



Materiality and Meaning in Literary Studies

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Recently, non- and paraverbal properties of literary texts at the level of documentary inscription (i.e. materiality), seen individually or as aspects of a so-called 'material text', that is, the union of materiality and verbal sign systems, received an increasing amount of attention in textual scholarship and literary studies. Here, 'meaning' or at least 'semantic potentiality' has been attributed to both or either and physical features of texts have been construed as hitherto neglected aspects of literary communication and literary aesthetics. In what follows, I will present a brief conspectus of the current debate and then try to provide a reconstruction of underlying ideas by answering the question 'how does a material text mean?'. Taking a descriptive meta-perspective and focusing on conceptual and methodological clarification, I try to clarify the somewhat blurry expressions 'meaning', 'to mean' and the like by translating them into the distinct terminology of semiotics and transferring them into the theoretical framework of an instrumentalist notion of signs.

1. Introduction

By pointing out their 'semantic potentiality', one line of thought within the current philological turn to *materiality*¹ exposes non- and paraverbal physical fea-

¹ See for introductory hints Per Röcken, "Was ist – aus editorischer Sicht – Materialität? Versuch einer Explikation des Ausdrucks und einer sachlichen Klärung". In: *editio* 22/2008, p. 22-46; Annika Rockenberger / Per Röcken, "Inkunabel-Materialität: Zur Deutung der Typographie von Sebastian Brants *Narrenschiff* (Basel 1494)". In: *Euphorion* 105/2011, p. 283-316, esp. p. 283-289; for further readings see e.g. Edward A. Levenston, *The Stuff of Literature: Physical Aspects of Texts and Their Relation to Literary Meaning*. New York 1992; David C. Greetham, "Materiality / Book as Meaning". In: *Textual Transgressions: Essays Toward the Construction of a BioBibliography*. New York 1998, p. 437-466; George Bornstein, "How to Read a Page: Modernism and

tures of texts as hitherto neglected aspects of literary communication. Thereby, assumed ‘semanticity’ is not confined to a mere *symptomatic* utilization of materiality for purposes such as classification of texts (and parts of texts), determination of chronological order and genetic relations or reconstruction of the process of text production. Instead, in contemporary literary criticism there have been attempts to establish some sort of “materialist hermeneutics”.² To quote from a recent contribution:³

After half a century of critical writings about the autonomy of the text we tend to think of literary texts as immaterial entities, independent of their medium, but to find an audience a text has to be embodied in a medium [...], and this embodiment invariably inflicts a certain body language on the text itself; a body language that inevitably interferes with the meaning of the text, adding nuances of meaning that are beyond the control of the author. [...] As a consequence of the noisy materiality of literature, the dominant hermeneutic approach to the interpretation of literature could profitably be supplemented with an increased awareness of material matters and their co-authoring function.

Similar claims can be found, for example, in the realm of ‘social semiotics’:⁴

[T]exts that are verbal utterances also have materiality, which contributes to their meaning potential; language and materiality work together, at different levels of semiosis.

But what do such postulates concerning the ‘semanticity’⁵ of materiality amount

Material Textuality”. In: *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*. Cambridge 2001, p. 5-31; Wim Van Mierlo (ed.), *Textual Scholarship and the Material Book*. Amsterdam 2007; Simon Eliot / Andrew Nash / Ian Willison (eds.), *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*. London 2007; Mats Malm / Barbro Ståhle Sjönell / Petra Söderlund (eds.), *Bokens materialitet: Bokhistoria och bibliografi*. Stockholm 2009; Martin J. Schubert (ed.), *Materialität in der Editionswissenschaft*. Berlin 2010; James Daybell / Peter Hinds (eds.), *Material Readings of Early Modern Culture: Texts and Social Practices, 1580–1730*. Houndmills 2010.; John N. King (ed.), *Tudor Books and Readers: Materiality and the Construction of Meaning*. Cambridge, 2010; Graham Allen / Carrie Griffin / Mary O’Connell (eds.), *Readings on Audience and Textual Materiality*. London 2011; Wolfgang Lukas / Rüdiger Nutt-Kofoth / Madleen Podewski (eds.), *Text – Material – Medium: Zur Relevanz editorischer Dokumentationen für die literaturwissenschaftliche Interpretation*. Berlin 2014; Elizabeth Scott-Baumann / Ben Burton (eds.), *The Work of Form: Poetics and Materiality in Early Modern Culture*. Oxford 2014.

² Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition*. Princeton 1991, p. 15.

³ Tore Rye Andersen, “Distorted Transmissions: Towards a Material Reading of Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*”. In: *Orbis Litterarum* 68/2013, p. 110-142, at p. 111-112.

⁴ Anders Björkqvall / Anna-Marlin Karlsson, “The Materiality of Discourse and the Semiotics of Materials”. *Semiotica* 187/2011, p. 141-165, at p. 143.

⁵ A brief note on terminology: Since I cannot give an explication of the vague and ambiguous term ‘semantics’ here, the term (as well as derived expressions like ‘semantic’ or ‘semanticity’) is always put in single quotation marks instead to remind the reader of its questionable status. Even though ‘semantics’ is obviously applied to the area of semiotics that primarily deals with the

to? How is the notion that materiality (or the material text) ‘has meaning’ or at least ‘meaning potential’, ‘does mean’ or ‘does contribute to the meaning’ to be conceived? What exactly is meant by this sort of statements?

In what follows I try to present a *systematic* reconstruction and thus provide a better understanding of such (vague, ambiguous) claims by analyzing the underlying question ‘how does a material text mean?’. First, I will give a rough survey of the various objects and issues denoted by the term ‘materiality’ (esp. in the relevant context of textual scholarship), an explication of the related term ‘material text’ and some hints about how to grasp the interrogative pro-adverb ‘how’. Following that, I will try to clarify the somewhat blurry expressions ‘meaning’, ‘to mean’ and the like by transferring them into the theoretical framework of an *instrumentalist* notion of signs and by ‘translating’ them into the distinct terminology of *semiotics*.

