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## Interpretation, Sincerity & "Theory"

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## Interpretation, Sincerity & "Theory"

John Gibson

### 1. Introduction

An interesting difference between discussions of interpretation in the "analytic" and "continental" traditions (this distinction generally does much more harm than good but in this case it is helpful) is that on the whole analytic philosophers prefer to talk about interpretations and their continental brethren are often more interested in talking about interpreters. One sees this especially in various continental attempts to "enfranchise" the interpreter, frequently, an analytic type might respond, at the expense of the work and its author. If certain strands of postwar continental thought have sought to see meaning in art (and elsewhere) as originating in the mouths of interpreters as much as in the minds of artists, the analytic tradition has been more interested in exploring how interpretations can be seen as cognitively responsive to and so revelatory of the meanings to be found *in* artworks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, continental theories of interpretation tend to come off as more provocative and, frankly, sexier, whereas analytic theories of interpretation often seem the more staid and sensible of the two.

Laurent Stern's *Interpretative Reasoning* is that rare book that succeeds in bringing together what is best from these two traditions while leaving aside what makes them appear bloated or boring. One might expect so much from Stern, whose fluency in both philosophical traditions is always in full view in his work. Though I won't be much interested in the French and American inflections of Stern's theory in the following, I do hope to show that his theory allows us to acknowledge the presence of the interpreter without ever sacrificing the idea that her voice, if it is to be a genuinely *interpretive* voice, must ultimately speak for, and not in place of, artworks. In other words, in Stern's theory one gets continental allure and analytic reasonableness, and this is surely a good thing. As one does on these occasions, I will also raise a few worries. But my basic hope is to show that Stern's theory is eminently worthy of philosophical attention.

### 2. Stern's Voice

I think that the first thing one would be inclined to say about Stern's book is that it is challenging. The prose is clear and urbane, so it is not challenging *in that sense*. It is challenging in the sense that it does not tolerate careless readers, as I know, since I was one. The first time I read it, I noticed only what was absent. Stern does not spend much time addressing the views of other major players in the debate. He does have illuminating things to say about Richard Wollheim and Arthur Danto, but the other usual suspects are, if not absent, then very much in the back-row of this book. Nor does Stern structure his book around a discussion of the issues, problems, and paradoxes that have been driving work in the theory of interpretation in Anglophone aesthetics for the last thirty-odd years. The book did not seem especially interested in whether we should be intentionalists or conventionalists,

whether critical monism or critical pluralism should rule the day, whether we should be relativists, realists, or constructivists, and so on. These issues pop up in the book, but they do not guide it. They have, at best, brief cameos. For these reasons, the book struck me as having been written largely in the void.

Fortunately, I reread it (I had to, as I was asked to review it), this time carefully, and the experience was one of reading an entirely different book. For one, the careful reader will see that Stern always has the major players and issues in mind, and in subtle ways his book is constantly gesturing towards them. But more importantly, the careful reader will see that Stern, in his quiet and civilized way, is asking the reader to consider a very different approach to the theory of interpretation. Stern's interests are not in the sorts of meta-interpretative issues that concern most philosophers. His focus is on the principles, concerns, and goals that inform *actual* interpretative claims, so much so that his book often makes the philosophy of interpretation seem to be primarily a chapter of practical philosophy. Stern wishes to know when, and why, we offer interpretations. What prompts the interpretive enterprise itself, and what are our options when responding to these promptings? For whom do we speak when we make interpretive claims: merely ourselves, ourselves and those sufficiently like us, or, with hope, everyone? When are interpretations sincere, when are they "off the wall"? And when do my interpretative claims reveal more about me than the nature of the object I take myself to be rendering intelligible? In all of these cases, and the many more like them that Stern explores, the focus is descriptive, in the methodological sense Ryle or Wittgenstein would approve of: it is an example of philosophy as the exploration of the logical geography of our existing concepts and practices.

