? Seven. That's what I've been getting lately for that reading, sometimes more. So it looks like we have what amounts to three or four readings of the poem in

this room: first, the reading that takes the poem as basically a happy memory of a cherished moment with the speaker's father, and then the reading that finds the poem to be about the abuse of the child at the hands of the father. And there are two versions of this second reading: one that reads the dance as a metaphor for a beating—a reading that turns the whole poem into something like an allegory—and the reading that the majority seem to be advancing, taking the dance as a real event, but seeing the entire event as one that constitutes a form of abuse in a relationship and family that is, as they say, dysfunctional. Is that fair to say? And then there is the reading that sees the events as remembered fondly by the speaker, but nevertheless having some elements that were bitter, but still overall a fond memory? Yes? No? You're not so sure. Can we stick with the two major or superordinate readings for a while (since they seem to contain the other readings and are held by almost all of you) and examine the evidence that leads you to one claim or the other, that is, to read the poem as a largely positive and happy memory or to read it as somehow about child abuse? Who wants to present the evidence for the majority reading, that this is a poem that is in some fundamental way about abuse? OK, Sarah, let's hear it.

S2: First of all, the father is drunk.

S12: We don't know that.

S2: His whiskey breath "could make a small boy dizzy." So you can bet he's had enough to be pretty loaded himself.

T: Let's let Sarah finish.

S2: Well, the poem is filled with evidence: the boy gets hurt from the dance—his ear scrapes the dad's belt with every step; the dad beats on the boy's head. That can't be pleasant. The father's knuckle is already scraped as if he'd been fighting in a bar on the way home. So he's at least a rough, violent person.

S3: It could be scraped from beating on the boy.

S2: It could.

T: Anything else?

S13: The mother can't stop frowning. She is upset by what she sees.

T: Right. Do we know why she is upset?

S11: Because the house is shaking so much that the dishes are about to fall off the shelf.

S1: That doesn't mean that the child is being abused. She may be upset the way mothers often are at ordinary male roughhousing. It's too rough for her, but the boy and his father like it.

T: That's plausible.

S4: If the child is a girl, the mother could be jealous.

T: Oh yes! That's an interesting interpretive twist. Terrific. But what other evidence can we find on the abusive side?

S14: The father's hands are caked with dirt. So he is some kind of laborer.

T: And what do you make of that?

S14: Well, maybe that means something . . .

T: You mean laborers or men who work with their hands are more likely to be alcoholics and child abusers than other people—say, middle-class folks like yourselves? Are we hearing some class prejudice here?

ALL: (Titters and murmurs.)

T: OK. I'll give you some good reasons later why—aside from its basis in class prejudice—you might not want to consider the dirt on the father's hands as evidence either way. What other evidence can we find to support the abusive reading?

S7: Well, the boy holds on like death and he is waltzed off to bed at the end, still clinging to his father's shirt.

S1: Where do you see abuse in that?

S7: It shows that the child, like all children of alcoholics, is terrified, but still holds on for dear life to get whatever kind of contact and affection he can. It's a sad picture, not a happy one.

T: OK. Good. Let's now switch to the other side. Where is the evidence that it's a happy poem? Sean?

S12: First of all, he calls the poem "My Papa's Waltz," which sounds affectionate and names a dance. And he could have referred to his father as his old man. *Papa* is a loving term.

S15: It's a happy memory because dancing with your father is a wonderful thing to do, even if his breath smells like whiskey. Look. I'm sorry to sound upset, but I don't see why people want to ruin this poem. It's like digging up gossip on somebody who is basically a good person and trying to make him look bad. The mother frowns because that's what mothers do when they see horseplay. "Oh, my dishes! My furniture!" It's not serious.

S12: I agree. He says that they romped and he says that at the end, the boy still didn't want to go to bed. He continues to cling to his father's shirt.

T: You read that line as evidence that it's a happy poem? But Sarah's group read the same line as evidence that it's a poem about abuse.

S14: Well, it's not!

T: OK. Anything else?

S11: The waltzing is not easy.

S6: Isn't that evidence that the dancing is abusive?

S5: It could show how much the boy liked dancing with his dad. He kept at it even when it was difficult.

