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## Interpretations: Deep, Reasonable, and Free

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## Interpretations: Deep, Reasonable, and Free

*Paul Guyer*

1.

Laurent Stern's *Interpretative Reasoning* is not primarily a work in aesthetics. It is a work on the conditions for the interpretation of acts in general and speech-acts in particular, which makes some use of Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment in its model of sound interpretative practice, and discusses the interpretation of works of art as one example of the category of contestable interpretations. The latter fact explains why we discussed it at a meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics (Eastern Division), and the former the otherwise inexplicable fact that I was invited to be one of the discussants. But I was happy at both of these circumstances, for it is a fascinating and powerful work that I was glad to have had the opportunity to study. I will spend some of my space here on the relation between Stern's model of interpretation and Kant's model of aesthetic judgment, and some of it discussing Stern's model of the interpretation of works of art and Kant's account of the experience of fine art. But first I will need to sketch Stern's general approach and to say something about his attack upon what he calls "deep interpretation," which is the animus of his work. Stern's concept and criticism of deep interpretation is also a focus of John Gibson's essay in this symposium.

Stern opens with the statement that "This book is about the activity of interpreting. In interpreting, we talk about what was said or done" (p. 1). More specifically, what he means by an interpretation is an assertion about a speaker's or agent's illocutionary intent in his or her speech-act or action more generally; an interpretation is one person's claim about what another agent has meant in a speech-act or an action more generally. However, Stern adds that "Most of the time we understand what was said or done without any interpretation" (p. 23), or "In the large majority of cases there is no need for an interpretation; we understand what is at issue immediately and without further inquiry" (p. 45). Interpretation is needed only when the speaker's or agent's meaning is not immediately obvious, so Stern's account of interpretation is not meant to be a completely general account of understanding the intentions of others. At the same time, it is not meant to be an account of "deep interpretation," or the interpretation of meanings that are not obvious to the interpreter because they are not obvious to or are even inaccessible to the speaker or agent, for it is an attack upon the idea of deep interpretation so understood. So it is a theory of the conditions for the interpretation of meanings that are accessible to their speaker or agent but are not immediately transparent to other interpreters. Stern holds that "interpretations" in his sense "are not susceptible to any sort of litmus test," and his central claim is that for this reason "the implications of our claim" to interpret another "have to be expressed in terms of what reasonable and well-informed interpreters will (or would, or even ought to) say in interpretive situations" (p. 1). His argument is that sound interpretation rests on what he calls

the "Universalizability Principle," the principle that "Every reasonable person who is familiar with the circumstances understands what is at issue the way I do" (p. 9). That is, in order to make a not immediately obvious but justifiable claim about what another means by his words or actions, an interpreter must believe that his interpretation is consistent with the facts as he knows them, that his interpretation is the "best available for a given," relevant purpose — these are what Stern calls the "factual" and "normative" constraints on interpretation — and that any reasonable person who shares his understanding of the factual and normative assumptions about the case at hand would agree with his interpretation. This kind of interpretation even allows for cases in which there is disagreement between the speaker and the interpreter because the speaker is not as well-informed as the interpreter is or is not being as reasonable as the interpreter is; this will lead to a "natural interpretation in the subjunctive mood" (p. 11), the "subjunctive" being the assumption that the speaker would agree with the interpreter's interpretation of his own meaning or intention if he were more fully informed about the facts of his own circumstances or were being more reasonable. (As Gibson points out, the subjects of interpretation will not always agree with others' interpretations of their words or actions because subjects as well as interpreters can be ill-informed or irrational.)

## 2.

However, Stern rejects what he calls deep interpretation, which is the case in which the speaker would not agree with the interpreter's interpretation of his meaning or intention even if he were better informed about his circumstances and fully reasonable, because such deep interpretation rests not on the Universalizability Principle but on the "Restrictive Principle," which is the premise that "Only reasonable persons who are familiar with the circumstances understand what is at issue the way I do," or "All persons who understand what is at issue the way I do are reasonable and familiar with the circumstances" (p. 10). Whereas the Universalizability Principle claims that, with proper information, all reasonable persons would agree with my interpretation, the Restrictive Principle makes the weaker claim that all persons who agree with me are reasonable, leaving open the possibility that some reasonable persons who are equally well informed about the matter under interpretation do not agree with me. Stern seems to think that it can only be this principle that is appealed to in offering a deep interpretation because even if the person whose action or speech-act is under interpretation is assumed to be reasonable, he will reject the deep interpretation. The real thrust of Stern's concept of deep interpretation is that it is one to which the interpretee is supposed to be, as it were, permanently resistant but in which the interpreter nevertheless claims to be justified. Marxism, Nietzscheanism, and Freudianism are Stern's paradigm cases of deep interpretation (p. 20), the first presumably being the theory that ideological positions are always motivated by economic interest even when agents refuse to believe it, the second that religious beliefs are always motivated by power relations even when agents refuse to believe it, and the third that various sorts of dysfunctional behaviors are always motivated by unresolved sexual issues even when agents refuse to believe it.