Stern builds his account around a study of the interpretive *voice*, and it is this notion of voice that makes his contribution to the philosophy of interpretation so unique. We begin to speak in the interpretive voice when we are aware that what we say is not of the order of straightforward discovery, for when we take ourselves to have simply discerned an objective property of an object, there for all to see, we speak in the idiom of description rather than interpretation. This keeps the distinction between interpretation and description tidy, and it reveals how far Stern is from the view, still popular in literature departments, that there is no such thing as non-interpretative understanding. As Wittgenstein pointed out, the naïve belief in the omnipresence of interpretation drains the concept of interpretation of all content,<sup>[1]</sup> and Stern's way of setting up his notion of voice ensures that Wittgenstein's warning is heeded. As Stern sensibly insists, interpretation steps on the scene when there is a *question* of meaning. When I say in the descriptive mode of speech, "My daughter finds my stories boring," I am expressing a kind of certainty: I take myself to be not interpreting but simply reporting on her state of mind. Were I to make the same claim in the interpretive voice, my statement would implicitly point up the possibility of thinking other than I do, for if I thought there was no other possible way her behavior could be taken, if I thought that there was no real *question* as to what it amounts to, I would not see an interpretation as prompted in the first

place.

The interpretive voice always bears the mark of the personal. It speaks the dialect of individual judgment, of opinion (the sense of "opinion" we employ when we speak of a "legal opinion" and not the one undergraduates everywhere enlist when defending relativism). But we do not, for Stern, speak *only* for ourselves: this would distinguish interpretation from description by assimilating interpretation to expressions of mere taste, which would be to err in the opposite direction. The deliverances of a sincere interpretive voice (more on sincerity in a moment) occupy a space midway between the fully objective and the purely subjective, between claims with essential reference to the subject and those which gesture entirely in the direction of the world. When we speak in the interpretive voice, we express an individual judgment, a way we think an object should be understood, that implicitly makes a claim about how the *others* will, or ought to, make sense of the object. That we apply reasons when making interpretive judgments would seem to suggest this much, since a reason, if it truly is a reason, should provide the same support to others' judgments as it does to mine. (This does not mean that if we share a reason it shall inevitably lead us to the same interpretive judgment, since we will not share many other, potentially competing reasons, all which can rear their heads and bring us to make sense of the world in different ways). I am not sure Stern would approve of the following way of putting it, but all this strikes me as showing that when we speak in the interpretive voice, we call on others to see the world as we do, and so to this extent we offer up a *claim to community*. When we speak in the interpretive voice, we inevitably issue an invitation to a *shared* way of making sense of some text, artwork, person, or culture.

There are two ways in which the interpretive voice makes a claim to community. According to Stern, interpretations implicitly express one of two principles or "conversation terminators," as Stern calls them: the Universalizability Principle and the Restrictive Principle. The Restrictive Principle makes the weaker, though still significant, claim to community, namely, that "only reasonable persons who are familiar with the circumstances understand what is at issue the way I do." (p. 10) As the name suggests, the Universalizability Principle expresses the stronger claim to community, and it has the implicit form of a claim to the effect that "every reasonable person who is familiar with the circumstances understands what is at issue the way I do." (p. 9) What we appeal to when trying to justify an interpretation is not a decisive, fully objective standard of rightness -- there aren't any available to us (we wouldn't be *interpreting* if there were) -- but rather a conception of what "reasonable and well-informed interpreters will (or would, or even ought to) say in interpretative situations." (p. 1) The Universalizability Principle states that *any* such reasonable and well-informed person would offer the interpretation I offer; that this is how anyone possessed of sound mind and decent education will view the matter. But there are, of course, many occasions in which we must retreat to a weaker claim to community, such as when we interpret in the face of insurmountable disagreement. In these cases we invoke the Restrictive Principle and speak in the humbler tone of one who claims only that only others like

her, who share, say, her particular values, commitments, routes of interest, and habits of thought, will interpret some object as she does.