S10: That's why I read the poem as bittersweet. It has all of these elements of abuse in it, yet the boy cherishes the opportunity to be close to his dad and works hard to keep the closeness going.

S16: But the father is drunk and even if the boy wants what he can get from him, it doesn't change the bottom line that the father is drunk and an alcoholic and on the edge of being out of control. And whenever that is what's happening, that's abuse for the child who has to live with it. And that's what the mother sees and is also afraid of.

S17: We don't know that the father is an alcoholic or that he gets drunk very often. Maybe that's the only time he loosens up enough to play with his kid. That's not abuse. Maybe it's more abusive when he's not drinking and ignores his child.

S18: Right! I can't believe what you guys are saying about this poem! Didn't any of you ever dance with your dad the way it's described in the poem? I did as a little kid. And nothing that happens in this poem is in any way abusive. What's abusive is what you are doing to this poem!

T: There's a strong reading! Thanks, Eric.

S16: Are you on his side? Let Eric tell us, if he thinks it's not about abuse, why the poem has all those words and descriptions that show abuse: beating, scraping his ear, whiskey on his breath, dizzy, mother frowning, battered knuckle, hung on like death! Come on!

T: Apparently we could go on with this argument for some time longer and maybe also hear from those of you who have not spoken up. But I think we've heard most of the evidence to be found in the poem from both sides. And not only does that evidence seem inconclusive, but some of the same evidence gets cited in favor of opposite positions. I hope that by now, even if you are as certain as you can be about the validity of your own position, you can also see the logic or the reasonableness (and possibly the passion) of the position being argued by those who disagree with you. That is, I suspect that given the evidence you've heard on both sides, you can intellectually respect the position of your classmates on the other side from yours, even if you "know" that they are wrong.

All right. How can we adjudicate between these two competing interpretations of the poem or validate any of the variant interpretations? Where can we go, besides to the poem itself, for additional evidence?

S8: You could ask the author, if he were still alive.

T: I think that's what most people would say, especially people outside of the literary community. It seems commonsensical. And I know somebody who did just that and I'll tell you about it later.

MANY STUDENTS: No! Tell us now! It's not fair if you know! (And so on.)

T: I'm sorry I mentioned it so soon. OK. I'll tell you what I know that someone claims to have gotten from Roethke himself.

A couple of years ago I conducted a workshop much like this one for the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, and in the middle of it a teacher in the group raised her hand and said that she had once asked Roethke about this poem. I asked her to hold on to her information until near the end of the workshop and then tell us what he had said. So at the proper time, she told us that she had read the poem in the mid-fifties and began to teach it, and had always felt that the poem was ambiguous or ambivalent in its tone. Then in about 1960, she met Roethke at an NCTE conference, where he was giving a reading, and asked him about his intentions in the poem. He told her to look at the last lines of his poem, because a poet always shows you what he is after with a poem in its last lines. And what are the last lines? "Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt." Unfortunately, those are lines that in this room both sides have cited as evidence for their opposite positions!

S1: But when he said that, he must have thought it would show the reader how the poem was about a warm and loving experience. Because that's what any normal person in 1960 would think about those lines.

ALL: (Many voices with laughter and objections.)

T: That's my prejudice too, I admit.

Reflections, Meditations, and Explications: Debriefing and Extending the Workshop

Commentary: What follows is a series of discourses, discussions, or mini-essays on a number of issues—theoretical, practical, and historical—arising from the workshop experience. These discussions, which serve to reflect on and extend the more experimental segments of the workshop, are reconstructions of what I usually say in actual workshops with students or with teachers. However, I am taking the additional liberty offered by the absence of time constraints and the advantages of written composition to elaborate these discourses more extensively than I would in an oral presentation. For the sake of space, moreover, I am deleting the clarifying and challenging questions and statements that students and teachers typically contribute to what will appear on these pages as unrelieved monologue. Finally I want to note that as these discourses focus increasingly on theoretical and professional matters, they increasingly addresses themselves to teachers rather than to students.