Despite the rather metaphorical (almost arbitrary) uses of ‘materiality’ in poststructuralist and constructivist theory, and against the vague ideas of recent post- or anti-hermeneutic (as well as anti-semiotic)⁶ trends – focusing on the ‘appearance’, ‘aura’, ‘surface effects’, ‘presence’, ‘resistance’, ‘agency’ or ‘affordance’ of things – I hold that once we get past mere “affective dimensions of texts and readers’ encounters with them”⁷ and employ notions like ‘meaning’, it becomes inevitable to analyze such concepts in terms of communication, intention, understanding or interpretation.

Since the term ‘meaning’ is often used to refer to different *aims of interpretation*, finally, I will conclude with some *hermeneutical* remarks concerning the standards of interpreting materiality and/or material texts. Generally, my overall approach will be *positive* and *constructive*, that is, I will not provide a *critical* report or commentary on the literature that deals with the alleged (communicative) significance of materiality. Instead, I will confine myself to conceptual and methodological clarifications.

investigation of *linguistic* (verbal) sign systems, the term is also used to denote semiotic qualities of non- and paraverbal phenomena. Thus, there is no consensus on the usage of the concept.

⁶ See Martin Siefkes, “Sturm auf die Zeichen: Was die Semiotik von ihren Kritikern lernen kann”. In: *Schriften zur Kultur- und Mediensemiotik* 1/2015, p. 7-42; DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15475/skms.2015.1.1>

⁷ Jacob Haubenreich, [CFP] “Materiality and Meaning in Contemporary Literary Studies: MLA Panel, Vancouver, 2015” (published online, February 2014); <https://po.missouri.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind1402&L=GERMAN-CFP-L&P=30545>; accessed 11/2015; see also Jacob Haubenreich, [CFP] “The Posthermeneutic Turn in Textual Studies”. *GSA Panel*, Washington, D.C., October 2015 (published online, January 2015); <https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/discussions/54630/cfp-posthermeneutic-turn-textual-studies-gsa-2015-deadline-january>; accessed 11.2015.

2. 'Materiality'

First and foremost, let's briefly call to mind the variety of objects and issues denoted by the term 'materiality'. According to my understanding, it refers to all chemical and/or physical properties of written or printed documents, incl. visual and graphic features.⁸ These qualities are either directly accessible to sensory perception (visual, haptic, tactile, olfactory) and metrologically measureable or instrumentally perceptible.

Material qualities can be classified according to (a) media framing or form of communication (letter, broadsheet, journal, book), (b) type of document (manuscript, typescript, print) and (c) relation to verbal sign system (non- or paraverbal).

At this point, I pass on giving a systematic overview of the diverse material aspects of document and script and the different production instances involved.⁹ Layout, characteristics of paper (like thickness, color, format, folding, sewing), used writing material, and (typo-)graphic design allow – as symptoms – not only to draw conclusions on production and handling but also – based on rule-governed inferences – to justify a certain classification of the particular object.

That much is clear, a complete recording of material evidence would result in a huge amount of data that could become subject of interpretative considerations. However, not all physical properties of textual objects become equally

⁸ Röcken, "Was ist Materialität?", p. 27-38. For the sake of completeness it should be pointed out, however, that the term 'materiality' is used differently (wider, sometimes even metaphorically) in poststructuralist cultural studies and media philosophy. For a short survey see *ibid.*, p. 28-33; for further readings see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht / K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (eds.), *Materialität der Kommunikation*. Frankfurt/Main 1988; K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, "The Materiality of Communication". In: Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (ed.), *Materialities of Communication*. Stanford 1994, p. 1-12; Christina Haas, *Writing Technology: Studies on the Materiality of Literacy*. Mahwah, NJ 1995; N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, Mass. 2002, ch. 1; Andreas Reckwitz, "The Status of the Material in Theories of Culture: From Social Structure to Artifacts". In: *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 32,2/2002, p. 195-217; Julian Wolfreys, "Materialism/Materiality". In: *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory*. Houndmills 2004, p. 143-150; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford 2005; Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*. Durham, NC 2005; Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass. 2008; Johanna Drucker, "Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic to Probabilistic Materiality", *Parallax* 15,4/2009, p. 7-17; Bill Brown, "Materiality". In: W. J. T. Mitchell / Mark B.N. Hansen (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. Chicago 2010, p. 49-63; Christine Mitchell, "Materiality: Tracking a Term, Tackling a Turn". In: Michael Gubo / Martin Kypt / Florian Öchsner (eds.), *Kritische Perspektiven: "Turns", Trends und Theorien*. Münster 2011, p. 281-300; Johanna Drucker, "Performative Materiality and Theoretical Approaches to Interface". In: *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7,1/2013; <http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/7/1/000143/000143.html>; accessed 11/2015; Thomas Wortmann, "Zurück in die Zukunft? Die Literaturwissenschaft und ihr ‚Material‘". In: Claudia Liebrand / Rainer J. Kaus (eds.), *Interpretieren nach den „Turns“: Literaturtheoretische Revisionen*. Bielefeld 2014, p. 139-167.

⁹ For a more detailed conspectus see Röcken, "Was ist Materialität?", p. 43-45 and Annika Rockenberger, *Produktion und Drucküberlieferung der editio princeps von Sebastian Brants Narrenschiff (Basel 1494): Eine medienhistorisch-druckanalytische Untersuchung*. Frankfurt/Main 2011, p. 72-74.

suspicious of ‘semantivity’. Above all, typographical aspects of printed texts¹⁰ together with issues of book design¹¹ and conspicuous characteristics¹² of private or official letters – i.e. visually perceptible features – did attract hermeneutical attention; not least because the addressee or audience related embedding gives reason to expect a rather lively *usage* of signs in a communication situation.

3. ‘Material Texts’

How does a material text ‘mean’? As a matter of principle, we need to make sense of the question before we can proceed answering it. At this, the easiest task is to clarify my understanding of the term ‘material text’. More difficulties will occur when dealing with the verb ‘to mean’ and the interrogative pro-adverb ‘how’. So, to begin with: What is a material text?