For reasons that should now be clear, the Universalizability Principle invokes the image of the agreement of others, of "every reasonable person," not because it somehow logically derives this agreement from an unassailable point of argumentative departure, whatever that might be. To put it in terms I hope Stern would approve of, interpretations expressive of this principle gesture towards a universal community because they take themselves to have won a certain *right*, to be *entitled* to use a certain kind of vocabulary. When interpreting in the "universal voice," the interpreter is "understood *as if* he discovered certain properties in an artwork" (p. 159). But "had he in fact discovered such properties, he would not need to support the statement of his discovery with the Universalizability Principle. He would be entitled to claim that he had spoken accurately about facts or true descriptions concerning an artwork" (p. 159). When we interpret in the universal voice, our interpretation is expressive of a kind of confidence: confidence in the fact that we have hit upon the best available interpretation, one that "every reasonable person" should find compelling. In this case, the right we take ourselves to have won is that of *using the language of discovery*, of speaking *as if* we have passed from interpretation to description, when in fact we really haven't. Stern illustrates this with an example of an imagined art critic:

Everyone—including the critic whose understanding and imagination shaped an interpreted object out of the perceptual object she saw—ought to see it as the critic "saw" it; everyone ought to believe that he sees a perceptual object, when in fact he "sees" an interpreted object. In demanding that everyone see it as she "saw" it, the professional critic speaks with a universal voice. Are we witnessing a sleight of hand, when the critic first wants to report with her own individual voice what she "saw" in a given artwork, and then speaks with a universal voice in demanding that everyone see it as she "saw" it? One answer is that we must admit that this is indeed a sleight of hand. In accepting this answer, we admit that the formal properties attributed to a painting are understood *as if* they were found in that painting, *as if* they were perceptual properties — while in fact they are not found in it and they are not its perceptual properties. A second answer is that the sleight of hand must be rejected, and the formal properties attributed to a painting are its perceptual properties. This answer is unacceptable, for it collapses aesthetic judgments into perceptual judgments. (p. 153).

One has likely already detected a bit of Kant in all of this. Since the other symposiasts will discuss Stern's use of Kant in considerable detail, I will only mention one feature of it here. The passage from the purely individual to the universal voice is not made along the rails of logical entailment. It is not that we hit upon some *impersonal* grounds for seeing the object as we do. It is, after all, *our* "understanding and imagination" that leads us to see the object this way, and so the grounds of our judgment are, to this extent, personal, even in a sense "subjective," though this term connotes somewhat

uncontrollably when speaking of interpretation and so is perhaps best left aside. When we interpret in the universal voice, one of the reasons it bears the mark of the “universal” is because the judgment’s mode of self-expression cancels out reference to the personal grounds that gave rise to it and so what is left is the image of how it will strike *one*, and not *this* or *that one*. Like Kant’s judgment of taste, Stern’s conception of interpretative judgments in the universal voice makes essential reference to the object and how it *is*, rather than how it merely *seems to me*. This is a consequence of the implicit “as if” claim the Universalizability Principle embodies.

A concept that appears throughout the book is that of interpretative *sincerity*. Stern’s discussion of sincerity allows him to offer a novel analysis of something every theory of interpretation must address: the notion of *fidelity* to the object of interpretation. In most popular theories of interpretation, fidelity (or a concept amounting to it) is understood in epistemological or metaphysical terms. Is the object (really or actually) propertied as a certain interpretation says it is and, if so, how might we know this, what conditions must present themselves if we are to be justified in asserting this? Stern does not ignore these meta-interpretative issues, but he explores them in terms not of a conception of an abstract match between an object and an interpretation of it but of the interpreter’s attempt to be faithful to the object of her interpretive scrutiny. Stern recasts fidelity as sincerity of expression, of a voice that strives to speak for another rather than on behalf of an agenda or ideology that the interpreter effectively just imposes upon another.