Discussion 1: On Questions of Poetic Identity, Persona, and Biographical Evidence

Let us now look at other kinds of evidence to see what we might find to help us adjudicate between competing readings of the Roethke poem. For one thing, we are sophisticated enough to know that, although poems are written by their authors, they are spoken by speakers, who are what we call the *persona*. The author of a poem might be a modern woman, but the speaker in a poem she writes could be a medieval duke.

Poems are constructed and they are fiction. They are not or need not be confessional. We even have evidence that in composing this poem, which may feel to us highly autobiographical, Roethke entertained the idea, at least for a while, of having it spoken by a female persona.

On the other hand, if we didn't identify the speakers of many lyric poems with their authors, we wouldn't be very interested in the poems. Consider a poem like Ben Jonson's elegy on the death of his first child ("On His First Son"). Most readers find that a powerful poem and would do so no matter who wrote it. But part of its power for us resides in our sense of its sincerity, our sense that the voice of the poem is a real one and belongs to someone who has experienced this loss in actuality. And, of course, in this poem the name of the poet and the dead child appear in the body of the poem as well.

For another example, think about George Herbert's religious meditations. If we didn't believe that these poems were the sincere expressions of the rhythms of his own spiritual life, we wouldn't find them nearly as compelling or important, aside from their metrical and imagistic virtuosity, even though there is abundant evidence that they were revised significantly to remove some of the personal dimensions of the poems and make them more public documents—more expressions of typical spiritual life or exemplary spiritual life. But part of their power for us lies in our taking them seriously as representations of the spiritual experience of George Herbert, the living person who was Orator at Cambridge, who relinquished the opportunity to hold powerful public positions in order to become a country parson, and so on.

My point is that no matter how sophisticated we are as readers, we are inclined—and wisely so—to identify lyric poems with their authors, unless we have some reason to separate them. And here it might be salutary for us to realize that the very idea of a persona for a first-person poem or for the entire genre of lyric poems was largely an invention of the New Critics in the mid-twentieth century. The term *persona* was used throughout most of literary history, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, to distinguish the voice of created or fictional characters within poems from the authentic voice of the poet speaking for himself or herself. In drama those other voices were and still are referred to as *dramatis personae*. But until well into the twentieth century, it was generally assumed that when the poet spoke in a poem in his own person—rather than in something like a dramatic monologue with a clearly invented character—it was the poet speaking (see *persona* in Preminger et al. 1993, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Compact Edition, 1971), probably reflecting late nineteenth-century poetics, defines the term *lyric* as "now used for the name of short poems . . . expressing the poet's own thought and sentiments."

It was the New Critics in the twentieth century who, in their opposition to biographical readings of poems and their insistence on the poem as a created artifact distinct from the poet and her intention, introduced the idea that even in lyric poems the speaker can't be equated with the poet. And one measure of the pervasive influence of New Criticism on literary education is the fact that virtually all English

teachers I encounter continue to insist on talking about speakers in all poems as the persona and to enforce that practice among their students. Fortunately, they know better as readers and frequently ignore their academic practice when they encounter and talk about most lyric poems they care about.

But before we go too far in abandoning the idea of a persona, let me point out that many lyric poems of the Renaissance—especially love poems that appear to be written directly from the heart—are, as the critic and poet J. V. Cunningham (1966, 162) used to observe, written less by a man than by a tradition. That is, what the poem does and says is to a very large extent conventional and imitative of similar poems in the Petrarchan or classical traditions. And that surely raises questions about how much the speaker of the poem is the individual who is the author or the author in his role as poet and as the figure a poet is expected to cut in the culture. Moreover, many modern theorists would insist that all poems in every age are necessarily written by a confluence of cultural forces and antecedent voices, and the very idea of a single author for a text is something of a fiction.

