

CHAPTER ONE

ETHICAL INTERPRETATION AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF KEVIN VANHOOZER

I will begin this chapter by introducing the work of two key figures in recent literary theory to which the work of Kevin Vanhoozer often take aims in his critique. I will conclude this section with a brief comment on the state of biblical studies, with specific reference to Isaiah, in relation to these theories.

The bulk and body of this chapter will work through a concise articulation of Vanhoozer's theory of textual communication. This includes his metaphysics and epistemology of communication. His ethics of communication will receive greater detail with a conclusion on its application and engagement with Isaiah 6:9-10 and its interpreters.

I. Text and Interpretation in Recent Times

What constitutes the "present pluralistic situation" to which Vanhoozer refers? Apart from a host of other recent literary theories the two major interpretive paradigms include what he calls the Undoers (postmodern deconstructionists) and the Users (postmodern pragmatists). Accepting the limitations inherent to categorization Vanhoozer's model provides a helpful framework for understanding our current situation. His contribution will be best understood in light of two figure-heads which

exemplify both the Undoers and the Users, namely Jacques Derrida and Stanley Fish respectively. In citing these two authors I am no way assuming to cover the vast territory of current literary theory. Rather, in agreement with Vanhoozer, I see the approach of Derrida and Fish capturing two important movements which have impacted many in the field of hermeneutics. In biblical scholarship there are few who have wholly adopted the strategy of either Derrida or Fish. However, these two authors serve an important function by illustrating key hermeneutical issues in recent times and therefore warrant investigation.

Jacques Derrida: Words at Play

Derrida's work can best be understood from Saussure's structuralist thinking. Saussure writes that "language is a system of inter-dependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others."¹ Words are not understood because of some extra-linguistic referent. Words are understood because of their reference to other words. We know what "cat" means because we have other words in paradigmatic (i.e. dog, horse, snake) and syntagmatic (i.e. *this is a cat*) relations to it. This perspective constitutes a closed model of language. Derrida emphasizes the structuralist point that the meaning of a sign only comes by its *difference* from other signs. Derrida writes that "the play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself . . . [and] no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which

¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, cited by Terrance Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 26.

itself is not present . . . [and so finally] there are only everywhere, differences and traces of traces.”²

Derrida argues that claiming the presence of truth or meaning as above and beyond the play of differences stems from Western metaphysics which he rejects. Derrida rejects as violent any attempt to stand for a center of meaning which restricts the movement of language, whether it be God, the Bible, Logic, an author, or anything else. In dislodging the Western concept of a center of knowledge, truth, and presence Derrida stated that perhaps “there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of present-being . . . that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play.”³ And so the meaning of every word slips from our grasp and there is no foundation upon which one can claim to have “caught” the meaning, making it present to behold. The *word* never comes to rest in an extra-linguistic reality and remains indeterminate and so we are left to compete (often the result of play) for how we interpret the language around us.

Derrida’s model of language provides no authority to which the reader must ethically attend. This approach views any authority as oppressive, attempting to control meaning. Derrida advocates that the best way to respect the “other” in the text is to let it run free. Vanhoozer rejects this model, believing that Derrida simply replaces the authority of the author with the control of the reader which in turn does

² Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 26.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280.

more violence to the text than attending responsibly to the author. In addition to this Vanhoozer, as will be demonstrated below, argues that Derrida employs a fundamentally deficient understanding of what constitutes the basic unit of meaning. For Derrida it is the sign and for Vanhoozer it is the sentence. In this critique Vanhoozer relies heavily on work from Ricoeur who argues that a “sentence is not a larger more complex word, it is a new entity. . . . A sentence is a whole irreducible to the sum of its parts.”⁴

Stanley Fish: Show Me Your Meaning and I'll Show You Mine

Stanley Fish can be best understood within the broad setting of reader-response criticism. This model receives meaning neither from the author nor the text but in the act of reading. Reader-response theory attempts to account for the various nuanced interpretations which each reader brings to a text. This method finds expression in the various forms of reader-response criticisms. Examples of this include such frameworks as eco, feminist, marxist, and liberation theories. In observing the role which the preunderstanding of the reader brings to a text Fish has gone so far as to say that “the reader’s response is not *to* the meaning; it *is* the meaning.”⁵ Fish expands this to say that readers respond to texts in the manner which their social setting has equipped them. He argues that *this* keeps the reader from slipping into complete relativism. “The reader is identified not as a free agent, making literature in any old way, but as a member of a community whose

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 7. Vanhoozer’s development will be further addressed below.