Unpacking how this notion of sincerity works requires an additional battery of distinctions. The unproblematic sort of interpretation, at least for the question of sincerity, is what Stern calls “natural” or “surface” interpretations, and these can be expressed in two “moods.” When spoken in the “indicative” mood, “the interpreter tries to understand the speaker’s words as the speaker *would* understand them if he were in the interpreter’s place.” (page 13, emphasis added) Assume I am attempting to interpret the behavior of my sexually akratic colleague. (In this instance it is helpful to consider the interpretation of behavior; I shall consider the interpretation of artworks below.) I offer a sincere interpretation of the natural and indicative kind if I take what I say to be the interpretation of his behavior the akratic himself *would* acknowledge as correct. But this “would” is funny, of course. In the indicative mood, the claim is that my interpretation *matches* (there’s the indicative) his self-understanding, or at any rate it would match it were my colleague called to account for his behavior. In short, what I say is what he *would* say about himself, and the “would” here is not contrary-to-fact but reports a condition that we would expect to be fulfilled. But it is possible that my akratic colleague is incapable of seeing his behavior for what it is. Perhaps he blames his problems on the constant intrusions of Temptation to which he sees himself as a helpless victim. In this case, the “would” does not indicate the interpretation he would *actually* give, for he is not capable of honest self-assessment. And so I offer a natural interpretation in the “subjunctive” mood and I claim something very different. I claim that my interpretation is the one he *would* agree with *if* he were reasonable and honest, which he

is not.

Note that my interpretation in the subjunctive mood still has a claim to reaching all the way to the facts of the matter as my colleague, too, would understand them. It is simply that a defect on the part of my colleague prevents him from acknowledging this. These facts are features of *who he is*, and it is his inability to see something *about himself* that makes these facts unavailable to him. And here we arrive at the general point all of this announces. Sincere natural interpretations in either the indicative or subjunctive mood cast the source of potential confirmation as *internal* to the object of interpretation itself. Assuming my interpretation is correct, my akratic neighbor can in principle verify this simply by taking an honest look within.

In the case of natural interpretations in both moods, we make use of the Universalizability Principle, since we are working with a conception of what "every reasonable person" would say, regardless of whether one is sufficiently reasonable to meet this condition. But we often go beyond this as interpreters and do something quite suspicious, something that calls into question our interpretive sincerity. Say I have been reading a certain book to which I've become beholden, a book my akratic colleague has not read. By the light of this book I find myself moved to offer the following interpretation. I interpret his behavior as causally linked to Man's Fall from Grace or, if I have been reading a rather different book, as a result of the inevitable insatiability of bourgeois desire in late capitalist society. Now it won't matter at all how reasonable or capable of honest self-assessment my colleague is, which is why my theory-laden interpretation cannot be seen as a sort of excessively subjunctive natural interpretation (we are well beyond that), for he can look within himself as much as he wishes and he will not find *anything* that could make my interpretation adequate to his self-understanding. Nothing "internal" to him could possibly perform a justificatory role here. This is because the only way he could share my conception of the relevant facts of the matter would be if he were to embrace something that is *foreign* to him, namely the "theory" in virtue of which I make sense of his behavior.

In this respect, for my akratic colleague to come to see his behavior as I do, he must join a very limited community: the community of all those who embrace my theory. Put differently, it is in virtue of the theory that many of the relevant facts of the matter appear as they do. And so it no longer suffices to invoke a notion of a potentially universal community of consent in respect to my interpretation (the community of "every reasonable person"). I have to retreat to a restricted, one is here tempted to say "provincial," notion of community when I form an image of those who will find my interpretation reasonable. I have done two things at this point. I have abandoned the Universalizability Principle in favor of the Restrictive Principle, and I have moved from natural interpretation to "deep" interpretation. This is not, according to Stern, a good thing.

When I shift from natural to deep interpretation, I effectively move the potential source of confirmation of my interpretation *outside* the object of interpretation, and thus it will only be by

the light of something alien to that object that my interpretation will make sense or seem compelling. And in doing so, I have effectively stopped speaking on behalf of the object and started to make the object speak on behalf of a theory I happen to champion. Now I may be so beholden to my theory that I no longer see it as merely a theory, in which case I will perhaps take myself to be offering a natural interpretation in the subjunctive mood, though I'll be guilty of self-deception if this is the case. If I am not deceived, then this raises obvious and important questions about the sincerity of my interpretation, since what I say seems at root to be an ideological move that I've just dressed up as an "interpretation." Either way, I will strike the community of potential judges of my interpretation as revealing more fidelity to my theory than to the person I am trying to make sense of, and so I will seem to be one who interprets incompetently or in bad-faith, neither of which does much good for my status as an interpreter.