The introduction of the expression ‘material text’ by Peter Shillingsburg (1991)¹³ is closely connected with the debate on the *sociology of texts* conceived as a media history of literary works, mainly descending from a critique of the alleged ‘idealism’ and ‘positivism’ ascribed to the so-called ‘Greg-Bowers-Tanselle-School’ of textual scholarship.¹⁴

Apparently, Shillingsburg got the impression that within the debate a clearer understanding – or at least a better comprehension of an actual disagreement – was obstructed by indistinct terminology. As is often the case, the inconsistent

¹⁰ Donald Francis McKenzie, “Typography and Meaning: The Case of William Congreve” [1981]. In: Peter D. McDonald / Michael Felix Suarez (eds.), *Making Meaning: ‘Printers of the Mind’ and Other Essays*. Boston 2002, p. 198-236; Jerome J. McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*. Princeton 1993; Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923*. Chicago 1994; Megan Benton / Paul C. Gutjahr (eds.), *Illuminating Letters: Typography and Literary Interpretation*. Amherst 2001. Needless to say that typography – as well as book design – is more of a *function* of materiality in a strict sense; yet, in recent philological and linguistic discourse – see Röcken, “Was ist Materialität?”, p. 34-38 – the graphic visual design (although located on a different categorial level) is usually considered to be a part of the extension of the term ‘materiality’.

¹¹ Bodo Plachta, “More Than Mise-en-Page: Book Design and German Editing”. In: Wim Van Mierlo (ed.), *Textual Scholarship and the Material Book*. Amsterdam 2007, p. 85-105; Robert Bringhurst, *The Surface of Meaning. Books and Book Design in Canada*. Vancouver 2008; G. Thomas Tanselle, *Bibliographical Analysis: A Historical Introduction*. Cambridge 2009, ch. 3; Tore Rye Andersen, “Judging by the Cover”. In: *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 53/2012, S. 251-278.

¹² James Daybell, “Material Meanings and the Social Signs of Manuscript Letters in Early Modern England”. In: *Literature Compass* 6/2010, p. 647-667; James Daybell, *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635*. New York, 2012; Anne Bohnenkamp-Renken / Waltraud Wiethölter (eds.), *Der Brief – Ereignis und Objekt*. 2 vols. Frankfurt/Main 2008 and 2010.

¹³ Peter Shillingsburg, “Text as Matter, Concept, and Action”. In: *Studies in Bibliography* 44/1991, p. 31-82.

¹⁴ Paul Eggert / Peter L. Shillingsburg, “Introduction to Anglo-American Scholarly Editing 1980–2005”. In: *Ecdotica* 6/2009, p. 9-19; Wim Van Mierlo, “Reflections on Textual Editing in the Time of the History of the Book”. In: *Variants* 10/2013, p. 133-161.

and normatively impregnated usage of the term ‘text’ was the main obstacle for a clarification of the positions taken up.

Shillingsburg specifies the term to present *different perspectives* on a yet diffuse conglomeration of objects, their features, qualities and our orientations to them respectively. His explication of ‘material text’ reads as follows:¹⁵

material text. The union of *linguistic text* and *document: a sign sequence* held in a medium of display. The material text has ‘meanings’ additional to, and perhaps complementary to, the linguistic text.

Without expanding on the elaborated conceptual apparatus¹⁶ it becomes apparent that the term ‘material text’ is used to draw our attention to the fact that every verbal sign sequence – commonly known as ‘text’ – always comes in a concrete materialization to which hermeneutical relevance could be attributed to. However, the word ‘meaning’ is put in quotation marks and remains indeterminate like the merely adumbrated ‘semantic’ interrelations.

A categorial asymmetry becomes apparent, too:¹⁷ namely, hermeneutically relevant relations are not in place between two independent entities – the verbal text seen individually and the materiality taken by itself – but between the verbal text on the one hand and the *unity* that consists of the verbal text *and* its materiality on the other hand. Thus, Shillingsburg seems to assume that the sheer materiality taken for itself does not ‘mean’ anything at all but gains ‘semantic’ value only at the level of combination or *synopsis* with the verbal sign sequence. It is a debatable point whether such constraints are reasonable. Whilst not anticipating the debate, a definition of ‘material text’ should be less demanding with respect to its prerequisites. My own tentative explication of the term reads as follows:

Expl-mTx – A material text is a complex multi-modal¹⁸ semiotic artifact that includes not only a verbal sign system reduced to writing but also additional (non- and paraverbal) material features, where both are caused by agents of the production process (which is not necessarily the author of the verbal text).

¹⁵ Peter Shillingsburg, *Resisting Texts: Authority and Submission in Constructions of Meaning*. Ann Arbor 1997, p. 101.

¹⁶ Shillingsburg, *Resisting Texts*, ch. 3, esp. p. 70-76; for critical remarks see G. Thomas Tanselle, “Textual Instability and Editorial Idealism.” In: *Studies in Bibliography* 49/1996, p. 1-60, at p. 37-41 and Paul Eggert, *Securing the Past: Conservation in Art, Architecture and Literature*. Cambridge 2009, p. 229-231.

¹⁷ This asymmetry is avoided by the distinction between *bibliographical* and *linguistic code* as proposed by McGann, *The Textual Condition*, p. 15-16.

¹⁸ A *multi-modal* approach assumes that the ‘meaning’ of a text is not constituted just by one single semiotic resource (i.e. verbal language) but mostly derives from several inter-relational semiotic resources (modalities) that represent the object of interpretation altogether; see e.g. Gunther R. Kress, *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. New York 2010.

To provide some further hints: the non- and paraverbal aspects of materiality *possibly* caused with a communicative intention possess ‘semiotic potentiality’ (as a mere *disposition*) to the extent that they possess immanent or relational properties which – against the background of additional semiotic knowledge – can function as premises for interpretative inferences (see for further distinctions §4).

