

## INTERPRETATION: THE INFINITE CONTROVERSY

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### ABSTRACT

*The following is an attempt to view and perceive the problematic act of interpretation, including its nature, its endless controversies, its horizons and its limitations. The paper is comprised of two sections. The first is an introduction covering the various aspects of the interpretive act. It also deals with the vast potentialities opened up by interpretation. The second section shows some of the limitations of interpretation, as seen in the different interpretations of Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Shakespeare's Hamlet. The approach used throughout is ambivalent in that it stresses the merits and drawbacks of interpretation in reading and understanding texts.*

**Keywords:** controversy, right interpretation, perspective

### INTRODUCTION

One of the salient topics much discussed in contemporary literary theory is the concept of 'interpretation'. At first glance, this may seem peculiar if we recall that the critical processes comprising the analysis, appreciation, and study of literature are more or less 'interpretive' acts, essentially concerned with the problem of perceiving latent meanings or dissecting textual strategies in pursuit of what is not stated. However, as the following pages will show, this axiomatic activity has been recently problematised in such a way that there is a dire need to sort things out and judge for ourselves

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the validity or invalidity of the arguments presented for the act of interpretation or against it.

Interpretation is, first and foremost, a broad term that covers a whole gamut of humanistic activities and disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, theology, law, history, anthropology, literature, art, and linguistics. Even the activities of politics and the media can be subsumed under the general rubric of interpretation. Indeed, the first questions raised by man regarding his existence and relation with an intimidating environment and lurking threats, his grasp of unappeased conflicts and apprehensions, are all manifestations of interpretation; no matter how rudimentary and incoherent they might be. There is no doubt that the outstanding instances of human thought revolve around this invariable interpretive axis. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1961) is a seminal work that seeks to ascertain 'plausible' meanings in a very murky area—that of dreams. His other influential work *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929) serves much the same function. In both, Freud capitalises on different techniques, including condensation, displacement, splitting, and wish fulfilment, in order to reach his goal of developing meaningful concepts. Not merely content with psychoanalysing actual cases, he also undertakes to explore artistic texts and figures. In another context, Freud analyses Da Vinci's famous and controversial painting 'The Mona Lisa'; in terms that reflect his remarkable interpretive skills, he pursues the subtle nuances of the work that evoke the infantile roots of Da Vinci's own sexual and artistic inhibitions (Hayman 1947: 45).

In the fields of sociology and history, interpretation is also seen as an active and activating force. Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1965) manipulates exegetes and interpretive devices to the fullest, in order to show the drastic impact of economic and social context on an individual's psychic and mental breakdown. As a whole, this is a process of interpreting economic factors and their roles in moulding individuals according to a priori, calculated formula of give and take, cause and effect. In his significant work, Richard Howard epitomises the interpretation of the relationship between individual and community and its wide-ranging impact: 'The subjectivity of the insane is both a call and abandonment of the world,' he writes, "is it not the world itself that what we should ask the secret of its enigmatic status?' (quoted by During 1992: 56) Such ontological arguments may give the false impression that interpretation is a recent, even 20th century phenomenon. In fact, however, interpretation is as old as mankind itself. We remember the classic methods and strategies employed in the *Dialogues* of Plato and Aristotle and their striking repetitions. The dialogic method, as Bakhtin reminds us, is

more effective in substantiating relevant points and bringing home the import of a given text. All religious books, whether part of Judaism, Christianity or Islam, devote a good amount of space to the role of interpretation and its significant role. Indeed, the niche Prophet Joseph enjoyed and his achievement of the Pharaoh's favour 'are due to his correct interpretations of the latter's dreams' (Lodge & Wood, 1988: 380). All of this is evidence that interpretation as an activity is common in all cultures and ages.

The fact of the matter is that interpretation is part and parcel of human disciplines and of man's conscious and unconscious wishes. Horoscopes and the ancient icons and engravings all attest to this inescapable fact. However, it has to be stated in advance that the present view of interpretation is exclusively confined to the critical domain and its problems. Hermeneutics, the study of the Scriptures or theology, is beyond the scope of the present study, although casual references pertinent to that field will be made where relevant.