⁵ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 3.

assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention he pays and thus the kind of literature ‘he’ ‘makes’.⁶ Decisions about meaning are stable only in so far as the community decides their acceptability. Meaning is not *discovered* in a text as intended by an author, rather, meaning is *produced* by the interpretive methods of the reader.⁷ With respect to reading this has resulted in the conclusion that “there is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only ‘ways of reading’ that are extensions of community perspectives.”⁸ The idea of interpretation itself becomes totalizing viewed as *producing* authors, texts, and readers.⁹

Though Fish has travelled a different path than Derrida he has also concluded that meaningful textual communication is a closed system. Meaning cannot be received from outside the realm of our social setting. Fish may have avoided individual relativism but he has not freed himself from communal relativism. Vanhoozer asks of Fish how a “text could ever be used to criticize a dominant ideology, or how any interpretive community could be challenged as to its particular reading aim and method.”¹⁰ What can be gained from reading if the practice remains limited to what the community already knows? The question of transcendence figures as largely here as it does in the work of Derrida.

Most reviewers of Vanhoozer view his engagement with the works of Fish and Derrida as responsible and respectful.¹¹ And many other writers are certainly in

⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 170. For a similar critique of Fish see Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 535-550.

¹¹ Anthony Billington, review of *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Kevin Vanhoozer, *Anvil* 17 (2000), 309; Robert Dunn,

general agreement of the critique levelled against these writers.¹² However, Adam questions the legitimacy of Vanhoozer's depiction of Fish and Derrida.¹³ Rather than the proclamation of the author as "dead" Adam views these theorists as being more interested in why we understand authors in the manner which we do.¹⁴ The details of this discussion need not detain us here. The difficulty here is an ethical one. On the one hand Fish and Derrida (I am not assuming that their positions are the same) may truly accept the importance of the author's intention but their theory would lead us to question or deny that reality. If so, there is a problem. On the other hand they may actually believe that the author is *not* a real presence to attend to in the interpretation of texts. However, Fish in his own works seems to accept the presence and influence of the author.¹⁵ Both possibilities raise important questions warranting the work of Vanhoozer and others.

The Users and Undoers in Biblical Studies

A simple keyword search in a periodical database for biblical studies will reveal the increased integration of theorists such as Derrida and Fish in biblical

review of *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Kevin Vanhoozer, *SJT* 53 (2000): 257.

¹² E. D. Hirsch represents a major critic of dominant "postmodern" literary theories (and is a primary source of Vanhoozer's approach) who sharply criticizes the work of Derrida; E. D. Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 13. For viewpoints which spend provide more room for the positive points of these contributors see Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 127, 549; Tremper Longman III, "Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moises Silva (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996), 120-23. For a critique of Fish outside the theoretical framework of Vanhoozer see Michael Spikes, "A Kripkean Critique of Stanley Fish," *Soundings* 73 (1990): 325-41.

¹³ A. K. M. Adam, review of *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, Kevin Vanhoozer, *Theology Today* 56 (1999): 422.

¹⁴ A. K. M. Adam, "Author," in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis, Miss.: Chalice Press, 2000), 11-13.

¹⁵ For this recognition in Fish's recent work, *How Milton Works*, see Michael Lieb, "How Stanley Fish Works," *JR* 82 (2002): 252-60.

studies. The release of *The Postmodern Bible*¹⁶ and *The Postmodern Bible Reader*¹⁷ introduce readers to the ongoing assimilation of such literary approaches as pragmatism and deconstruction.