Stern then rejects the justifiability of deep interpretation because he thinks that deep interpretations always involve an unsustainable claim by the interpreter that the speaker is self-deceived, and an insincere appeal by the interpreter to the alleged fact that some reasonable people do agree with him when what he really means is that all reasonable people should agree with him. The advocate of a deep interpretation holds "on to the Universalizability Principle in a backstage whisper while he loudly proclaims from center stage that he has retreated to a more modest position" (p. 2). Deep interpretations are offered when the interpreter is convinced that the facts do not support what the speaker believes, that the speaker sincerely believes what he claims to believe but is blamably mistaken in so doing, and that the interpreter knows better what the speaker means than does the speaker himself because the interpreter is justified in relying "on a set of interconnected beliefs about human nature — an overt or covert rudimentary theory — supporting the claim that he knows what the speaker meant better than the speaker himself" (p. 15). However, I take Stern to hold, the interpreter in a case of deep interpretation is not justified in his claim that the speaker is necessarily self-deceived nor in his appeal to "some" other reasonable people for the truth of what is in fact his own non-scientific claim about the "real" motive of the speaker, and thus deep interpretation is necessarily disreputable.

There may be less sting to Stern's critique of deep interpretation than initially appears. Part of what he argues is that if the purported science on which the deep interpretation is supposed to rest actually becomes widely accepted, then success will change "deep-level into surface-level interpretation and its supporting theory into a common-sense view or scientific theory," so the only deep interpretation that is really to be criticized is that on which the interpreter continues to insist in spite of the failure of his purported science to win acceptance (p. 21). I do not think that anyone would want to defend deep interpretation if it is by definition interpretation that purports to be scientific but is actually resistant to the real progress of science. If that is all that Stern means to reject, then I have no argument with him. I am not sure, however, that this is all he means to reject. In any case, I find something odd both in his characterization of the role of the Universalizability Principle in ordinary, defensible cases of "surface" rather than deep interpretation, and in his characterization of the deep interpreter's assumption about the self-deceived state of his subject. I will discuss the second of these points briefly and the first at somewhat more length before I turn to Stern's discussion of interpretation in specifically aesthetic contexts.

My further worry about Stern's characterization of deep interpretation is that he seems to treat the deep interpreter's explanation of the underlying meaning (or motive) of the speaker as an alternative at, so to speak, the same level as the speaker's explanation of his meaning, so that for the deep interpretation to be true, the speaker's own interpretation of his meaning has to be false and therefore the speaker has to be self-deceived about his own meaning. But deep interpretations might also be thought of as explanations of why certain sorts of speaker have the intentions that they do,

so that it is not false that the speakers have those intentions, but the fact of their having those intentions is to be explained in a way that the speakers do not realize or recognize. In this case, speakers would not need to be self-deceived about their own intentions but would rather be ignorant of the explanation of those intentions. I would not want to argue that this model would work in every case of deep interpretation, but if it works in some cases, then my model would undercut the blanket charge that every deep interpretation makes an implausible claim that the subject of the interpretation is self-deceived and not merely ignorant of the deeper causes of human behavior. If we undercut this claim, and if we also show Stern's charge that deep interpretation always involves insincere or pseudo-science to be true merely by definition, then I think we can conclude that proposed deep explanations of human behavior, Marxist, Nietzschean, Freudian, or otherwise, have to be individually evaluated rather than antecedently rejected on the basis of Stern's general argument.