There might be some sort of *interrelation* between the verbal and material sign systems co-present within the material text. That is, interpretative inference procedures addressing primarily the materiality employ – stronger version: require – as resources or contexts the outcomes of interpretative inferences addressing primarily the verbal sign system and vice versa. Such corresponding ‘semantic’ relations could be qualified some more as affirmative or critical, additive, contrastive, contrary, complementary etc. As for their *function*, such interrelations might well be seen as relations between signs and meta-signs, where the latter are conceived as means of showing the intended register or mode of communication, that is, certain characteristics of signs are used to give instructions on the proper usage of the signs themselves.

Let’s recall to what extent the discussion on the alleged necessity of a new and ‘broadened’ concept of text has been lead during past decades, let alone the concomitant inflation of conceptual stipulations it has produced.¹⁹ It has been tried to attribute research programs and ontological commitments to the term ‘text’ *by definition*. Because of these terminological re-framings, quite different issues are being labeled with and emphasized by the very same term.

In my view, the idea to define the notoriously indistinct term ‘text’ more precisely by the use of adjectival specifications (like ‘material’) has considerable benefits. This makes clear whereof one actually speaks and if participants in a discussion talk about the same issue at all. Thus, different issues and aspects of a complex cultural artifact can be distinguished, misunderstandings can be avoided, and the technical terminology can be adjusted to specific conditions and requirements.

By means of Shillingsburg’s terminological specifications, the somewhat blurry question ‘Is the typography a part of the text?’²⁰ can be substituted by a more reasonable one. According to *some* definitions of ‘text’ the non- or paraverbal materiality of the document may be considered part of the things denoted by the term (and if we do not already have a clear understanding of actual or stipulated uses of the term ‘text’ we simply cannot answer the question). *In any case*, typography is part of the *material* text. To quote an aperçu well-known to German scholars, whether we print “Goethe’s ‘Werther’ in octave and gothic types or in duodecimo and roman types, with black ink on white paper or yellow ink on blue paper”, at least the *material* text does not remain the “very same”.²¹

¹⁹ See Annika Rockenberger / Per Röcken, “Typographie als Paratext?: Anmerkungen zu einer terminologischen Konfusion”. In: *Poetica* 41/2009, p. 293-330, at p. 313-314 and p. 326-330.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 326-330.

²¹ Roland Reuß, “Schicksal der Handschrift, Schicksal der Druckschrift: Notizen zur Textgenese”. In: *Text: Kritische Beiträge* 5/1999, p. 1-25, at p. 16: “Ob ich Goethes ‘Werther’ in Oktav und

4. 'Meaning'

Let's move on to the clarification of the interrogative pro-adverb 'how' and the verb 'to mean'! To begin with: how-questions are modal questions. They refer to the fashion, way, or manner of the synchronic and diachronic givenness of things. As for objects, how-questions ask for their empirical state or nature, as for actions and courses of events, they aim – in a descriptive, normative, or prescriptive way – for procedural modalities, temporal processes, procedures, and regularities as well as for basal generative mechanisms. Provided, the verb 'to mean' refers to a process or activity, the question 'How does a material text mean?' is best understood as a question about procedural modalities and presuppositions of – well, precisely what of? An insightful note in Wittgenstein's *Blue Book* reads:²²

The question[] [...] 'what is meaning?' [...] produce[s] in us a mental cramp. We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to [it] and yet ought to point to something. (We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it.)

Certainly, the compulsiveness of this reflex can be deduced from said "bewilderment" and multiple attempts to find a "thing that corresponds" to the word 'meaning'. Here is a jumbled enumeration of corresponding *entities*: content, information, proposition, message, communication, significate, signification, representation, idea, concept, thought, notion, association, intention, verification, truth value, reference, object, sense, acceptation, purport, in- or extension, de- or connotation.²³

What is more, another observation causes uncertainty. On the one hand it looks like the things labeled with the term 'meaning' are conceived as *qualities* of linguistic objects at different levels of complexity: something 'has meaning', a word, a sentence, perhaps even an entire text.²⁴ On the other hand a wording like 'this and that *means* something' suggests that 'meaning' should be

Fraktur oder in Duodez und Antiqua, schwarz auf weiß oder gelb auf blau setze, der *Text* bleibt (hoffentlich) *derselbe*."

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations', generally known as The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford 1958, p. 1.

²³ As a side note: Obviously, these entities are either *internal* or *external*, *concrete* or *abstract*. In any case, the idea that there actually *is* "a thing that corresponds" to the substantive 'meaning' might be labeled as 'meaning-realism' or 'semantic realism', whereas the arguments put forward below operate on 'nominalist' assumptions.

²⁴ Jack W. Meiland, "The Meanings of a Text". In: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21/1981, p. 195-203; Robert Stecker, *Artworks: Definition, Meaning, Value*. University Park, PA 1997, p. 157-166; Oliver Robert Scholz, "On the Very Idea of a Textual Meaning". In: Jürgen Daiber / Eva-Maria Konrad / Thomas Petraschka / Hans Rott (eds.), *Understanding Fiction: Knowledge and Meaning in Literature*. Münster 2012, p. 135-145.

interpreted as an asymmetric (bi- or ternary) *relation* between corresponding entities.²⁵

Additionally, in the field of *literary studies* the issue of ‘meaning’ is closely tied to various conceptions of hermeneutics, that is, it is at least partially connected to normative ontological and interpretative theories as well as to different practical aims and epistemological interests. Here, the scenery of ‘semantification’ is commonly located within the framework of a model of literary *communication*,²⁶ and ‘semantic potentials’ are electively explained and limited with regard to a transmitter on the production side, a receiver on the reception side and/or by relating the object of interpretation to the sign system’s stratifications and signification differences. According to that, with a genetic focus on the production side it is asked what the sign’s author intended to communicate or which categorial or communicative intentions may be reasonably ascribed to them. In addition to this, the culture-historical requirements and regulations of potential semiotic inferences are examined. While, with a focus on the reception side the question arises what and how an actual or plausibly reconstructed historical or current reader could have perceived, experienced, and understood due to their knowledge and semiotic competence.²⁷