Still, we are inclined, and I think reasonably so, to read most lyric poems as personal utterances, and I think most modern poets would not discourage that inclination. And in Roethke's case and in the case of this particular poem, we seem to be especially invited to do so. Although the poem was originally published in 1942, Roethke included it in a 1948 volume of collected poems called *The Lost Son*, where it appeared as one of fourteen poems in an opening sequence of transparently autobiographical poems referred to by his biographers and critics as "the greenhouse poems," including the now widely anthologized short poem "Child on Top of a Greenhouse," about how a boy climbs up on the roof of a greenhouse in a nursery and upsets all the adults who see him up there spread out on the glass. And here I should mention that Roethke was raised around greenhouses because his father and grandfather were florists who worked in their own greenhouse next to their home in Saginaw, Michigan. That might explain why the father in "My Papa's Waltz" would have hands caked hard by dirt. Finally, as if to quell any lingering doubt about the autobiographical origins of the poem, Roethke included a headnote for the poem in one of the early published versions of it, saying (as nearly as I can remember, since I can no longer find the volume where I saw it) the following: "My father used to dance with me sometimes when he came in from work: ta tum, ta tum, ta tum"—surely a happy-sounding note.

Now, I don't know if Roethke's father was an alcoholic. But Roethke himself was a famously hard drinker. Might that suggest that his father probably was or that it's a reasonable guess that he was? And does that support one reading over another? On the other hand, I was doing this very workshop for a college English department some years ago, where the English department chair told me afterward that while he liked how I worked with the poem, he also knew how Roethke intended the poem to have been read. He had been a doctoral student at the University of Washington in about 1960, where Roethke taught in the English department. And he had heard Roethke read the poem on several occasions and he always read it in a lilting voice as if sing-

ing a song or chanting in waltz time. It was, said my colleague, clearly a poem of joy or one registering a happy memory for Roethke. But if that seems a definitive answer, you should know that I have another friend who is himself a distinguished poet and who also knew Roethke. He told me that he had heard Roethke read this poem in a gruff and rough-sounding voice as if reciting a list of capital crimes to a prisoner about to be shot.

Discussion 2: A Teacher's History of the Reception of Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"

Let me now recount to you the history of the reception of Roethke's poem among readers like yourselves, based on my experience of having taught the poem over a period of two generations, or about forty years. I don't remember the first time I taught the poem, but I know that I taught it in various classes throughout the sixties, and I distinctly remember discussions of the poem in a college freshman English class I taught in about 1962 or 1963, when I was a TA, and later in an introduction to poetry course that I taught as a professor in about 1966. I would guess that in the two and a half decades from 1960 up to about 1985, I taught the poem fifteen or twenty times in university freshman English classes or introductory literature courses like the one I presently teach. In all that time—that is, in the twenty-five-year period between 1960 and 1985—no student in my memory ever said anything in class discussion or in a piece of writing or in private to me about this poem having anything to do with abuse, with dysfunctional families, with alcoholism, or with violence.[2]

The first time I remember hearing the word or idea of abuse applied to this poem was in 1985, when I had been invited to be on a panel of University of California English professors at a late summer conference on new theories and approaches to the teaching of literature, sponsored by an association of English department faculty at California Community Colleges. As it turned out, I was unable to attend the conference and regretted it very much because the featured speakers for the conference included several theorists and practitioners I admired very much. But, alas, I had made a prior commitment and couldn't accept the invitation.

However, only a week or so after the conference, I ran into a colleague who taught at our local community college, a colleague who was my exact contemporary, who seemed to me highly knowledgeable on professional issues, and who had a wide reputation as an outstanding teacher. As it turned out, he had attended the conference and was delighted to tell me about it, insofar as that was possible with the two us standing in the middle of the aisle of a hardware store. But he did tell me some of the highlights of what was clearly an informative and provocative conference, and he told me specifically of a talk given by Nancy Comley of Queens College in New York City in which she spoke of how her students interpreted Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz." Her students—an ethnically diverse group of urban students, mostly from working-class and middle-class homes—took that poem, my colleague informed me in a tone signifying derision, to be a poem about child abuse. And to make matters worse, he noted, she—the professor, the distinguished scholar—thought that was a legitimate

reading. Then he added, confident that I, his exact contemporary, would share his sense of outrage: "Do you see how crazy these modern critics have become!"