In Old Testament studies generally and Isaianic studies in particular the integration of these approaches has been slower. However, the presence of recent literary theories has emerged more prominently in the work of those contributing to the Book of Isaiah Seminar. Melugin provides an intriguing introduction to the work of this seminar.¹⁸ Observing the recent history of Isaianic interpretation Melugin wonders whether uninitiated readers would know whether these scholars were all reading the same book, considering the diversity of their approaches and conclusions. To this condition Melugin argues that much demands on what questions and agenda the reader brings to the text in question. With respect to Clements, another contributing scholar of the seminar, he asks “whether Clements has discovered a past reality or whether he has created it.”¹⁹ In a more recent article Melugin leaves the reader with little doubt as to his own answer to that question. Melugin cites *as erroneus* “that there is meaning ‘in’ or ‘behind’ the text and that the job of scholars is to ‘dig’ to discover meanings that are already there.”²⁰ Melugin cites Fish as the one who has “taught us” this reality.²¹

¹⁶ George Aichele et al., eds., *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schleifer, eds., *The Postmodern Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

¹⁸ Roy Melugin and Marvin Sweeney, eds., *New Visions of Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 13-29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ Roy Melugin, “The Book of Isaiah and the Construction of Meaning,” in *Writing and Reading the Isaiah Scroll*, ed. Craig Broyles and Craig Evans (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The influence of these literary theories can also be noted on a more specific level. Bruce Chilton offers an example of this with respect to Isaiah 6:9-10. Critiquing Evans' work in *To See and Not Perceive* Chilton notes that Evans does not address a fundamental issue as to why the various interpretive communities dealt differently with this text. Chilton states that it is "simply because meaning is not inherent in the texts."²² Chilton offers no support for this claim and assumes that the reader will, ironically, understand him and take as fact this reality.

In citing these scholars I am in no way claiming their guilt in reference to Vanhoozer's critique. Neither I nor Vanhoozer advocate the rejection *in toto* of the integration of these theories in biblical studies and theology. "A *little* deconstruction may not be such a dangerous thing; indeed, it may be therapeutic."²³ Vanhoozer goes so far as to "*commend deconstruction as a standing challenge to interpretive pride.*"²⁴ Deconstruction will not rest when an interpreter claims his or her interpretation to define and confine *all* possible meaning of the text. However, if indeed it is beneficial to take heed and adapt Vanhoozer's interpretive position then the investigation and determination of the potential benefits and harm of those integrating such theories as advocated by Derrida or Fish becomes necessary.

²² Bruce Chilton, review of *To See and Not Perceive*, C. A. Evans, *CRB* (1991): 82.

²³ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 386; For a positive use of Derrida's work in Isaianic studies see Gerald Sheppard, "The 'Scope' of Isaiah as a Book of Jewish and Christian Scriptures," in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. Roy Melugin and Marvin Sweeney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 259-60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

Using Language in the Refutation of Meaning

Before dealing with Vanhoozer's contribution another observation can be stated and emphasized. No literary theorist, to my knowledge, within any literary camp has abandoned the written word as a medium of communicating ideas and beliefs about language. This observation may seem like a tautology. Of course we must use language to discuss language. However, in the world of writing there are certain theories, which if understood "correctly" would render their writing incoherent.²⁵ As I have intimated above the discussion on authorship may be more subtle than some realize. However, it seems that some *authors* are asking us to believe such things as the *death of the author*.²⁶ Vanhoozer observes a similar paradox in that it is difficult to sincerely utter the phrase, "No statement is meaningful."²⁷ Despite these practical observations the challenge to authorial-centered literary theorists continues.

Latent within much "postmodern" literary approaches seems to be the hope that in attacking the very conventions of our received language system an opportunity might be encountered for transcendence or a "newness" to emerge, one that we could not have conceived within the accepted structure of language. In the very least some form of liberation is hoped for. Despite the spectrum of literary (and artistic) approaches employed in addressing this issue all still return to the written word. Conventional language remains in use, albeit in a non-conventional ways. This

²⁵ For the recent literary trend in praising "difficulty" in reading see Robert Alter, *The Pleasure of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996) 15.

²⁶ Kevin Vanhoozer, "Language, Literature, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology: What's Theological About a Theological Dictionary?" in *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1999), 27; Longmann, "Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," 128.

²⁷ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 401.

process may be understood by a poet I once heard quoted in defence of this movement. “Burn everything so that only what is pure remains.”

Should a Christian ethic of reading herald or despise these movements? Are some current thinkers in the same camp as Einstein who had to wait for practical physics to catch up with his theories? Or are some of these theories the pouting response of those who feel restricted by their received status quo? The problem inherent in addressing this situation is that to *read* and respond to those engaging in this discussion is to already assume a particular reading strategy and theory of meaning which certain literary theorists reject. Prior to Vanhoozer’s ethics it is therefore necessary to begin with a statement on the metaphysics and epistemology of language, meaning, and particularly of textual interpretation.