The broad range of things and concepts denoted by the terms ‘semantics’ and ‘meaning’ in literary studies is almost impossible to grasp. There is substantial confusion. Vagueness and ambiguity of the pertinent terminology did even provoke the question whether it would not be more reasonable to avoid or even *eliminate* it and to replace it by a language more differentiated and perspicuous. In this manner the question about ‘meaning’ might be translated “into a vocabulary that will improve the prospects of rational assessment, not least of all by exposing merely verbal disagreement.”²⁸

How is the indistinct question about ‘meaning’ best translated or replaced? In my view, the most promising candidate is the question about *what makes the*

²⁵ John Lyons, *Semantics*. Vol. 1, Cambridge 1977; John Lyons, “Bedeutungstheorien”. In: Armin Stechow / Dieter Wunderlich (eds.), *Semantik*. Berlin 1991, p. 1-24, at p. 1-5; Georg Meggle / Ego Sigward, “Der Streit um Bedeutungstheorien”. In: Marcelo Dascal (ed.), *Sprachphilosophie*. Berlin 1996, vol. 2, p. 964-989; Oliver Robert Scholz, *Verstehen und Rationalität: Untersuchungen zu den Grundlagen von Hermeneutik und Sprachphilosophie*. Frankfurt/Main ²2001, p. 258-278; Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas*. Cambridge 2002, ch. 2; Ernest Lepore / Barry C. Smith (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*. Oxford 2006, p. 149-389; Jeff Speaks, “Theories of Meaning”. In: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011); <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/meaning/>; accessed 11/2015.

²⁶ Ibrahim Taha, “The Literary Communication Pact: A Semiotic Approach”. In: *Semiotica* 114/1997, p. 131-150; Anders Pettersson, *Verbal Art: A Philosophy of Literature and Literary Experience*. Montreal 2000, p. 60-82; Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication*. Philadelphia 2000.

²⁷ For further considerations see Paisley Livingston, “Authorial Intention and the Varieties of Intentionalism”. In: Garry L. Hagberg / Walter Jost (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*. Oxford 2010, p. 401-419; Darren Hudson Hick, *Introducing Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. New York 2012, ch. 3.

²⁸ Jeffrey Stout, “What Is the Meaning of a Text?”. In: *New Literary History* 14/1982, p. 1-12, at p. 2; see also Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object*. Cambridge 1960, p. 258-260.

interpretation of signs and their exploitation for communicative purposes possible.

Please note, it is not so much the hermeneutical question about ‘the (correct) meaning’ of a semiotic artifact that is replaced, but rather the more general question about the meaning of the term ‘meaning’. Employing another Wittgenstein phrase, the change in interrogative perspective can be clarified in the following way: “if you want to understand the use of the word ‘meaning’, look for what one calls ‘an explanation of meaning’.”²⁹

Within the framework of an elaborated *instrumental* notion of signs – as provided by Rudi Keller’s *Theory of Linguistic Signs*³⁰ – an explanation of ‘meaning’ explains “that which makes communication possible” or “how it is possible for speakers to bring their addressees to recognize what they (the speakers) mean” (ibid. 47) respectively, and for the addressee to guess with some certainty the speaker’s intentions. ‘Meaning’, understood in this way, is a “key of interpretation” (114) provided to the recipient, “the property by virtue of which a sign is interpretable” (93; see 94 et seq.), “that which serves the interpreters as basis for their inferences” (99). Based on the ‘meaning’ – in due consideration of their “situational or contextual knowledge” (115) – recipients guess the “sense” or “the reason for the employment of linguistic aims”, the speaker’s “communicative intention” (113).

At this, the basis by virtue of which signs, understood as communicative means” (108), “means of influence” and “a certain kind of instrument” (60), become interpretable, consists in exactly three “systematic connections” and corresponding “basic techniques of interpretation”: Namely, there are “causally based, similarity based, or rule based” connections whereby we are able to make “causal, associative and/or rule-based inferences” (99). According to this distinction, signs can be classified by reference to the inferential procedures used for their interpretation. Following an accepted nomenclature, (and slightly modifying the terminology proposed by Ch. S. Peirce without adopting his representational theory of signs) one may distinguish between *symptoms*, *icons*, and *symbols*.

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. The German text, with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Oxford 2009, § 560; for further discussion of this paragraph see Peter M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Mind and Will: An Analytical Commentary on the ‘Philosophical Investigations’*. Oxford 1994, vol. 4, p. 383-385; see the helpful hints in Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies*, 1: “Asking first ‘What’s an explanation of meaning?’ has two advantages. You in a sense bring the question ‘what is meaning?’ down to earth. For, surely, to understand the meaning of ‘meaning’ you ought also to understand the meaning of ‘explanation of meaning’. Roughly: ‘let’s ask what the explanation of meaning is, for whatever that explains will be the meaning.’ Studying the grammar of the expression ‘explanation of meaning’ will teach you something about the grammar of the word ‘meaning’ and will cure you of the temptation to look about you for something which you might call the ‘meaning’.” – Accordingly, asking ‘how?’ instead of ‘what?’ might help to avoid mentioned “mental cramp” as well.

³⁰ Rudi Keller, *A Theory of Linguistic Signs*. Oxford 1998; henceforth page specifications are given within the main text.

Symptoms (see 103–108) are *indexical signs*. They have a special semiotic status insofar as they are *not* produced with a communicative intention and – in principle – everything that is the case or exists can be interpreted as a symptom (i.e. an effect) of something else (i.e. a cause or condition) that can be causally inferred from (explained by) the former. By explaining an issue causally, *we make it into a sign*, and thus an “aid for inferring something not directly perceptible from something that is” (99).

Icons (see 108–111) and *symbols* (see 112–115) on the other hand are *true signs* and communicative means with which sign users can realize a number of intentions, like the *categorial* intention to suggest an artifact’s generic classification to the recipient, the *communicative* intention to prompt the recipient to a contentual inference, or the *directive* intention to induce the recipient to take a certain action. Icons function as context-sensitive association impulses and trigger associative inferences. Symbols can be utilized as signs due to the rule of their use and the shared (collective) knowledge about this.