I confess that I nodded in agreement, while thinking that I needed to get home to reread the poem, because it seemed to me offhand that it might indeed be about abuse or that a strong reading could be offered based on the claim that it was about abuse. As I have said, at that time I had never heard a critic or student offer such a reading, but then at that time I hadn't had an opportunity to teach the poem for several years. I was determined to teach it again, however, at the first available opportunity, which came that very fall in a lower-division English course I had volunteered to teach on composition and literature. I taught the poem early in the quarter and found that many of my students produced the same readings as Nancy Comley's students. And I have had similar results with every group of students as well as with every group of teachers I have worked with in the years since.

On that first occasion, actually, the class split nearly down the middle on the abuse question. Thereafter, I have taught the poem virtually every year to some group of undergraduate students and have regularly conducted workshops like this one with preservice and inservice teachers as well. From 1985 until about 1990, the number of readers who read the poem as a poem about abuse grew every year, until by 1990–91 it was typically about 85 percent. Then it began to drop for a few years, back to a more nearly even split by about 1996. In recent years it has risen again, so that, by the turn of the century, it was typically 75 percent, and now in the year 2002, I again characteristically find 80 or 85 percent of the readers in a class or workshop insisting that the poem is about abuse.[3] And to support their reading—which, mind you, was almost unheard of twenty years ago—I have been told by my colleague Joe Trimmer of Ball State University in Indiana that a billboard and brochures in Indianapolis advertising the services of a shelter for abused women and children show this poem as a background text. If our students want to find more corroborating testimony, they can go to the Internet, where they will find "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Roethke indexed on several Internet search engines under the topics of child abuse and alcoholism.

In the meantime, many accomplished readers, especially readers of my generation and older, still tend to read the poem as basically a warm and loving memorial (an ode) to the poet's father and to his own past. Quite typically, one of the most widely used and most respected college anthologies of literature (Kennedy and Gioia 2000, 526) treats the idea that the poem may be about the father's abusiveness as a reading that misses the tone of the poem and ignores its humorous side.

So what happened? How can we account for the fact that no student in my classes before 1985 ever made a case for or even pointed me in the direction of the reading that so many contemporary students and most of their teachers seem to regard as the preferred or even normative reading of this poem? The answer, of course, is that before the mid-eighties, ideas about abuse and dysfunctional families and discussions of alcoholism in one's family were not part of the public discourse. They became a part of that discourse with the explosion of twelve-step programs in middle-class commu-

nities in the decade of the eighties and with the public revelations in the eighties and nineties of the substance abuse problems of celebrities and their family members. There also appears to have been a concerted effort on the part of mental health workers, government agencies, and the women's movement during the past decade to build public awareness about child abuse and various other forms of family violence, particularly against women and children. The effect of such a change in public discourse is that virtually all Americans—and surely all literate middle-class Americans—are alert to signs of abuse and suspicious about any hint of violence, especially where there is evidence of alcohol use.

Nor do I think we can assume, knowing what we now know about the hidden side of American middle-class family life, that there were no students in my classes in the decades of the sixties and seventies who read Roethke's poem as a poem about abuse. But to make a case for such a reading in those years would have required speaking from personal experience of what was at that time still unspeakable. It may also be the case that the students most likely to read abuse in the poem were—as the children of alcoholics themselves—also those most inclined to dismiss their own perceptions as distorted and unworthy of calling to anyone's attention. By the mid-eighties, however, the entire country was speaking of what had once been unmentionable, and it was possible and almost inevitable to know of such matters without having had any comparable experience in one's own life. Moreover, to speak of such experiences in one's own life—to unmask what had been a source of shame—was now widely seen as personally restorative and a method of overcoming shame. What we can say, then, is that a change in the culture made a particular reading available that had not been culturally available before (cf. Mellor, O'Neill, Patterson 1992).

Discussion 3: Sources of Interpretive Authority

The attractiveness and popularity of what appears to be the dominant current reading of Roethke's poem does not, of course, make it correct. But then what would make any reading more correct than another, unless we establish, as E. D. Hirsch urged us to do in 1967 in *Validity in Interpretation*, some basis for authorizing or validating readings? Hirsch has argued that authorial intention is the most credible and trustworthy source of authority and must therefore serve as the basis for determining interpretive validity, especially in cases where competing interpretive claims are being advanced. But even if there were unequivocal evidence about how Roethke may have read his poem at the time he wrote it, the limited value of that evidence as a guide to our current reading is suggested by imagining what Roethke might say if he were to return from the grave to reread his own poem from the perspective of what he might now know.