Here we see that in deep interpretations of this sort the delicate but essential balance between the personal and objective is lost. My interpretation gestures too much towards me and the theory I embrace and too little towards the object of interpretative scrutiny. In offering a deep interpretation, I set an excessively "personal" condition for the acceptance of my interpretation, indeed for my interpretation even to appear reasonable to others: acceptance of the theory I happen to favor. With this, my interpretation abandons the Universalizability Principle and takes up the Restrictive Principle, and it does so in such a way that will make one doubt that I am really speaking in a genuinely interpretive voice. I invoke the notion of the limited community of "experts" to support my interpretation, and I claim that it is only by virtue of membership in this community that one will share my conception of the facts of the matter. At this point, the idea that an interpretation should be guided by a conception of the object of interpretation's own self-understanding (indicatively or subjunctively understood) is thrown aside. Whatever it is that I am up to here, it no longer seems to be a sincere attempt to play the game of interpretation.

This is controversial stuff, as Stern knows. Much of what our colleagues in the humanities do is offer interpretations of this deep sort. Indeed, many of the political, economic, evolutionary, structuralist, historicist, psychoanalytic theories (the list is nearly endless) that abound in the contemporary university are as a matter of daily course enlisted to weave the kind of interpretation Stern finds suspicious and of questionable sincerity. It is refreshing to find an expression of scepticism about the habit of applying these grand theories so freely and so frequently uncritically. It is a habit that gives rise to the impression that academics prefer to posture knowingly in the presence of great questions rather than attempt to say something actually informative about them: something like the academic equivalent of what teenagers do when they account for the wellspring of human motivation in terms of one being a "jock," a "loser," a "rich kid," or "immature." All this might be true in certain cases and at some level, but there is something to be said in favor of asking interpreters to be faithful to, if you will, *the sense of self* the



object of interpretation actually possesses, faithful to a person's motives as she honestly understands them, to an artwork's sense of its own purpose, to the concerns a social group itself sees as underwriting its protests. Our conception of an object's "sense of self" will itself be interpretation dependent; but we can at least build into our conception of the interpretative enterprise a conception of answerability to the object, of understanding it at least partly on its own terms, even if we acknowledge we do not have direct, that is, non-interpretative, access to this. Whether or not one agrees with all the particulars of Stern's theory, he is to be commended for asking us to take this commitment to interpretive fidelity much more seriously than we often do when going about our business as academics and critics.

### 3. A Modern Worry

I have one worry I will raise here. The worry I have is not so much about Stern's theory as it is about my inability to understand how to apply it to kinds of art I would very much like to be able apply it to, and I wish to ask Stern for his help here. In a general way I have in mind much modernist art. And of this, I am especially interested in a region of art Stern himself cares about deeply: poetry.

My worry is that many of the features of Stern's theory of interpretation I find so attractive won't be of much help when confronting the very things for which I am most in need of a theory of interpretation. The question of meaning is of a different kind in the case of poetry, indeed in the case of art, than the question of meaning in the case of human behavior. I don't take it to be especially surprising to say that when I confront *The Waste Land* I will have to do very different things as an interpreter than when I confront my sexually akritic colleague. And I do not think Stern says anything to the contrary. But the worry I have is that the difference is a matter of the inevitable role of "theory" in the case of interpreting (especially modernist) poems, theories that are ultimately "foreign" to the poems but that are essential to the successful interpretation of them. And I fear that Stern's excellent arguments against deep interpretations will have the unwanted consequence of barring theory in cases where theories are actually needed and helpful. Let me explain.