What is interpretation, after all? Are we free to interpret things in whatever way we choose, capitalising on Derrida's assertion that meaning is essentially absent and that it is the reader or the recipient who creates or generates that meaning? Or are there some linguistic and semiotic indicators that can function as catalysts for the generation of different and plausible interpretations of the same event? What makes such hints or allusions capable of being interpreted in the proper or desired sense? Questions of this sort are not easy to answer with certainty and conclusiveness. The only thing we are sure of is that interpretation is basically a cogent critical tool that helps in elucidating texts and clarifying their meanings and nuances if it is applied with caution and subtlety. Moreover, interpretation can help in creating brilliant and surprising readings of the same text, provided that the individual undertaking this task is properly qualified for it. As T.S. Eliot puts it (1920: 22), 'The interpreter's task should be to elucidate the meanings of a text, and not to restrict to just one'. In suggesting such an idea, Eliot is a forerunner in affirming the multiplicity of meanings and the interpreter's role in deducing or generating meanings other than those intended or planned by the author. This is so because the humanities are not a matter of empirical knowledge—hence, the freedom to find a host of meanings at different levels of a text. In other words, interpretation is essentially a linguistic process that keeps track of the linguistic medium, construing it and charging it with as many conceptual significations as the text allows. As Christopher Norris argues,

The theory of interpretation is simply an account of how we, as competent language-users, habitually 'do things with words' and the ethics of mutual understanding, with its own distinct set of humanist and rationalist values squarely opposed to all forms of religious and pro-theological dogma. (McGuirk 1982: 87).

No matter how 'competent' we might be in dealing with language, whether in producing or perceiving it, it remains essentially elusive and inconclusive. It always has the potential to drive the individual to find out suggestions and nuances inherent in its very structure. Moreover, language is not merely a reflection of reality or of the world: it is a world of its own that has its own laws and codes (Barry 2002: 44).

One of the relevant issues in this regard is Jacques Derrida's metaphor about the inevitable resemblance between the clothes man wears to hide many parts of his body and the meanings of words that remain concealed and have to be unravelled and decoded by the interpreter. He is quoted as having said, man wears a good image of all that is hidden in his existence, including the linguistic meanings (Wise 2002: 124). Derrida's own judgment, as suggested here, shows that he sees language as inseparable from human understanding or misunderstanding. This is because the linguistic meaning 'emerges only provisionally, from an endless process of re-interpretation' (Desilet 2005: 1). Given this concept of the linguistic medium as mystifying, particularly in terms of "the instability of meaning" (Hughes 2002: 11), one perceives the validity of and justification for the process of interpretation and the role assigned to it. Hence the interpreter is free to erect his own 'Bible of interpretations', as Hirsch rightly puts it (1967: 127). As regards the process of practicing interpretation, one has to recall that the interpreter's objective usually centres on two basic points: 'the author criticism and reader criticism' (Hogan 2006: 101). These are two constituents of the creative process whose relation to each other is organic and reciprocal.

Interpretation, then, is fully steeped in the close study of the text and the theory of reading and its endless controversies. The reason is clear enough: when the interpreter embarks on his enterprise, he inevitably faces the problematics of the text, the mental processes taking place in his mind, and the role of memory in contrasting the chosen text with others and properly prioritising it. George Poulet, in his *Criticism and the Experience of Interiority* (1966), identifies the imperceptible changes taking place in the reader's consciousness when he encounters the text:

When I read, I mentally pronounce an I, and yet the I that I pronounce is not myself. "Je est un autre", said Rimbaud. Another I, who has replaced my own

and who will continue to do so as long as I read. Reading is not just that: a way of giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters and shelters them (Selden 1988: 201).

Accordingly, the discerning reader or critic undertaking the task of interpreting texts has to extract those 'alien' elements and put them in a new matrix. In another relevant context, there is the argument for considering the interpreter's task as having something to do with 'refiguring the type' (Bird 2004: 17). This is a re-working of the paradigm that creates a more comprehensive image of a given text corresponding to the author's perceptions as well as to those of the reader. Interpretation cannot survive without a deep understanding of the writing process, its strategies, and sign-systems because the interpreter's act consists of decoding these signs in order to ascertain or generate the desired or most convincing and plausible interpretation. The interpreter draws partly on his knowledge of different critical schools and methods, including new criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism and semiotics, as well as from a great interest in the linguistic unit and its indeterminate and unpredictable meanings or suggestions. Knowing or ascertaining the etymological aspect of the linguistic unit, its structural constituents, its historical context and its ceaseless developments in terms of meaning and connotations is a prerequisite for competent and convincing interpretation. Indeed, the problem of meaning or, if you will, 'the meaning of meaning' is itself a controversial issue that has occupied a vast space in the arguments of critics, scholars, historians and even creative writers. For instance, one of the sayings of the French poet Paul Valery (1871–1945) is that there is no real meaning in a certain text (Eco 1979: 79). Also, the French arch-modernist Gustave Flaubert (1821–1888) declares that what is ostensibly meaningless entails a further meaning surpassing all that is meaningful (Barthes 1968: 7). However, in their book with the same title, critics Ogden and Richards have sought to develop a sort of compromise between the intentions of the producer (speaker or author) and those of the customer (recipient or auditor),