It seems hardly far-fetched, in fact, to imagine him saying what many middle-aged adults of my acquaintance have said about their childhood experience: something like, "I always thought I had a happy childhood, but now that I look back on it, I realize I was abused." Picture Roethke making an appearance in a classroom full of students

studying his poem and saying: "When I wrote this poem, I thought I was celebrating a moment of closeness between myself and my father. But now that I look back on it—given all that I have become aware of in recent years having to do with alcoholism and family dysfunction—I can't regard it as such a fond and humorous memory anymore. And I must have sensed the problem even then or I wouldn't have used so many words and images hinting at a violent subtext for the more overtly happy surface action." Such a reading, in noticing textual contradictions of which the writer was unaware at the time of composition, might even be said to constitute a deconstructionist reading, a reading that discovers ways in which the text subverts or deconstructs its own pretensions to a dominant tone and coherent discernible meaning.

In the case of this poem then, as I suspect might be true for many texts, it's not hard for us to imagine circumstances under which the writer might embrace an interpretation of his text that was not part of his own original conscious intention in writing his text, creating thereby a kind of new authorial intention retroactively declared and a convincing case for a deconstructionist reading. In any event, while I confess that like most readers of my generation I am personally convinced that Roethke's poem ought to be read as a warm and generally fond memory of a moment of closeness with his father, I don't believe that the available evidence would allow me as a teacher to insist on my own reading as more authoritatively correct or more reasonable than the alternative readings offered by a new generation of readers.

Discussion 4: **An Apology** *for the* **Interpretation** *of* **Poetry:** *In Defense of Literary Study as a Disciplined Enterprise*

If we are unable to settle on a single authoritative and fixed meaning for this poem and presumably for other poems, does it follow, as many students will happily insist, that one of the advantages of studying literature over other subjects is that there are no right answers and that a poem can mean anything a reader wants it to mean? And is it also fair or reasonable to conclude—as have a number of outspoken critics of exemplary instruments for assessing literary reading (see Blau 1994a and 2001)—that if teachers of literature are unable to authorize a single and fixed interpretation as the only correct answer to the question, "What does this poem mean?" then those teachers can't possibly be respectable practitioners of their discipline, or else the discipline is itself an intellectual sham? Literary study can hardly be worthy of respect as an intellectual discipline, the argument goes, if it is, in fact, what many students think it is: which is to say, if it lacks, first, a reliable body of knowledge about the meanings of the texts that are the objects of its study and, second, a well-established procedure or set of disciplinary standards for distinguishing between valid and specious claims about the central questions and objects of disciplinary study. In other words, if we can't produce a single and fixed interpretation of a poem, like Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," and if we regard any interpretation a reader offers to be as valid as any other, then something is seriously lacking in our professional skill or in our profession.

To answer such critics of our teaching (and of our best assessment) practices and of our profession, we need to unpack and correct some of the presuppositions that make their line of argument appear reasonable. We may also need to clarify for ourselves just how it is that our practice is, in fact, governed by established disciplinary procedures that provide standards for distinguishing between valid and invalid interpretive claims.

First, that we have entertained several different and sometimes opposite interpretations of the same poem hardly suggests that a poem can mean anything a reader might claim it means. Is it merely an accident that nobody interpreted the poem as a representation of a sporting event or a high school prom or a religious experience? In fact, the varied and competing interpretations of the poem show a very high degree of agreement about what the poem says and even what it means, with the areas of disagreement quite narrowly constrained. In other words, our disagreement operates within a very narrow range of possible meanings and suggests that we have already agreed on a great deal about the meaning of the poem. Many things that might be said, perhaps by less competent readers of this poem, neither were said nor would have been acceptable as valid if they had been said (cf. Fish 1980, 342–45).