### 3.

Now I turn to Stern's more general claim that in offering any interpretation the interpreter employs a claim that other reasonable people agree with him, all other reasonable people in the case of a sincere surface explanation and only some other reasonable people in the case of an insincere deep interpretation, as a *premise* in the justification of his claim. I can well imagine that someone might appeal to the agreement of some other reasonable people, in particular purported experts, in trying to defend a controversial deep interpretation. But that would be an act of desperation induced by the inadequacy of the interpreter's evidence for his controversial interpretation. In the ordinary case, it seems to me, the interpreter does not use his purported agreement with other reasonable people as a *premise* in the justification of his interpretation, but rather claims such agreement as the *conclusion* of the evidence that he takes to justify his interpretation. And this, it seems to me, is the lesson of Kant's analysis of what it takes to speak with a "universal voice" in making an aesthetic judgment, not, as Stern seems to think, that a claim to agreement with all other reasonable people is a *premise* in the justification of a judgment of taste or any interpretive claim.

It might initially seem surprising that Stern appeals to Kant rather than to Hume (who is mentioned only once in Stern's book, in a completely different connection). One might have expected from Stern's initial suggestion that, because there are no "litmus tests" for interpretation, we instead rely, in trying to justify our interpretations, upon claims about what "reasonable and well-informed interpreters" believe, that he would appeal to Hume's argument in "Of the Standard of Taste" that, in the absence of rules for beauty or other aesthetic merits that apply directly to objects (that is, rules that specify that if objects have certain particular non-aesthetic properties then they necessarily have certain aesthetic merits), we turn to the collective judgments of a body of optimally perceptive, well-informed, and reasonable critics to discover a canon of objects of good taste rather than the unavailable rules for beauty. Stern is right not to turn to Hume, however, for he is trying to analyze how people can

support *their own* authoritative interpretive claims (and to distinguish that from how they unsuccessfully support their non-authoritative and indeed unjustifiable deep interpretations), while Hume is looking for a strategy for people who do *not* feel that they can make authoritative judgments of taste, people who fear that there is no disputing about tastes and thus no way for them to locate canonical objects of taste in the midst of a welter of competing claims. Hume's argument is that while there is no direct disputing about *objects* of taste on the basis of rules about aesthetically determinative properties, there is a fact of the matter about who are the qualified *judges* of good taste, and that those of us — the vast majority — who are not in an optimal position to find the best objects of taste on our own can nevertheless enjoy the best objects because the qualified critics can lead us to them. We are all capable of "relishing" the fine strokes that those critics will point out to us. Hume's model is not one on which an interpreter attempts to justify *his own judgment* by claiming that any, some, or all reasonable persons agree with him or would if they had all the information he does; it is one on which ordinary persons who recognize that they do not themselves have all the experience and refinement of the best critics seek to *improve* their own aesthetic experience and in turn their judgment by following the recommendations of those critics. It is a model, in other words, of how those who recognize themselves to be less than optimally qualified judges *defer* to those whom they recognize to be more qualified for the benefits that will bring them, not one on which subjects seek to *justify* their own judgments by appealing to the agreement of others.

But can Stern successfully invoke Kant instead of Hume in defense of his own model of interpretation? In my view, Stern is right to invoke Kant's claim that it is a necessary condition for making a sincere judgment of taste that one speak on the basis of one's own experience of an object rather than merely reporting the claims of others, but wrong to appeal to Kant in support of the view that a claim to the agreement of all other reasonable people is a premise for a judgment of taste or, by an analogy, a claim for the correctness of an interpretation. For Kant, the claim that if one has in fact made one's own judgment of an object correctly then others who also experience it under optimal conditions can be expected to judge it the same way — that is, to experience the same pleasure in it that one has oneself experienced — is the *content* of the judgment of taste. It is what is *meant* by calling the object beautiful, not the *premise* or *justification* for it.

The intellectual puzzle of the judgment of taste for Kant is to explain on what basis one can claim the agreement of others with one's own judgment of an object in face of the fact, already demonstrated by Hume, that judgments of taste cannot be driven by rules about the properties of their objects. Stern takes himself to be following Kant in holding that "Interpretations supported by the Universalizability Principle occupy the space between idiosyncratic, sectarian, or essentially contestable interpretations on one side and facts or true descriptions on the other. It would be disingenuous for the solitary interpreter to suggest that the aesthetic properties he has ascribed to an artwork are facts about that artwork, or

to claim support by the Restrictive Principle for what he has said about that artwork. If he claimed such support, he could just as well admit that his interpretation is idiosyncratic, sectarian, or essentially contestable." Or, if he claimed such restricted agreement with his pleasure in an object, he should refrain from calling it beautiful. "As long as he stands by his interpretation, he must dig in his heels, and support it with the Universalizability Principle" (p. 159). But Kant never envisions us as appealing to the agreement of all others in *support* of our judgments of taste. He envisions the assertion of the agreement of others, under optimal conditions, with our own pleasure in an object as the *content* of our judgments of taste, to be *supported* by the premise that our pleasure in an object is due to a particular response of our cognitive faculties to it, a response that can be expected to occur in others because the cognitive faculties work pretty much the same way in all human beings.