Is the meaning of a sentence that which is in the mind of the speaker at the moment of utterance or that which is in the mind of listener at the moment of audition? Never, I think. Certainly not that which is in the mind of the listener, for he may utterly misconstrue the speaker's purpose. (Ogden & Richards 1923: 193)

At any rate, the absence or inconclusiveness of meaning, or at least a certain scepticism about its presence, is in fact a point on which a host of

critics and researchers almost unanimously agree. An entire critical trend in contemporary literary theory (post-structuralism or deconstruction) locates its overriding principle in the problematics of meaning, the dwindling role of the author in the text and the new dawn rising before the reader. All of these are at work in the rigorous activity of interpretation and the influential task it is undertaking at this time. Deconstruction as theorised and practiced by its advocates and apologists emphasises as a starting-point of the task of dismantling Western logo-centric and Aristotelian assumptions. In their place, it aims to erect its scepticism about the certainty of meaning or the existence of any clear-cut, specific denotations. What is of primary interest here is the ignoble, tacit, marginalised and banned. The French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida (1930–2005) delimits the characteristics of the writing game and thereby establishes the interpretive space and its vast potentiality. He de-historicises the writing process and strips it of anything outside its intrinsic and formal aspects,

1. A written sign can be repeated in the absence not only of the subject who emitted it in a specific context but also of a specific addressee.
2. The written sign can break with its real context and be read in a different context regardless of what its writer intended.
3. The written sign is subject to 'spacing' (*espacement*) in two senses: first, it is separated from other signs in a particular chain; secondly, it is separated from 'present reference' (that is, it can refer to something not actually present in it. (Selden 1988: 174)

Obviously, Derrida dismisses here any extra-textual and linguistic elements, including the producer of the text. Like Roland Barthes in his famous declaration of the demise of the author ('Death of the Author'), Derrida raises similar doubts about any role assigned to the author after the publication of his text. In the stage following publication, there is an unprecedented appropriation of the text and its potential meanings by the reader or interpreter—hence, the vast freedom of the interpreter to exercise 'free play' in the given text in the absence of its author, including the ability to coin new logisms and connotations as much as the text permits. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), a key figure in reception theory and interpretation, makes arguments similar to those of Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), Michel Foucault (1926–1984) and Jacques Derrida. In Gadamer's view, writing involves self-alienation. Hence, the process of understanding and interpretation moves entirely in the linguistic orbit

through the act of scrutinising the sign and finding or producing its multiple nuances and connotations. As he puts it, 'because the meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down, this transformation is the real hermeneutic task. The meaning of what has been said is to be stated a new, simply on the basis of the words passed on by means of the written signs' (Newton 1988: 51). Thus, all the postulates and findings of linguists are put at the service of the interpreter and his painstaking (or hair-splitting) task. The linguistic tool, then, is the sole prerogative of both creative writer and interpreter. As William Gas states, the novelist, if he is any good, will keep imprisoned in his language; there is literally nothing beyond (Graff 1979: 60). Susanne Langer stresses the self-centredness of the literary point of reference in that the linguistic sign does not refer to anything physical or actual outside itself,

Poets deal with the language of their poets, not with life, with 'virtual life', which is much an illusion as the space created in a painting. Poetry is never a statement about historical facts...Literary events are made, not reported. (Langer 1953: 88)

The overriding emphasis on the linguistic medium can often be exaggerated and developed to such extremes that the actual meaning becomes subject to distortion and nullification. The critic Graff argues to this effect when he states that meaning is non-existent, and then language itself becomes question-begging. Since meaning arises wholly from the play of differences within an artificial sign system, it follows that meanings are arbitrary and that everything we say is arbitrary and that everything we say in language is a fiction (Graff 1979: 60). Saussure has already shown the arbitrary relation between the signifier (sign) and the signified (concept), but this useful differentiation has been overused such that the internal meaning of the sign has fully vanished or hopelessly blurred. In a situation like this, the task of interpretation becomes more demanding and challenging but also more rewarding. Thus, the freedom that the interpreter enjoys in stripping the sign of a fixed and final meaning requires that he depend on his common sense and experience in figuring out the relevant nuances and thus shades of meaning a text may hold (or is made to hold).