Second, every reading offered and counted as a viable reading was supported by evidence to warrant it. In other words, the discourse of interpretation proceeds according to the rules of evidentiary reasoning, and the adequacy and persuasiveness of such reasoning serves as the standard by which all interpretations are evaluated. Thus, when one student wanted to picture the child in the poem as a girl, the rules of evidence were called into play to evaluate that interpretive claim. And while the weight of the evidence suggested that the figure in the poem was a boy, it had to be allowed that the evidence is inferential and that the poem—not identifying the child explicitly as male—leaves a gap, albeit a small one, in the narrative, which a reader might fill in a way that is imaginatively satisfying for the reader. However, the conversation also made it clear that to read the child as female required an imaginative leap into that small gap that ran counter to the preponderance of inferential evidence. Therefore, the reading was allowed, even if somewhat begrudgingly. To disallow it entirely, however, would be to violate the rules of evidentiary reasoning, which authorize and limit all readings.

That some pieces of evidence were counted as evidence by readers arguing for opposite interpretations might suggest that the process of interpretation is simply a matter of using evidence in any way one might choose to support one's argument. In fact, it merely shows us that textual evidence is itself subject to interpretation. That is, insofar as the evidence cited is itself textual, it is a text to be interpreted. However, it also demonstrates the epistemological phenomenon and logical problem of the hermeneutic circle. We depend on evidence or facts that constitute evidence to produce an interpretation, but we also interpret the facts or the evidence available in the light of the interpretation that we anticipate or have hypothesized. Thus, readers who see the poem as describing an abusive event read the child's clinging to the

father's shirt as evidence that the child was abused and holding on for dear life, while those who read the poem as a warm and appreciative memory construe the child's clinging as evidence of his wanting to remain in the company of the father.

While that process of circular thinking might appear to call into question the validity of the evidentiary reasoning that produces interpretations, it is hardly different from the process of scientific reasoning that is the widely accepted model for advancing knowledge in the direction of truth. Scientific reasoning and inquiry, as Michael Polanyi (1966) has demonstrated, would seem, in fact, to be another version of the hermeneutic circle, depending upon the tacit dimension of knowing, whereby a scientist must first intuit research findings or new discoveries that are to be made in order to recognize a finding or discovery when it is finally available for recognition. That would seem to be a version of the common experience of shoppers who say, "I can't tell you what I want, but I'll know what it is when I find it." Whatever enables them to know what it is when they find it is their tacit knowledge of what it is before they find it.

It would seem to be the case, moreover, that all of the interpretive difficulties and epistemological uncertainties that render the discipline of literary study suspect to critics who expect more authoritative answers and more reliable procedures from a respectable academic discipline apply with no more perilous force to literary study than they do to other fields of study and certainly to all the other human sciences or professions. For example, if the difficulty of establishing a trustworthy and somehow authoritative interpretation of Roethke's poem seems to be a problem deriving from the status of the poem as a literary work, consider how the interpretive process would proceed if the facts represented in the poem were drawn from a real event (as they presumably were) that was witnessed by a group of social workers peering through various windows of the house where the events transpired.

Imagine them witnessing the narrated events—the boy dancing with his dad, the scraping of the child's ear, the smell of whiskey (or some visual evidence of the father's intoxicated state), the mother frowning, and so on. And then imagine those social workers meeting to compare notes about what they saw and what they made of it. Could they agree about whether they had witnessed an incident of abuse or one of parental love? What would make such an incident easier to interpret in real life than in a literary artifact? In fact, isn't it frequently the case that parents are arrested or suspected of child abuse on the basis of evidence that social workers and courts later determine gives insufficient grounds for labeling as abuse? So the source of uncertainty in Roethke's poem may not be any feature of the poem as a literary artifact at all, but a function of the ambiguity that resides in our culture and in our understanding and legal definitions about what constitutes abuse, even when we may be witnessing it.

If this seems a special case and one that avoids the issue of the usual interpretive uncertainties and competing meaning claims to which literary texts are subject, consider what field of human endeavor is less subject to interpretive uncertainties and competing claims about meaning and intention and so on. Surely not the institution of marriage or courtship. Who among us has not had some disagreement in the past

day or week or month with a loved one over what we meant when we said or did this or that, and what we intended, and why we said or did thus and so, if we intended some other meaning, and how we must have unconsciously intended to send the very message that we are now disavowing?