The *premises* for a judgment of taste in Kant's analysis are the assumptions, first, that the cognitive faculties work the same way in all human beings, thus that they can produce a pleasing free play of imagination and understanding in response to a particular object in all human beings whose response is not distorted by some suboptimal condition if they produce that in any human being whose response to that object is not distorted by some such condition; and, second, that the pleasure felt by the person making the judgment of taste has in fact been produced by that shareable free play of his cognitive powers rather than by some idiosyncratic condition. If those two assumptions are sound, then a subject is justified in calling an object beautiful, that is, in asserting that all other well-functioning human beings responding to the object under optimal conditions would share his own pleasure in it. Thus his claim that all other reasonable people would agree with his response to the object is the conclusion of his reflection on his aesthetic experience, not a premise in that reflection.

This structure is, I believe, apparent in Kant's central descriptions of judgments of taste and their justification. In §8 of the "Analytic of the Beautiful" of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where he introduces his idea of speaking with a universal voice, Kant writes that "The judgment of taste does not itself **postulate** the consensus [*Einstimmung*] of everyone (only a logically universal judgment can do that, since it can adduce grounds); it only **ascribes** this consensus to everyone [*es sinnt nur jedermann diese Einstimmung an*], as a case of the rule with regard to which it expects confirmation not from concepts but only from the assent of others. The universal voice is thus only an idea (on what it rests will not yet be investigated here)."<sup>[1]</sup> The point here is that universal consensus with or assent to one's own judgment of an object is not the premise of the judgment of taste, but what is claimed by it, on other grounds yet to be explained, but about which we know at this point in Kant's exposition that they cannot include the subsumption of the object under a determinate concept. In that case it would be a "logical" rather than an "aesthetic" judgment, that is, one that not only concerns but is also made on the basis of one's feeling in response to an object (§1), and that they cannot include personal interest in the existence of the object, because in



that case the judgment would be idiosyncratic rather than universal (§§2-6).

In the next section, the “key to the critique of taste,” Kant introduces his thesis that the free play of the imagination and understanding in response to an object is the non-conceptually-determined yet intersubjectively valid source of a pleasure about which we can indeed speak with a universal voice: “Now if the determining ground of the judgment on this universal communicability of the representations is to be conceived of merely subjectively, namely without a concept of the object, it can be nothing other than the state of mind that is encountered in the relation of the powers of representation to each other insofar as they relate a given representation to **cognition in general**. The powers of cognition that are set into play by this representation are hereby in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition” (§9, 5:217). The heart of Kant’s argument in the remainder of the “Analytic of the Beautiful” and in the “Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments” is then that we are entitled to assume that the “powers of representation” or cognitive powers, in the case of the beautiful the cognitive powers of imagination and understanding, work the same way in all human beings, because without that assumption we could not assume that any knowledge whatever is intersubjectively valid (§§21, 38). So if an object genuinely induces the free play of these powers in one person who approaches the object under optimal circumstances, it should do so in anyone else who does the same. This in turn implies that if any subject has in fact correctly ascribed his pleasure in an object to that source, something about which Kant insists no subject can ever be certain (§19), then the subject is entitled to speak with a universal voice, to “ascribe” assent to his judgment to others or expect that, if they too judge in optimal circumstances, circumstances of due attention to the object and free from distorting personal interests, they will agree with his pleasure in the object. Kant sums this up thus:

In order to be justified in laying claim to universal assent for judgments of the aesthetic power of judgment resting on merely subjective grounds, it is sufficient to admit: 1) In all human beings, the subjective condition of this faculty, as far as the relation of the cognitive powers therein set into action to a cognition in general are concerned, are the same, which must be true, since otherwise human beings could not communicate their representations and even cognition itself. 2) The judgment has taken into consideration solely this relation (hence the **formal condition** of the power of judgment), and is pure, i.e., mixed with neither concepts of the object nor with sensations as determining ground. If an error is made with regard to the latter, that concerns only the incorrect application to a particular case of the authority that a law gives us, by which the authority in general is not suspended. (§38, Note, 5:290)

The subject who makes a judgment of taste assumes that the cognitive faculties of all human beings work in the same way, about which he is supposed to be able to be certain from the communicability of knowledge in general. And he assumes further that his own pleasure in an object is in fact due to the free play of his imagination and understanding with it rather



than to his subsumption of it under a concept or to a merely idiosyncratic sensation, about which he is not supposed to be able to be certain. On the basis of *those* two premises, he is entitled to speak with a universal voice or assert that others should agree with his pleasure in the object, although within the limits of his certainty about the correctness of his attribution of his own pleasure to the shareable free play of the cognitive powers. He thus *concludes* that his judgment is universalizable, but he does not adopt the Universalizability Principle as a *premise* of his judgment.

I have gone on at such length about what Kant actually says because I take him to be partially right about the case of aesthetic judgment. I have long argued that he is not right to assume that the cognitive faculties work in exactly the same way in every healthy human being, but he is right to argue that our judgments of taste are justified only to the extent that we can assume that we do share our general cognitive dispositions with others *and* that we have correctly attributed our pleasure in an object to a shareable disposition rather than an idiosyncratic condition. I take this to suggest the right approach to interpretation as well, that is, I take it that a subject who sincerely offers an interpretation of another's words or actions takes his judgment to be justified by his correct response to the evidence before him and his generally well-functioning cognitive capacities. He does not appeal to the agreement of others with his conclusion as justification for his assumption about the healthy state of his own cognitive capacities. If the good functioning of his cognitive capacities were to be questioned, perhaps he would defend himself by showing how they have led him to the right results in other contexts and applications, but he surely would not appeal to the agreement of all other reasonable people with his present conclusion. That would be circular, for how could he claim to know who is reasonable if his own reasonableness is seriously under question? And it would also be unverifiable, for a reason that Kant would agree with Hume in accepting: no reasonable human being could ever claim to have surveyed the response of all other reasonable people. A reasonable person's claim that all other reasonable people would agree with him could only be the consequence of his confidence in his own reasonableness and his proper assessment of the relevant data, not a premise of his confidence in his judgment. Anyone's assertion that all other reasonable persons would agree with him as a premise in his justification of a particular judgment would thus be just as much a piece of insincere rhetoric as the claim that at least some other reasonable people agree with him made by the advocate of a deep interpretation.

#### 4.

That is all I will say about Stern's general approach to interpretation. I will now comment on some features of his approach to the interpretation of artworks in particular. Stern discusses the interpretation of artworks in Chapter 5 as a main example of "Contestable Interpretations." His most general thesis is that because "Most artworks were created to provide aesthetic delight, entertainment, or amusement...a wide notion of understanding in the context of art interpretation includes appreciation," and "this wide concept of understanding

is dependent on an equally wide concept of interpretation.” Indeed, the necessary concept of interpretation is sufficiently wide that the only restriction that can be placed upon it is that “The interpretation of an artwork that does not contribute to its appreciation will be faulted for failing to satisfy the factual and normative constraints on interpreting” (p. 101). This would seem to suggest that any interpretation of a work of art that leads to an appreciation of it in some audience, no matter how narrow or broad, should count as a good interpretation of the work of art, thus to a very broad liberalism about the interpretation of artworks. However, Stern wants to maintain that in the interpretation of artworks, as in the interpretation of other acts and speech-acts, there is something that counts as the “best available” interpretation, and that it is part of the normative constraint on the interpretation of artworks, as of anything else, that interpreters should aim for the best available interpretation. “An amateur critic,” he says, “need not search for the best available interpretation” but may adopt one suitable to his own knowledge and education even if he can “admit that there is at least one better interpretation” that is unavailable to him “for want of sufficient knowledge or an adequate interpretation” (pp. 101-2). Stern does not explain this proviso. You might think that if the point of experiencing artworks is to gain maximum appreciation from them, then the best interpretation of an artwork for any particular interpreter is the one that maximizes his appreciation of it, even if there is another interpretation available that might make another interpreter’s appreciation of the work even greater than the first interpreter’s but which, if adopted by the first interpreter, would offer him less appreciation than his own interpretation does. Stern does not suggest such an argument. What he does do is argue in general that there is such a thing as the best available interpretation of an artwork that is not necessarily identical to the artist’s own interpretation of it, and it is this argument about which I want to raise a question. I do not want to defend the claim that the artist’s own interpretation of a work of art is always the best available definition of it, but I want to question this claim in a very different way from Stern, a way that should cast doubt on whether the idea of a best available interpretation for a work of art makes very much sense at all.