Before embarking on these speculations about the thorny problem of interpretation, it is necessary to refer to the psychological and intellectual status of the critic undertaking this interpretive project, given the vital role it plays in colouring and determining his perspective on the texts in question. One of the relevant statements in this regard is what the critic Juhl notes: The meaning of a literary work is said to be defined in part by the historical

situation of the critic (Juhl 1979: 4). The social and historical circumstances surrounding the critic or interpreter have a decisive impact on his eventual judgments and appraisals of a particular text. In other words, if the objective factors are relevant and critical in determining the final and most cogent interpretation, the subjective ones are no less useful to the critic's specific interpretations and the perspective adopted in dealing with those texts. As a discerning reader, the interpreter or critic analyses the text and his (the interpreter's) own experiences as an individual living in a particular time and space. Consequently, this factor plays a significant role in shaping his interpretations and insights. Edward Said, for instance, would not have analysed and judged texts the way he did if he had not experienced the terrible repercussions of exile in an unfavourable environment. The same holds true for Homi Bhabha's arguments on and interpretations of Western discourse. The type of interpretation offered by Aurbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1953) is partly explained by the circumstances that accompanied the composition of that influential treatise.

The other point worth mentioning here is the essentially relativistic nature of interpretation. We may be privy to a huge number of interpretations of the same literary text or phenomenon, and it is difficult to prioritise any one in particular, as each has its own *raison d'être*. Hirsch puts the matter this way:

When someone's meaning is incomplete or false, we are able to say that it is inadequate to its subject matter only if we have, or believe that we have, a more complete and true conception of the subject matter than the author. But suppose we, in turn, express our superior conception of the subject matter and are judged by a further critic who believes that he has still truer or broader than our own. He in turn will say that our meaning is inadequate, and he will do so as the basis of a still different conception of the interpretation. Now, in each case, the judgment of the two critics might be right. (Hirsch 1967: 59)

That interpretation is a matter of the relative rather than the absolute or conclusive, as is stressed by many critics, particularly the advocates of the deconstructive inclination. J. Hillis Miller (b.1928), in addressing Nietzsche's challenge regarding 'the concept of rightness' in interpretation, even repeats Derrida's doctrine about the multiplicity of meanings when he states that the same text authorises innumerable interpretations: there is no correct interpretation (Lodge & Wood 1988: 244).



Two factors interfere and become manifest in the interpretive process that eventually show that interpretation is, in the final analysis, a matter of subjectivity and personal judgment. Stanley Fish (b.1938), a leading figure in reception theory, identifies a phenomenon that is very indicative of the nature and particularity of interpretation: the same reader will perform differently when reading two different texts, and different readers will perform similarly when reading 'the same text'. Fish's conclusion is cogent enough: 'Both the stability of interpretation among readers and the variety of interpretation in the career of a single reader would seem to argue that the existence of something independent of and prior to interpretive acts, something which produces them' (Ibid.: 301–302).

The interpretive process has its own foundations and criteria in performing this activity. Undoubtedly, interpretation—for all its clashing claims and views, as already pointed out—is not an arbitrary and haphazard domain. The plausibility or verisimilitude of a particular interpretation and the reasons for ruling out other adjacent interpretations are relative matters but have their own epistemological foundations, so that they can have their own validity that is to be accepted by the reader. Once again, Juhl's statement is helpful here. He clarifies this point in identifying the foundation for the right or most plausible interpretation, saying that 'the plausible or admissible interpretation of a literary work must satisfy linguistic constraints, certain requirements of textual coherence and general rules as conventions of literary interpretations' (Ibid.: 208). As regards the evidence that the interpreter makes use of in his task, it could be the appeal of the text or that of certain key phrases, situations or events.