Generally, it is important to see that signs are human-caused empirically perceptible phenomena (usually: material artifacts and/or their characteristics), which are the results of communicative actions (more precisely, *attempts* at communication). Necessary conditions for the presence of communicative actions are (1) the intention of the sign’s causal agent to immediately suggest a specified inference to potential recipients by means of meaningful sign usage, (2) the agent’s intention – by use of semiotic means (to her sincere belief) rationally suited to accomplish (1) – to put potential recipients in the position (a) to perceive and (b) realize or understand (1), and (3) her intention to let potential recipients *openly* know (2). Whoever wants (1) sincerely, has to want (2) sincerely; whoever wants (2) sincerely, has to want (3) sincerely.³¹

Thus, the mere presence of communicative intentions on the production side is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the presence of an attempt at communication (or the material manifestation thereof). In addition to that, said intentions have to be openly manifest for (historical) reception instances.³² If the sign’s author could not have had the justified belief or expectation that by making use of rationally adequate means, she might have given a potential – and due to semiotic knowledge: competent – recipient *reasons* for the recognition of her communicative intentions, it is opaque why one should say that she had said intentions at all.

Of course, at any time, a recipient can *decide* to treat some perceptible material aspect of a document *as if it was* a communicative sign; but this clearly does not alter the *actual* (i.e. non-communicative) status of the phenomenon in question.

³¹ Georg Meggle, *Grundbegriffe der Kommunikation* [1981]. Berlin ²1996, p. 7-16, p. 190-262; Georg Meggle / Nikola Kompa, “Pragmatics in Modern Philosophy of Language”. In: Wolfram Bublitz / Neal R. Norrick (eds.), *Foundations of Pragmatics*. Berlin 2011, p. 203-228, at p. 217-219.

³² Accordingly, the fact that historical recipients could have been able to identify these intentions may be considered to be an *epistemic* (indicatory) criterion for the semiotic significance of a material feature. It is not, however, a *definitional* criterion (neither necessary nor sufficient).

A quarrel concerning the question whether such a perceptible physical property should be conceived as a sign or not can only be decided with regard to the (probable) intentions and actions of a causal agent on the production side. Thus, in cases of doubt it has to be shown that the most convincing and *best explanation* for the presence of a certain material property is the communicative action of a causal agent on the production side.

To put it another way, in my view, the definition of ‘sign’ ought to be an *intentionalist* definition. An alternative would be something like a ‘subjectivist effect-related definition’ according to which something were to be referred to as ‘sign’ provided that it has an semiotic ‘effect’ on someone or is interpreted subjectively as a sign on the reception side. However, according to this suggestion, the question whether something *is* a sign cannot be raised reasonably. Whoever states that something is a sign would thus be right *by definition*.

These elucidative hints seem to be indicated for there has been some tendency to conceive *all signs* in accord to the model of *symptoms*, that is, to make the relational property of a thing *to be a sign* – which (with the *exception* of the symptoms) is to be accounted on the *production* side – conditional solely on the recipient’s assessment. This is less problematic regarding *symbols* – whose semiotic qualities become a quasi-immanent, guaranteed property of the particular object with increase of conventionality – but more so with regard to *icons*. Whereas for *symptoms* it is essential that they’re made into signs by recipients, and for *symbols* at most there can be some disagreement – which, by the way, can be dissolved by means of empirical research and historical reconstruction – whether there actually is a *convention* governing its communicative usage, *icons* pose a problem and, in a way, constitute the major element of uncertainty for the interpretation of material texts.

How can it be made plausible that a production instance *actually* did use prima facie conspicuous elements as signs with which communicative intentions are realized? To recap, for something to be a communicative sign, it is neither necessary nor sufficient to simply function as a semiotic trigger for some recipient’s associative inferences and *hence* to be conceived as a sign. Instead the question is: Was the sign’s causal agent reasonably justified in expecting that at least one recipient would be able – merely due to a “naturally human faculty of association”³³ – to infer something not directly perceptible from something that is, i.e. to understand what was meant by the author (the sense resp. the communicative intention)?

Here it might be of some help³⁴ to distinguish between (a) icons with *strong intrinsic relevance* that are quasi-automatically categorized as icons regardless of contextual features just because they bear close resemblance to a distinct object type (*iconic relevance*), and (b) icons with *little intrinsic relevance* that are categorized as icons (and signs) merely because of certain contextual factors, i.e. by

³³ Keller, *Theory of Signs*, p. 109.

³⁴ Börries Blanke, *Vom Bild zum Sinn: Das ikonische Zeichen zwischen Semiotik und analytischer Philosophie*. Wiesbaden 2003, p. 96-103 and ch. 3, esp. p. 177-186.

means of *extrinsic* categorization, more precisely by an inferential procedure that goes (bottom-up) from the potential sign or (top-down) from the context. To assume in all plausibility the presence of a communicative intention it is thus required to show that a production instance could have been assuming reasonably that a (contemporary) reception instance would have been able to identify – with minimal effort – the intended iconic type either due to a strong intrinsic relevance of the signal or due to contextual embedding.

‘How does a material text mean?’ – in view of the semiotic, sign-theoretical approach presented above, this question roughly may be reformulated as follows: How does semiosis of material para- and nonverbal characteristics take place on the production or reception side? More precisely: on the production side, how does an agent constitutively causing material properties of a book or text and using these as signs succeed in suggesting certain inferences (including perceiving something as a sign) to a recipient? Also, on the reception side, how does a recipient succeed in (a) comprehending signs as signs properly and (b) drawing (plausible) conclusions based on “systematic relations”?