II. God as Author, Jesus as Word: Vanhoozer’s Metaphysics and Epistemology of Language

“The search for understanding is . . . inherently theological.”²⁸ This statement supports all that follows in Vanhoozer’s theory of language. Taking his cue from Ricoeur, who figures large in his writing, Vanhoozer says that for understanding to be possible “the initial movement must be one of faith.”²⁹ We read and write because we believe and (adapting Augustine) we believe in order to understand.³⁰

This theological premise functions crucially in Vanhoozer’s model because it grounds his belief in the ability of language to communicate outside of ourselves. This stands as perhaps his most laboured argument against recent literary theorists

²⁸ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text?*, 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

who believe that reading functions as only a reflection/construction of the reader. We write because of our belief that we can be known. And we read because we believe someone (or something) other can be known. To support this position Vanhoozer develops an interesting synthesis of trinitarian theology and speech-act theory. His thinking follows:

- God is necessary for language to function.
- Language is best understood as an action, author/speaker (providing a locution), text/speech (with an illocutionary force), and reader/hearer (receiving the perlocutionary effect).
- The biblical account of a personal God (understood in the framework of the Trinity) best describes the presence of and responsibility we have to language.

God and Author: Vanhoozer's Metaphysics of Language

Vanhoozer begins with God because no other model of truth can adequately respond to reality. Employing Kant's language, God is a "transcendental condition" being necessary "for the possibility of something humans experience but cannot otherwise explain, namely, the experience of meaningful communication."³¹ In the form of the Trinity God, by nature, exists personally implying the reality of something beyond ourselves which can enter into our own existence.

Prior to "the beginning," in which God spoke creation into existence, God and his Word were fully united (Jn 1:1-2). As God spoke, his Word went out from him and had an effect. His Word was not ineffective. God is the Author(ity) over creation. The meaning of God's Word is found in God and is in full union with God.³²

³¹ Ibid., 456.

³² Ibid., 44.

Being made in the image of God we are given the responsibility of being author(itie)s of our own creations. “As God’s will structures the universe, so the author’s will structures the universe of discourse.”³³ This leads to the belief that God has a “design plan” for language.³⁴ We can trust in the possibility of language because of the belief that God has enabled it to accomplish its end, namely meaningful communication. Within this design plan we function as *citizens* (neither masters nor slaves) within the covenant of language.³⁵ Our role as author places us both as responsible for and in control of the discourse we offer. In speaking we decide to say *this* instead of *that*. Meaning finds residence in the author’s intention.³⁶

The idea of intention functions integrally to his overall project and needs further clarification. Vanhoozer is not interested in recreating the author’s psychology. He quotes R. A. Duff, a philosopher of law, who says that “you cannot take the top of a man’s head off and look into his mind and actually see what his intent was at any given moment.”³⁷ Knowing authors’ intentions comes from examining their physical texts (locution) and discerning what action they attempt to accomplish (illocution).³⁸ The author’s meaning resides in that which his or her intention sends forth in creation.

As a citizen of language authors cannot *master* their words to mean anything they want. The author cannot control the reader. The author works within the institutional framework of language. This allows the reader the possibility to receive

³³ Ibid., 47.

³⁴ Ibid., 205.

³⁵ Ibid., 204.

³⁶ When he is not integrating concepts from speech-act theory Vanhoozer still employs much of the work offered by E. D. Hirsch in his standard work, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967).

³⁷ Ibid., 246.

³⁸ See below for further clarification regarding the terms locution, illocution, and perlocution.

from the author because of our shared system of language. This shared framework requires that readers acknowledge the limitations of the communicative framework and behave responsibly within it. However, within that shared framework the author's intention still grounds meaning. *Therefore the text, prior to the reader's reception, already has a meaning to which the reader must attend.*

Vanhoozer bases his ethic in the necessity and possibility of attending to and receiving from an author. Meaning is not a matter of the reader's creation but rather the reader's reception *of* the author's creation.