Better yet, if literary discourse seems particularly susceptible to multiple interpretations and ultimate uncertainty in attempts to adjudicate between competing claims about meaning, consider the discourse that is regularly produced with the sole intention of preventing any disputes about meaning, intention, or interpretation—the one species of discourse where specialists are paid and paid handsomely to produce documents that cannot be subject to multiple, competing, or uncertain interpretations. I am speaking, of course, about legal discourse and the specialized skill of lawyers to write contracts and laws that will exactly represent the intention of their signatories at the time they are written and forever after. And what happens as soon as the contracted business is completed or as soon as a law impedes somebody's financial or civic interests? The answer is obvious. The parties to the contract are in court arguing over what the language of the contract actually requires of the various parties, or the justices of a state or federal court are at work on what they spend most of their time doing: trying to figure out what a particular law as written—written, mind you, so there could be no more than one way to interpret it—actually means or whether it is in conflict with other state or federal statutes (or constitutions), whose meanings are also subject to continuing and unending debate.

And when, after months or years of debate and thousands of pages of interpretive writing are devoted to a question of meaning and it is finally settled to the satisfaction of the court, it is usually settled by a majority of the justices voting in a particular way, with a minority still convinced of a different conclusion or several different conclusions. And even then, the majority decision is only a provisional one and is subject to reversal by a higher court or by the same court some years later, as we have seen in cases where the U.S. Supreme Court renders decisions that reverse Supreme Court decisions of earlier generations, precisely for the same reason I have conjectured that Roethke might change his mind about what his own poem means: cultural changes render our understanding of concepts like privacy, equal opportunity, equal treatment under the law, and child abuse different from what they were in generations past.

Why, then, should we expect greater interpretive stability and certainty from linguistic structures we call literature and the discourse of literary study—a study of fictional worlds designed to instruct and entertain us—than we expect from the discourse of the legal profession or from that of social workers, diplomats, psychologists, physicians, or husbands and wives, upon whose utterances and interpretations the health and happiness of real, not fictional, human beings may daily depend? The reality is that human beings live in a sea of texts, where our survival and happiness depend on our ability to read the language that, as Thoreau observed, "all things and events speak without metaphor," as well as the verbal language of human utterance and written texts. In such a universe of meaning, teachers of literature are privileged to

be able to work in a field of signification where the stakes may be relatively low, but their instruction salvational. In the example they set of interpretive attention, awareness of nuance, the weighing of evidence, and alertness to problems in interpretive authority, English teachers may serve as the most reliable guides and models for all persons, whose private, civic, and professional lives (whether they want it this way or not) require constant negotiation with texts whose meanings are finally no less indeterminate or subject to multiple interpretation than any novel or poem in our literary canon.

Notes

1. Stanley Fish, in a classic essay ("What Makes An Interpretation Acceptable," 1980), argues that a more sophisticated version of this state of affairs has always obtained, but only insofar as it describes the range of possible interpretations that are authorized by an interpretative community, which in the case of literary interpretation refers to the community of literary scholars and critics who teach in universities and control the conferences and journals where literary interpretations are published and presented. In the view of many students, that simply means that a poem (or any other literary work) can mean anything you want it to mean, but that some teachers will lower your grade if you don't agree with them.
2. I do not mean to claim that no reader until the 1980s had seen abusive elements in the poem. John Ciardi (1959, 1003) speaks of the poem as one which "despite its seeming lightness . . . is a poem of terror." And the teacher I met in Illinois had seen some kind of ambivalence in the poem as early as 1960. But it was not a reading I had encountered among my students or that was generally noticed by teachers. And neither Ciardi nor the astute teacher from Illinois would have gone so far as to claim that the event narrated in the poem—as ambivalent as it may appear—constitutes a version of abuse. The first published account I am aware of (thanks to Candida Gillis) where explicit mention is made of readers reading Roethke's poem as a poem about abuse is in an article by Celeste Resh in the Spring 1987 issue of the journal of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.
3. Why the number of people reading abuse in the poem has gone down and then up again in the groups I have surveyed since 1990 mystifies me. Nor can my counts be easily dismissed as statistical accidents. I survey at least four or five groups of students and teachers each year and get consistent percentages year by year.