Stern approaches the question of a best available interpretation for a work of art in the context of the debate between “intentionalism” and “anti-intentionalism”: “An intentionalist critic could attribute a characteristic to a given artwork and support her judgment by claiming that if the artwork’s creator were in a position to do so, he would agree with her judgment.” In other words, the artist’s interpretation determines what counts as the best available interpretation of the art work. “Her anti-intentionalist colleague could attribute the same characteristic to that artwork and support her judgment by claiming that she attributed a characteristic that is internal to the artwork” (p. 91). In other words, the artwork means what it does independently of what the artist intended it to mean or thinks that it means, and the best available interpretation is the one that best corresponds to what the work itself means rather than what the artist intended or thinks. Stern takes the anti-intentionalist side, maintaining that “Artworks do not contain secrets. Whatever they contain is, in principle if not in fact, available to all interpreters of a

given artwork....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 this distinction between "external" and "internal characteristics" of artworks that I want to question. In my view, all that is strictly "internal" to a work of art is the physical properties of the work (in the case of works of autographic art) or of its instantiations or performances (in the case of works of allographic art), although even those may be describable only in a multiplicity of convertible descriptions (as the same size may be measured in different units). In other words, all that is strictly internal to a poem is a series of black marks on white paper that could be described by a geometer or a series of sounds that could be described by a phonologist, all that is internal to a painting is an array of pigments on a flat surface that could be described by a geometer working together with a colorist, and so on. Everything else about the work subsists in a relation between the physical object and some group of thinking, intending, and interpreting agents. That a given series of marks should be interpreted as a poem in one language rather than a laundry-list in another already depends upon assumptions about the intentions of the person or persons who made the marks and the audience they were intended for. Similarly, that a given array of pigments on a flat surface is a painting rather than a used palette already depends upon assumptions about the intentions of the person who made the marks and the audience he may have intended them for, and so on. So the recognition of an object as a work of art at all and as the specific kind of artwork that it is already depends upon assumptions about intentions that are ontologically external to the physical object or event being interpreted. Any meaning the object has and thus anything about it that is to be interpreted will in this sense already involve something external to it. The suggestion that the best available interpretation of an artwork is the one that confines itself or best confines itself to its internal characteristics cannot even get off the ground.

If there is any answer to the question about the best available interpretation of the artwork, it will depend instead upon a claim about which of the meanings that are external to but related to the work of art should be decisive for its interpretation. Now there are at least three kinds of meaning that can be so related. I have suggested that in order to interpret a work of art at all it must be recognized, to borrow terms from Langer or Goodman, as a sign in one language or symbol-system rather than another. This relates it both to a language or symbol-system, which might be regarded as a disposition among some group of persons over some period of time to attribute meanings to objects, and to a particular speaker's or signifier's intention to make an utterance or symbol in that language or system. In other words, any work of art will be related both to some language-meaning and some speaker's meaning, and cannot be understood or interpreted apart from both of those relations. Third, there are the responses to an object on the part of various audiences, both an originally intended audience of the object and many possible subsequent audiences of it. Any audience, whether one person at one time, several persons at one time, or several persons at several times, will no doubt find a variety

of meanings in the object, some dependent upon understanding the language in which it was intended to be an utterance, others perhaps not, some dependent upon understanding the intentions of its original author, others not, some of those no doubt not even foreseeable by the original author.