Who then are we to attend to as the author of Isaiah? Without engaging at length on this topic there are some practical comments which can be made. As I will develop below, Vanhoozer argues for a literal (i.e. literary) reading of scripture. What does the text say within the conventions of language? We have received Isaiah written by a human hand and mediated by a human mind. However, part of the author's intention demonstrates that the word spoken finds part of its source in the divine. "We must not forget that the individual authors of Scripture often intended their readers to receive their words not merely as human words but as the Word of God."³⁹ In tending to the human author we find that another author emerges, namely God. Isaiah presents this with abundant clarity. The preface of Isaiah reads "The vision for Judah and Jerusalem. . . . Hear . . . for the LORD has spoken" (Isa 1:1-2). Isaiah 6 also clarifies that Isaiah intends not only to speak his own thoughts but intends for his audience to hear what is from God, as he experienced him in the vision. The authorship of Isaiah, the one who takes responsibility and authority for what is said, is ultimately divine. However, interpretation must attend to the human

³⁹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 264.

intention as expressed in the literary act we have received. In this way the idea of canon must also be mentioned. We have not received the book of Isaiah as an independent and isolated text, instead it comes in the midst of a larger text called the Bible. Any responsible approach to understanding the author's intention, must also consider the "editorial board" which gave us the Bible.

Due to the importance of the physical text (locution) in Vanhoozer's model and because of the textual variants received within the biblical tradition certain decisions *must* be made regarding what locution is accepted as representing the author's intention. For this reason text-critical work must be done in order to understand the texts which we *do* have and from there decide what functions as our "original" manuscript.⁴⁰

Jesus and Word: Vanhoozer's Epistemology of Language

An important point of orthodox Christian doctrine asserts that the divine Jesus really did live *physically*. Vanhoozer understands Jesus' role as "exegeting" the Father (Jn 1:18). Vanhoozer follows,

The incarnation according to Scripture and Christian tradition, is the literal embodiment of God. The Logos, that is, did not simply *appear* to take on a physical body, but really did so. Jesus is the 'exact representation of [God's] being' (Heb 1:3), 'of the same substance' (*homoousios*) as the Father. 'God,' one could say, has a literal sense – 'Jesus Christ' – and so, in consequence, does the world.⁴¹

The 'body' is therefore no longer an obstacle to but the condition of revelation. As the Logos indwells the flesh of Jesus, so meaning indwells the body of the text.⁴²

⁴⁰ See chapter two for the definition of an "original" text.

⁴¹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 304.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 310.

God the Father/Author was revealed in Jesus the Son/Word. Understanding God's intention means attending to the external communicative act performed by his Word, Jesus Christ. In the same way we understand the meaning of an author's text by engaging with her text.

The text contains the force exerting the author's intention. Whether or not a baseball player hits the ball we can, under normal circumstances, interpret that his intention was to hit it by observing the swing of his bat. Being unable to see into the mind of the author Vanhoozer advocates that "the text itself constitutes the most appropriate context for interpretation."⁴³

Vanhoozer asks several questions in laying out his epistemology. What can we know from texts? How do we know it? Can we determine if some readings are correct while others are incorrect? Moving from his metaphysical position of the competency of language, as given from God, Vanhoozer unpacks the possibility of "adequate" literary knowledge described as "all the knowledge we need to fulfill our vocation as human beings and interpreters."⁴⁴ The belief in adequate knowledge denies the view of humans as slaves to language (which denies the possibility of literary knowledge) or the view of humans as masters of language (which determines *the* correct meaning). The alternative comes in what Vanhoozer sees as being a responsible *citizen* of language. Because of our limited nature we function with the possibility of new literary knowledge and insight and no one person or group can claim the final word on meaning. However, we also do not live in a void which

⁴³ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 300.

eternally pushes meaning away from our grasp denying any meaningful understanding of what someone has said to us.

Interpreters will continue to contribute to an understanding of the meaning of a text. Within this understanding meaning functions as the “regulative idea one that orients and governs interpretive practice.”⁴⁵ Vanhoozer finds meaning in the literal sense of the text. He does not confuse this with a literalistic reading which he equates with the tendency towards empiricism, the complete factual correspondence of propositions to reality.⁴⁶ Rather what he demonstrates as the literal sense could also be termed the *literary* sense.

Vanhoozer’s literal sense finds accordance with his use of speech-act theory. The locutions received (the words written on the text) transmit an illocutionary force. Illocutions are defined as what the words *do*. Words can greet, warn, encourage, promise, etc. Understanding meaning flows from understanding the literal sense and understanding the literal sense is the result of identifying the illocutionary force of a text. This is extremely important to understand because it parts ways with both structuralist and post-structuralist thinking. Structuralist thinking posits meaning in words, namely in their reference to other words. Vanhoozer’s model posits meaning in the illocution and the smallest form of an illocution is the sentence. The study of words, or semiotics, remains important to interpretation. However, a sentence is not simply the sum of its words. Vanhoozer describes it as a “basic particular, . . .