There is a sense, though surely a trivial one, in which every answer we give to a question of meaning – the question, again, that calls forth the interpretive enterprise itself – might be seen as theory-laden to some degree. That is, it might be the case that questions of meaning can never be answered without the application of some sort of theory, even in the case of simple human behavior, such as your responding "He is afraid" when I ask you to solve the mystery of why a mutual friend never visits the dentist. Just to give a sense of how one might make a case for this, if certain philosophers are correct, my very ability to make sense of others' actions requires the application of a "theory of mind" to a piece of lively matter: to a thing that seems to be animated by the same psychological states that animate my behavior. One might even claim that the ability to appreciate a work of art (as a work of art) inevitably requires a "theory of art": a theory of what a work of art is and the sorts of value it can

bear.

One can hear the voice of Wittgenstein here, chiding something to the effect that "if this is a theory, then everything is." (To their credit, philosophers of mind almost always put "theory" in scare quotes.) But be that as it may, these would be harmless examples of an interpretive reliance upon a theory, even for a Sternian interpreter. The reason for this is that we can still respect the requirement of fidelity to the object of interpretation when we apply these "theories," for they function to help the interpreter bring to light actual *features* of the object of interpretation. When we apply these theories, we are not imposing anything *foreign* upon the object but are rather employing a "theoretical" vocabulary that allows us to speak more accurately about what is *internal* to it. As such, we can insist, in the natural and even universal voice, to be offering an interpretation that has a claim to matching the object's own "self-understanding."

But when we start to look at certain modern artistic practices, the question of meaning cannot be answered without relying on much more robust theories, theories that I fear a Sternian interpreter will have to regard with suspicion, at least if she is to be true to her theory. An example that I think pushes Stern's account to the edge, but not over it, concerns standard ways of interpreting the sort of romantic poetry typified by Wordsworth's attempts to re-enchant nature. When critics explore "The World Is Too Much with Us" and its various lines about preferring to be a "Pagan suckled in a creed outworn" so one can see "Proteus rising from the sea," a sea that "bears her bosom to the moon," they do not spend much time talking about the aesthetic features of its language, the beauty of the images it provokes in the reader, etc. They might have something to say about these and other features of the poem that are in a sense "internal" to it. But a seasoned critic will then quickly move on to matters that are, strictly speaking, external to the poem but by the light of which the general cultural and philosophical significance of the various lines of the poem can be made explicit.

A common critical starting point is to regard Wordsworth's poem as an example of romanticism's interest in contributing to what scholars sometimes refer to as "the critique of modernity," however unlovable the phrase is. That is, a critic will say something about the omnipresence of alienation in modern industrial society, the importance of those artists whose work forces us to confront the inauthenticity of modern life, and the almost sacred function of those works of romantic art that offer us what the "real" world has rendered impossible: a way of recovering, if only for a moment and just in the imagination, an authentic experience of nature, others, and the self. Hopefully the critic will be less clichéd than I have just been but, whatever she says, it will quickly begin to look very much like a *theory*: a theory of modern culture and of the revolutionary role art can play in it, a theory of how poems that on the surface just speak of pagans and bosoms can nonetheless be read as offering a direct and powerful contribution to the critique of modernity, and so on. And note that if you take the poem to be about these grander cultural concerns that are nowhere mentioned in the poem itself, the poem will only be shown to be about these matters *in virtue of*

*this theory*. It is by the light of a theory that is, strictly speaking, *external* to the poem that the poem can be seen to mean what the interpreter says it means.

I think Stern would simply wish to say that he does not have anything against this sort of *innocent* application of theory, though I do fear that his account of interpretation will not allow us to distinguish innocent from illicit applications of theory. The arguments Stern offers for his compelling and very much welcome criticism of deep interpretation strike me as also working against these. In both cases we rely on theories "alien" to the work of art in virtue of which, and only in virtue of which, the object appears to mean what we take it to mean. As Stern himself says about the interpretation of art: "Artworks are better served by focusing on the artwork rather than its creator; unwarranted interpretations can be excluded by concentrating on the distinction between internal and external characteristics of a given artwork" (p. 92). It is, at root, this distinction between the internal and the external that is causing my worry. And this distinction breaks down even more dramatically, I fear, once we move in the direction of modernist poetry.