An answer to these at first merely descriptive questions will not stop at a methodically controlled cognitive psychological³⁵ description – that is, persisting on the level of an introspective or empirical phenomenology of the act of reception – and analysis of actual practices of interpretation (say based on corresponding perception protocols and discursive reconstructions of inference). Provided, we³⁶ as textual scholars and critics do not want to just utter our personal, more or less free (and maybe random or anachronistic) associations and subjective evidence *ad libitum*, but connect interpretation hypotheses usually³⁷ with a claim to verification or general (maybe even universal) validity *and* try for an inter-subjective plausibility check of our statements by use of any argumentative backup, there is a multitude of *normative* aspects to be taken into account. This concerns primarily the objectives of knowledge of any one interpreting, as well as the methods and epistemological standards, which are applied in doing so. Generally, we endeavor to designate our stated interpretation hypotheses as being ‘appropriate’ (or at least: more ‘appropriate’), as being ‘justified’, ‘correct’ etc. We do this by bringing additional normative

³⁵ Thomas C. Daddesio, *On Minds and Symbols: The Relevance of Cognitive Science for Semiotics*. Berlin 1995, p. 104-109.

³⁶ For my use of ‘we’ at this point see Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*. New York 1989, p. 100: “When I use ‘we’ in this way, I am inviting you to examine whether or not you agree. If you do, then I am elaborating and exploring our common view, but if after some reflecting on the matter you find you do not agree, then I am traveling alone for a while.”

³⁷ This constraint is necessary because *some* types of literary ‘interpretation’ explicitly do not have an *explanatory* character (but aim at maximizing aesthetic value, for example) and therefore get by without corresponding epistemological obligations (i.e. reference to verity, validity claim, obligation to vindicate); see e.g. Stein Haugom Olsen, “Modes of Interpretation and Interpretative Constraints”. In: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 44/2004, p. 135-148; Peter Lamarque / Stein Haugom Olsen, “The Philosophy of Literature: Pleasure Restored”. In: Peter Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*. Oxford 2004, p. 195-214; Anders Pettersson, *The Concept of Literary Application: Readers Analogies from Text to Life*. New York 2012.

criteria for evaluation into effect. To put this more simply: While in the *context of discovery* even the wildest, most creative interpretation ideas are eligible, in the *context of justification* they have to be validated at their consistency with a set of normative premises (ensued in accordance with selection and gradation of additional contexts).

This is already made clear at the level of *perception* and *identification* of communicative signs: Not everything interpretable has necessarily been communicated.³⁸ If the decision on what is to be conceived as a sign and how it is to be interpreted is not to be put ad libitum of the individual interpreting. Instead, to be generated in an epistemically justified manner, it has to be made plausible that a historical agent on the production side meant something by chosen means of communication (or at least: could have meant), respectively had reasons to account probable (that is, with an eye toward assumed commonly shared *semiotic competences* or *semiotic knowledge*)³⁹ that a historical agent on the reception side would have understood these means as communicative signs.

One who makes perceptible sets of facts subject to semiotic inferences without having justified reasons to believe they could have *been intended as signs on the production side* (resp. could have been understood as such by a historical recipient) and labels the phenomena in question with terms like 'meaning', 'semantically relevant', 'meaningful', 'communicative', or 'sign', obviously does not seem to use said terminology according to the sprachregelung preferred by me.

However, it is important to notice that these *definitional* determinations are not necessarily tied to normative *hermeneutical* determinations – that is, regarding aims and methodology of interpretation acts – in favor of an *intentionalist* position.⁴⁰ Thus, it is quite possible to follow my proposed usage of said terminology and at the same time base one's own practices of interpretation on an explicitly anachronistic-subjective conception of hermeneutics. In my view, it is rather a matter of *choice*, and thus relative to our interests and the interests of the readers of our interpretations and editions, whether we want to focus on the causal agents involved on the production side and/or on historical or present readers. Admittedly, the finding *that* something is a sign requires the reference to *categorical* intentions of the sign author, but from

³⁸ Keller, *Theory of Signs*, p. 1 – There is a revealing analogy between the question under what conditions we are eligible to accept that a perceptible set of facts indeed is a communicative sign and the problem in intertextual theory to discover and make plausible an allusion; see William Irwin, "What is an Allusion?" In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59/2001, p. 287-297.

³⁹ Keller, *Theory of Signs*, p. x.

⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that people are strongly disposed to infer intentionality when understanding oral speech, written texts, artworks, and other human actions. Empirically our experience of human artifacts as semiotically significant is fundamentally tied to our assumptions of intentionality; see Raymond W. Gibbs, *Intentions in the Experience of Meaning*. Cambridge 1999 and accordingly Deborah Keleman / Susan Carey, "The Essence of Artifacts: Developing the Design Stance". In: Eric Margolis / Stephen Laurence (eds.): *Creations of the Mind: Theories of Artifacts and Their Representation*. Oxford 2007, p. 212-230.

this it does not follow that a critic needs to take an interest in the author's *communicative* ('semantic') intentions as well.

However, present practices of interpretation referring to material and media properties or the material text are characterized by a rather diffuse, unreflected language use and an obfuscation of related conceptions of hermeneutics.

Another little adjustment in this context: When taking a closer look at the question 'how does a text mean?', it might appear irritating that 'text' – if 'to mean' is to be understood as a verb which denotes a more or less consciously executed activity – seems to be conceived actually as an acting subject. Thus, in a specific reading, the assumption that a material text 'does mean something in some manner' has misleading implications. It might be that there is some version of the *mereological fallacy* in presence (or at least a *category mistake* sensu Ryle),⁴¹ namely attributing agency to an *object* of human actions itself and deducing from the personification of an inanimate object the license to blind out the *actual* human agents.⁴²

Within the scope of interpretation statements like this follow a logic of an avoidance strategy: Every time when one does not want to say clearly and precisely: '*the author* (or any other actor on the production side) meant', '*a competent contemporary or present reader* would have understood', 'this and that caught *my eye*' or '*I* understand this in that way', one says: '*the text* does mean, show, say, cause, opine, suggest' etc. Thereby one avoids specifying *precisely* what kind of statement one gives *on what exactly* and thus holds the *hermeneutical* status of the statement more or less elaborately in suspense. Above all, one avoids committing oneself to the claim to meet the communicative intentions of the agent on the production side with an interpretation.