⁴⁵ Ibid., 303.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 311.

[something] that cannot be explained by something more basic.”⁴⁷ This view frees us from Derrida’s view of the play of signs *ad infinitum*.

Interpreting the Bible literally, according to its literary nature, becomes a matter of genre. In the matter of genre Vanhoozer adopts E. D. Hirsch who states that genre rests in the author’s “controlling idea of the whole.”⁴⁸ In the manner that sentences are understood for their particular illocutionary force so too entire texts or books have an illocutionary force, or a *generic illocution*.⁴⁹ Understanding the “controlling idea” of a text provides the reader insight into the meaning of its various parts. In this, a most practical point of his theory, Vanhoozer shares a broad consensus with much biblical scholarship.⁵⁰

Understanding the genre of Isaiah as a whole, as well as its parts, has long occupied and frustrated the work of scholars. This reality demonstrates why a scholar such as Melugin has come to the conclusion he has, given the various and diverse attempts to understand the genre or “controlling idea” of Isaiah. Vanhoozer’s model offers a fair hearing to these various interpretations, but does not assume that *any and all* will be welcomed into a “thick” and responsible reading of Isaiah. To understand this process we must now turn to Vanhoozer’s ethics of reading.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 204; See also Ricouer, *Interpretation Theory*, 2-8.

⁴⁸ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 79.

⁴⁹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 341.

⁵⁰ See B. S. Childs, “Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis,” *Ex Auditu* 16 (2000): 121-29; Tremper Longman, “Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory, and the Evangelical,” *WTJ* 47 (1985): 46-67.

III. Vanhoozer's Ethic of Reading

Holy Spirit and Reception

Vanhoozer extends his trinitarian model of language to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Word – the Spirit of Christ – and ministers Christ, the matter of Scripture, to its readers. The Bible is the instrument of the Spirit's persuasive power, the means by which he brings persons to faith in Christ. . . . The Spirit does not alter the semantics of biblical literature or add to the stock of revelation. Meaning – the good news about Christ – is already there, in the Word. . . . The Spirit may blow where, but not what, he wills. The trinitarian doctrine of the *filioque* . . . has an important hermeneutical parallel: as the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, so perlocutions proceed from locutions and illocutions.⁵¹

The Holy Spirit represents significance, meaning accomplished. This aspect of Vanhoozer's project introduces the distinction between "meaning" and "significance." Meaning comes from understanding what type of illocutions are occurring in a given text. This requires correctly identifying what the text is *doing*. Significance is the actualization of the perlocution. What the text *has done* to the reader. Vanhoozer gives this example, "by *stating* something (an illocution), I may *persuade* someone (a perlocution)."⁵² James tells us that it is not enough to be only *hearers* of the word (understanding its intention) but also *doers* of the word (integrating its significance).

An Emphasis on Realism as a Part of Ethics

Vanhoozer employs a hermeneutic of realism to oversee his entire interpretive project. This position contributes to his overall view of our citizenship in covenantal

⁵¹ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 429.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 428.

discourse. Vanhoozer remains adamant that the absence of *absolute* literary knowledge should not shipwreck our search for *adequate* literary knowledge. Hermeneutical realism attempts to take a text's bearings. "We can establish determinacy, in the text or on the high seas, not because we orient ourselves by means of absolutely fixed epistemological landmarks, but by means of points that are *fixed in relation to one another*."⁵³ Establishing this bearing, this determinant meaning, the understanding of a given illocution remains both provisional and open-ended. "The single correct interpretation must remain an eschatological goal."⁵⁴

Interpretive Virtues

Vanhoozer's foundation of metaphysics and epistemology of language allows him to speak clearly regarding the interpretive virtues of a reader. These virtues are important because they safeguard against the abuse of the "author" which can arise in both the models of Fish and Derrida. These models ban the author from having any real authority. For Derrida this allows for interpretations to multiply infinitely with no presence to be accountable to. Fish's model attempts to ground accountability in the interpretive community.⁵⁵ However, this does not allow the text to speak from outside the community. Rather, the text only says what the community allows it to say.