Now a Sternian interpreter might be able to tell a story that would assuage my worries about the role of theory in interpreting Wordsworth, and this should be acknowledged. The title of the poem is, after all, "The World Is Too Much with Us," and it includes lines such as "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers/Little we see in Nature that is ours." It is perhaps a small step from this to claim that, even if my theory is external to the poem, the poem quite explicitly *issues an invitation to apply a theory of this sort to it*, and so the bridge to what is external to the poem is erected by the poem at least as much as by the interpreter. Or so the Sternian interpreter might argue. But once we pass from romanticism to modernism, the kind of story that will help the Sternian interpreter of Wordsworth will no longer work. This is because the "problem" of modernist poetry is precisely that the question of meaning becomes so much more pronounced, to such an extent that we often cannot ascribe even surface-level meaning to a poem. We cannot determine what its lines are even saying, what they are *about* in even the most basic semantic and thematic sense, without the application of a "theory." And so even if we are to make a case that a certain modernist poem issues an invitation to apply a theory to it, the grounds we provide for claiming this *will itself be theory-dependent*.

Of course it is not the case that every modernist poet pushes language to the boundaries of sense and intelligibility; but like modernist art in general, modernist poetry has largely earned its reputation for difficulty because it does this so frequently. Let me offer as an example of this difficulty, at its best (or worst), a few stanzas from John Ashbery's "Affordable Variety":[\[2\]](#)

Cathexis arrives early in a golden coach  
We see stuff perched around,  
mazes stuck in mazes,  
knot of grapes at the throat, the horizon.

And we couldn't keep it coming.

That is so.

This is an invaded country.

Dawn will abdicate all your book.

If my fidelity as an interpreter requires that I let the object of interpretation speak for itself, what exactly does one listen for in a poem like this? The very idea breaks down here. If I am to beat even the most basic sense of aboutness out of these lines, I have to do a tremendous amount of speaking on behalf of the poem (the poem does, of course, act as a constraint in all of this, so one needn't worry that it is being ignored). Say, for example, I decide to interpret these lines as about the flutterings of subjective experience: the random and chaotic shifting between perceptions, thoughts, feelings, memories, and associations that, according to a theory I favor, constitutes mental life (in modernity?). Or perhaps I will opt for something else entirely, since one has the sense that the possibilities are many in a way they certainly are not in the case of Wordsworth's poem. The point is, *whatever* interpretation I offer will play the role of constituting, at least from the standpoint of meaning, the poem itself.

There is no point in belaboring my worry that we shall have trouble here respecting the Sternian interpreter's wish to be faithful to what is internal to the object of interpretation, to speak on behalf of its "self-understanding" and not a theory we favor, and so on. Instead I will conclude by saying that I cannot shake the following feeling. It is the feeling that when confronting modern art of this sort, the most *disingenuous* expression of the interpretive voice, the most *insincere* thing an interpreter could do, would be to speak as a *sincere* Sternian interpreter would: to speak in a universal voice "as if" the meaning one attributes to an object were a "perceptual" feature of it, something to be found *in* it. In other words, the feeling I cannot shake is that the very features of interpretive sincerity that makes Stern's theory so attractive elsewhere have, in the case of exemplary kinds of modernist art, the consequence of making the interpreter look wildly dishonest.

At any rate, this is the entanglement of issues I would like to ask Stern to help me to straighten out. It is a sign of the extraordinary reach of Stern's theory that I have had to look to some of the more freakish regions of modern art to find a question for him. And even here I have not unearthed an inconsistency in Stern's theory. Despite appearances (and all the words), all I've really done is ask Stern how he would apply his theory to an issue he was not concerned with in his book. And if one worries about its application to stranger sorts of interpretive phenomena, there should be no doubt that Stern's elegant and fascinating study shines much light on those interpretive practices we rely upon in our daily encounters with one another and the world.

John Gibson

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## Endnotes

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[1] See, for example, Wittgenstein's reflections on rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations*, especially §201-§211.

[2] *Where Shall I Wander*, (New York: Ecco Press, 2005), p. 3.