In face of these facts, there seems to me to be no prospect for arguing for anti-intentionalism by appealing to the internal meaning of an artwork and relegating its author's intentions for it to the domain of external meaning. An artwork has no internal meaning and all of its meanings are, strictly speaking, external to it. Some other sort of argument has to be found for minimizing the importance of the artist's intention and privileging some other domain of meaning. I do not think that anyone is going to argue that linguistic meaning, independent of both speaker's meaning and audience's response, is going to settle what is the best available interpretation of an utterance. So if the artist's intention is not to be decisive, then the most plausible locus for the best available interpretation will have to be in the domain of audience response to a work. Then the question of whether there is such a thing as a best available interpretation will depend upon whether there is such a thing as the best available audience for a work. If you think that the decisive normative constraint on artworks is that they be able to be appreciated, then that question will in turn become whether there is some particular audience best qualified to appreciate it. If there is such a thing as the best available interpretation of an artwork, it will be the one that makes it most enjoyable for the best qualified audience for it.

This would seem to be the Humean view. There is non-circularly specifiable body of the most qualified critics of a given work or genre of art. They are the ones who can best interpret and most enjoy it, and the rest of us should accept their interpretation of the work because that will maximize our own enjoyment of it. Or there is what seems to be Stern's variant of this Humean position, namely that while there may be such a most qualified body of critics and therefore a best available interpretation of an artwork in principle, in practice the rest of us will not always have the resources of refinement and education to be able to enjoy what they enjoy. We should instead prefer whatever interpretation of a work maximizes our own enjoyment of it in our actual circumstances, so to speak an agent-relative rather than agent-neutral interpretation of a "best available interpretation." But neither of these positions seems very attractive to me, in this regard an unreformed Kantian, because each leaves out something I take to be essential to aesthetic experience. Namely, it involves what seems to the subject to be a free play of his or her own imagination, induced by an object that in the case of art has been intentionally created by an author, indeed created with the intention of producing that state, but not dictated by the author's intention, the subsumption of the object under concepts that obviously apply to it, or anything else. Room for personal freedom in response seems essential to aesthetic experience, and the idea that there is no "best available interpretation" of an artwork at all thus seems inherent in the idea that our experience of artworks is aesthetic. Neither the artist's intention nor the interpretation of some especially

qualified body of critics can be determinative, not because there is some internal meaning to a work of art that is different from either of those, but because the freedom of personal response to a work of art is part of what makes the experience of it aesthetic. Nor should the response of some particular audience, whether it be of one person or of some community, be admitted as a sort of agent-relative, second-best "best available interpretation" due to the inescapable limitations of the audience's circumstances. Such a response should be countenanced because it is the essence of aesthetic experience.

No doubt any attempt to make my position acceptable would require that it be able to exclude what Stern calls "off-the-wall" interpretations: not any response to a work of art that makes it enjoyable to some person should be able to count as an interpretation of it at all. I will not attempt that reconciliation here. Instead, I will close with the suggestion that the thought that there can be no "best available interpretation" for a work of art, *a fortiori* not one dictated by the artist's intention, because of the freedom of response that is the essence of aesthetic experience, is precisely what is suggested by Kant's image of the artistic genius. Kant claims that successful works of art arise from genius, and that genius "is a **talent** for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given," and which must instead be a "natural gift" (§46, 5:307). As a work of genius, a work of art must involve an "aesthetic idea," a core of meaning presented in a way that "by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate content, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way" (§49, 5:315). The reason why great art can never be produced in accordance with a rule but only through a natural gift is not because the artist must be possessed by a *daimon*, *pace* Plato, or is motivated by his subconscious, *pace* Freud, but simply because the aim of art is to produce a free play of imagination and understanding in its audience that is not dictated by a rule. The artist cannot have a rule for producing a response that cannot be produced in accordance with a rule. Only a "free correspondence of the imagination to the lawfulness of the understanding" (5:317) in the artist can stimulate such a state in the audience. But even then the response of the audience cannot seem to be dictated by the artist's own intention of and conception of his work because then the response will still not seem free to the audience. Thus the artist's intention cannot be determinative of the best available interpretation of an artwork, because that would block the audience's enjoyment of it through their own free exercise of their cognitive and therefore interpretative powers. But there can be no single best audience interpretation of the work because that too would undermine the sense of free play that is essential to each and every satisfactory experience of the work.

It should be clear that I have not agreed with everything that Laurent Stern has argued, and that even when I have agreed with some of his conclusions I have not agreed with his arguments for them. I hope it is equally clear that I have found this a rich and stimulating work that opens up many fascinating issues, and I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to think about it.

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### Endnotes

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[1] *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by Paul Guyer,  
translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge:  
Cambridge University Press, 2000), §8, 5:216.