Vanhoozer outlines four key virtues of interpretation.⁵⁶ The first is *honesty*. This virtue demands that the reader make aware his or her own biases upon entering

⁵³ Ibid., 301.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 303.

⁵⁵ For a Christian perspective on integrating Fish's model see Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 377.

into interpretation. Avoiding this interpretive honesty means introducing the risk of drowning the voice of the author out with the interpreter's own voice. The second virtue is *openness*. This virtue invites the text on its own terms. It is an invitation to transcendence, knowing that the reader's knowledge is provisional and open to new knowledge from outside herself. The third virtue is *attention*. This virtue allows the reader to spend time with the text noting its various details and layers in light of the whole. The fourth virtue is *obedience*. This virtue asks the reader to follow the direction of the text. Vanhoozer states clearly that this does not necessarily mean *doing* what the text says, but rather being able to see or anticipate the intended perlocutions.

One would be hard pressed to find these virtues explicitly stated in any given interpretation. However, a reader's virtues will be made evident in their writing and are worth listening for in their interpretation. A reader's virtue emerges in the manner which they engage with a text. For instance, chapter 7 will question the virtuousness of those claiming to interpret Isaiah 6 without regarding its placement in the overall literary whole of the Bible. Vanhoozer's virtues should be remembered as part of his citizenship in the covenant of discourse.

An example of virtues, or the lack of, can be demonstrated in the example of two parties in a mutual agreement bound by contract. When both parties understand and accept the intention of the contract its meaning finds the fullest perlocutionary effect. However, if something or someone sours the contractual relationship it is amazing what either party will "find" in the contract to support their own agenda, instead of the original intention of the contract. Suddenly the author's intention is

replaced with the will of the reader. The Church is no stranger to this reality in its dealing with Scriptures, there remains much in Scripture that is “hard to understand” leading us to “distort” its original intention (2 Pet 3:16).⁵⁷

Responsible Reading

Vanhoozer advocates the centrality of the author’s intention as the ground of textual meaning. This means that an ethic of interpretation “is to guard the otherness of the text: to preserve its ability to say something to and affect the reader, thus creating the possibility of self-transcendence.”⁵⁸ Vanhoozer unpacks this within the context of translation. An ethically appropriate translation is one which both understands the illocutionary force and perlocutionary affect intended by the author. This requires the reader to exegete or “lead meaning out of” the text.⁵⁹ In accordance with speech-act theory the preservation of meaning does not come through the quest for exact semantic equivalence which believes that a translation reproduces an identical text, just in another language. This model assumes “a permanence through time – [and] a perpetuation of the same.”⁶⁰ Vanhoozer sees this as untenable. It focuses too much on the words themselves, a view not in keeping with meaningful communication. If meaning transmits through speech *acts* then the translator should desire to produce the same effects of the original illocution. “The translator is one who preserves the efficacy of past communicative action.”⁶¹ In this way the

⁵⁷ For an excellent example of respecting the intention found in the biblical text see Rowan Williams, “The Literal Sense of Scripture,” in *Modern Theology* 7 (1991): 121-34.

⁵⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 383.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 392.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 392.

centrality of an original physical text is maintained while the importance of transferring its *efficacy* allows for meaning to be maintained in translation and interpretation.⁶²

Another important aspect of Vanhoozer's position comes in allowing for meaning (located in the author's intention located in the text) to be stabilized. Meaning remains publicly accessible, in the form of the text, and not sourced in any individual's interpretation or strategy. The accessibility of the text also allow for its significance a freedom to address new and unknown contexts. "There is no contradiction between asserting that a text has a single, though not simplistic, determinate meaning on the one hand, and a plurality of significances on the other."⁶³

The "Thick" and "Thin" of Interpretation

Synthesizing his prior discussion Vanhoozer asks that responsible readers might contribute to a "thick" reading of the text which "allows us to appreciate everything the author is doing in a text."⁶⁴ It is in our differences and limitations that we must look for this "plural unity." "As with persons, so with texts: their true identity only becomes apparent in the full range of their relationships."⁶⁵ This understanding can accept diverse interpretations as positive contributions, but not

⁶² It should be noted that in more recent work Vanhoozer has begun to downplay the role of perlocutions in the process of translation and exegesis. His current position appears to stand in some tension to the work produced in *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*. This tension needs further exploration though I do not see it contradicting his basic emphasis on understanding the trajectory and force of a given text. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2002), 157-203.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 392.

necessarily *any* interpretation, a claim of a reading as *different* cannot stand as sole justification for its acceptance.