By way of contrast, let's say: a material text cannot *act* communicatively but rather shows immanent and relational properties, *because of its human causation and usage*, by means of which it could function as a trigger for causal, associative, or rule-based conclusions. *The only ones acting here are human agents:*⁴³ *authors, type and book designers, composers, printers, editors, historical or present readers* – agents who pursue their aims of communication

⁴¹ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago 1949, ch. 1.3; I will not investigate any further whether the above described manner of speaking about texts is to be qualified as being *nonsensical* or *false*.

⁴² For a general critique of these sort of metaphors and anthropomorphic hypostatization see Maxwell R. Bennett / Peter M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience*. Oxford 2003, ch. 3.

⁴³ Despite of that, I would like to hint at programmatic attempts to conceptualize physical artifacts (or generally inanimate entities) as 'actants', 'social actors' or 'acting subjects' and thereby subvert an agential subject-object-dualism; see e.g. Tim Dant, *Materiality and Society*. Maidenhead, UK 2005, ch. 4: "Agency, affordance and actor-networks"; Carl Knappett / Lambros Malafouris (eds.), *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*. New York 2008; Wendy Griswold / Gemma Mangione / Terence E. McDonnell, "Objects, Words, and Bodies in Space: Bringing Materiality into Cultural Analysis". In: *Qualitative Sociology* 36,4/2013, p. 343-364. For some general remarks on the categorial framework for the description and ascription of agency see Peter M.S. Hacker, *Human Nature: The Categorial Framework*. Oxford 2007, ch. 5.

by suggesting or drawing *conclusions* based on systematic relations by using signs. Qua sign, material and media properties of objects are used as premises for interpretative inferences.

Summa summarum: From what has been said, ‘how does a material text mean?’ is an elliptical question in triple respects because (a) acting human agents are blinded out, (b) basic mechanisms of semiosis are not exposed and differentiated precisely enough as presuppositions of communicative practices and (c) it stays uncertain exactly what epistemological interest is being concealed by use of the concept ‘meaning’, or, whether the scene of ‘semantification’ is being located on the production or on the reception side.

Still, the modified version of the question has to be made more concrete with an analysis of actual interpretative practices in which materiality and material texts become object to semiotic inferences that on their part may generate further (and more complex) interpretative hypotheses according to certain conceptions of hermeneutics.

5. Prospects: Types of Interpretation and the Question of Standards

Perception and inferential interpretation of signs are obviously a somewhat risky business that often presupposes certain conceptual stipulations and is permanently threatened by accusations of subjectivity, whateverism, and anachronism. The weak specifics of physical properties of textual objects *considered as signs* along with the often weak or missing conventionality of their usage do not contribute to any change for the better. Even the discursive reconstruction of inferential procedures as applied by the interpreter causes considerable difficulties already.

Moreover, the validity claim of interpretative statements is restricted due to their embedding in certain conceptions of hermeneutics: Apparently there are several language games with their own specific rules that are all principally appropriate and legitimate at a time,⁴⁴ but may au fond be distinguished and further classified with regard to their focus on the production and reception side respectively and the intended level of historical consistency. Besides that, interpretative statements can aim at various objects of knowledge and therefore may provide answers to widely different questions – a fact that is easily missed when labeling all answers with the very same term ‘meaning’.

⁴⁴ Göran Hermerén, “Interpretation: Types and Criteria”. In: *Grazer philosophische Studien* 19/1983, p. 131-161; Jeffrey Stout, “The Relativity of Interpretation”. In: *The Monist* 69/1986, p. 103-118; Robert Stecker, “Relativism About Interpretation”. In: *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53/1995, p. 14-18; Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law*. Oxford 2003, ch. 8; Olsen, “Modes of Interpretation”; Staffan Carlshamre / Anders Pettersson (eds.), *Types of Interpretation in the Aesthetics Disciplines*. Montreal 2003; Tom Kindt / Tilmann Köppe, “Conceptions of Authorship and Authorial Intentions”. In: Gillis J. Dorleijn / Ralf Grüttemeier / Liesbeth Korthals Altes (eds.), *Authorship Revisited: Conceptions of Authorship Around 1900 and 2000*. Leuven 2010, p. 213-227, at p. 225-227.

It looks like the pivotal question of pertinent criteria for the evaluation of interpretative statements cannot be answered irrespectively of normative stipulations. Thus, it is evident that a hypothesis about the historical author's actual or presumable communicative intentions is said to be *epistemically justified* upon other terms than a claim about what a competent contemporary model reader might have understood respectively about what an actual present reader understands at a time without considering the historical context of a document's production. Accordingly, there are significant differences in respect of the strategies employed to enhance the plausibility of interpretative statements – given that the philological practices in question are about *interpretation* after all and not about the rhetorical staging of a personal sensuous-aesthetic experience or the maximization of 'semanticity' by means of anywise-inventive associations.

A question I have not answered within this essay is this: Are there – besides those peculiar to certain types of interpretation – at least minimum categorical standards for the evaluation of interpretative statements concerning the materiality and/or the material text? To give my readers something to think about – a final normative stimulus, so to speak – I would like to submit the following catalogue of adequacy or quality criteria:⁴⁵

(1) *Formal criteria*, i.e. linguistic structure and style: (a) avoidance of any personification or naturalization of the object of interpretation; (b) clarity and perspicuity of language; rhetorical economy, especially: avoidance of elliptical constructions, allusive or overly blanket verbalizations; (c) usage of well-established (semiotic) terminology and/or explication of pivotal concepts.

(2) *Contentual criteria*: (a) consistency and coherence of statements; (b) transparency of the argumentation, that is: general aims, research demands and (heuristically operative) premises as well as presuppositions regarding basal theories of 'meaning' and interpretation should be specified in no uncertain manner; (c) there should be a plain distinction between statements that are to be justified and statements that fulfill a justificatory function, where the latter should be already accepted or can be made plausible without any (viciously) circular reasoning; (d) simplicity: the nearest interpretative hypothesis – i.e. the one that is casually consistent with our miscellaneous background knowledge and to a lesser extend requires additional assumptions – is to be favored; (e) there should be specific empirical reference to the object of interpretation.

⁴⁵ For a brief survey see Willard Van Orman Quine/Joseph S. Ullian. *The Web of Belief*. New York 1978.

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