A “thick” reading also demands that an “interpretation remains incomplete without an appreciation of a text’s significance.”⁶⁶ The attention to significance still brings a heavy critique to interpretations of the scholarly community. One may still feel the reverberations of Barth in this position (who Vanhoozer cites in support). Barth laid siege against the interpretations of scholars in his day citing their work as “merely the first step towards a commentary.”⁶⁷ Vanhoozer continues this critique by adding that “historical critics have become fixated on one level of description only.”⁶⁸ He goes on to say that “what is immoral about [these] interpretive interests is not what they do but what they fail to do.”⁶⁹ Awareness of this “yawning chasm” between commentary and homily stands a valuable and needed part of an adequate ethic of interpretation.⁷⁰

No interpreter can cover *all* the ground of any given interpretation. Because interpretations are provisional and our contexts change, meaning and significance will continue to be nuanced. However, this does not mean that just any contribution will be accepted. With respect to biblical literature there are certain moral requirements that the text as a canon need to be attended to. If we accept that the genre or *controlling idea* of the Bible states that it stands as a revelation of God to humans then this must, in some manner, inform and be reflected in our interpretations.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 422.

⁶⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6 ed. trans Edwyn Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 6.

⁶⁸ Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 399.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ In further support of this critique see Frances Young, “Interpretative Genres and the Inevitability of Pluralism,” *JSNT* 59 (1995): 102.

Key points in Vanhoozer's Ethic of Interpretation and Isaiah 6:9-10

There are several points of interest in Vanhoozer's model that can be concisely stated before approaching Isaiah 6:9-10. The proceeding study is focuses on *interpretations*. The "original" text of Isaiah stands as that to which every reader needs to attend if ethical meaning is the goal. Any interpretation, which includes translations, attempts to re-locate meaning in a new context. This means entering into the hermeneutical circle in which I stand with a limited and biased position. I am aware of the difficulties posed by this process. I do not claim to hold a *definitive* meaning by which to compare these interpretations. I hope to lay forth the locution of Isaiah 6:9-10 (and the chapter as a whole) as best we have it. From there I hope to enter into the earliest interpretations which were in the form of translations (and in the case of 1QIsa^a a potential interpretation which remained in the same language.)⁷¹ This evaluation will necessarily trust in the adequacy of language to reveal contrasts and distinction that can be observed. In addition I will deal with recent interpreters and their commentary on the passage. Within this evaluation I will keep the following questions in mind, though not all may be relevant in a given section.

1. Does the interpreter account for and attend to the author of Isaiah? If so, how?
This question seeks to expose the interpreter's basis for presenting the meaning of the text.
2. How does the interpreter translate the passage?
This question seeks to expose the fundamental understanding of how meaning is understood to be transmitted. Does the interpreter believe that exact equivalence is required for transmission?

⁷¹ Joseph Rosenbloom, *The Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll: A Literary Analysis and Comparison of the Qumran Scroll with the Masoretic Text of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 81.

3. How many levels of description does the interpreter account for?
It is obvious that one interpreter cannot deal with *all* relevant contributions to a “thick” description. However, it may be observed that an interpreter is neglecting key aspects of the text resulting in reduced meaning.⁷²
4. What is the relation between the interpreter’s own voice (i.e. ideological bias) and the transcendent voice of the author?
Are there observable instances in which the interpreter’s questions override the concerns of the author?⁷³
5. What is the interpreter’s concern for the significance of the text?
It is not necessary that every interpretation has a full concrete application of the text’s significance. However, if the interpreter is not concerned with connecting to the overall understanding of the text (including its significance) than his or her reading is open to ethical questioning.

Through this study I will gather of an overall perspective of the interpretive treatment given to this passage. This perspective will carry the charge articulated by Barth and carried on by Vanhoozer whose desire is to recognize the “Word in the words.”⁷⁴ The Bible remains a text which intends to reveal the Creator to his creation in manner which both exalts the Creator and offers redemption to creation. How then are those who spend their lives toiling in the text contributing to *this intention* of the Bible?

⁷² Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 399.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 403.

⁷⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 9.