All of these choices have to conform to the interpreter's or reader's preconceived ideas of what a particular literary or non-literary text should be. In other words, the reading of a certain text is not an innocent or amateurish activity. Rather, it is the outcome of a particular aesthetic and ideological theory that the interpreter adopts before embarking on this task. The act starts when the interpreter finds that a particular metaphor recurs in more than one situation and sees that it is necessary to explain how that particular metaphor is imbued with particular connotations and suggestions. Some characters or situations hold the alluring potential for the interpreter to infer a multitude of meanings from them. Likewise, the more open, realistic texts do not have much to offer the interpreter because they are self-evident in their structural and linguistic framework.

The other principle of coherent and persuasive interpretation is a focus on the inner logic of the text, irrespective of the author's professed intentions. The autonomy of the literary signal and its possible meanings could be taken as the only criterion the interpreter capitalises on in dealing

with the literary text. In this regard, Robert Scholes's arguments are illuminating. He finds that interpretive skills involve tacit and intuitive procedures that 'have proved highly resistant to systematisation and hence difficult to transmission in an indirect or formal way' (Scholes 1982: 1–2). This is another way of saying that the individual talent of the interpreter is not only laudable, but also necessary if one hopes to fulfil the desired objectives of the interpretive process.

Success, brilliance and persuasiveness are elements with which not every interpreter is endowed. Although interpretation draws upon linguistic analysis, skill and sleight of hand, there is a further condition to be met before one reaches the desired interpretation. Stanley Fish, in his 'Interpreting the Variorum', suggests that 'the ability to interpret is not required; it is constitutive of being human' (Con Davis 1989: 722). In other words, the interpreter's skill basically exists at birth and is no less significant than the creative writer's. However, this natural faculty can be sharpened and cultivated through continuous study and practice. For instance, familiarity with the etymology of words and their changeable meanings can help the interpreter to deduce tacit or intended suggestions. The term "my love", for instance, when used between men in the Elizabethan era, had connotations that were very different from those invoked in contemporary usage of the phrase. This distinction creates a need to remain vigilant and not to blur the two different time-periods and their contexts or ignore the subsequently distinct connotations of those different uses.

All types of critical studies have proliferated in the last fifty years or so. It is striking to note that figurative language is not merely found in creative literature now. Rather, its agent of explanation (criticism) has thrived on the use of such techniques. Accordingly, we come across terms that are originally found in creative literature, such as 'the rustle of language' (Barthes 1986: 1), semiotics, tying or untying the text, taming the text, encoding or decoding, or even 'the rape of the text' (Graff 1979: 30). A discourse of this sort betrays a desire on the part of critics to make criticism (and by extension, interpretation) a self-dependent, autotelic activity. Apart from the distinct terminology it makes use of in order to cultivate a strong sense of plausibility, interpretation is generally to be differentiated from understanding. Interpretation is a step ahead, farther than understanding, although it hinges on understanding as an indispensable element of itself. It is logical to infer that understanding is the starting-point for any fruitful interpretation. Hirsch uses another instance of figurative language to show the difference between the two: 'Understanding is silent while interpretation is garrulous' (1967: 135). I would add that understanding is a constant element for all types of readers, while interpretation represents the variable

whose value is ascertained in accordance with the angle used by the interpreter and his skill and talent in probing texts and their underlying implications. Understanding is less demanding and problematic than interpretation. Interpretation, then, is a special field that does not tolerate amateurish interests or incompetent persons. Interpretation, in the words of Paul Ricoeur, is 'a particular case of understanding. It is the understanding applied to the written expressions of life...interpretation only appears as the one province within the empire of comprehension and understanding' (Ricoeur 1976: 74). Understanding and comprehension are only preliminary steps in the process of successful interpretation. In fact, only the experts and connoisseurs who have mastered the rules and requirements of interpretive acts are entitled and expected to provide their own analyses and formulations of texts. Thus linguistic competence, a vast knowledge of humanities and a subtle intuitive power are some of the prerequisites for successful and weighty interpretation.

The relation of the present text to its predecessors and the reciprocal effects of each on the other are of prime importance here in reaching the best possible interpretation. T.S. Eliot writes about this issue in his 'Tradition and Individual Talent' (1920), in which he stresses the inextricability of the present from the past and of the personal from the impersonal. This insightful judgment is helpful for the interpreter because he is expected to view the new text from different perspectives, including its relation to earlier texts in his tradition or to its worldwide contexts. Jaus calls this relation 'the horizon of expectations' in that the new text is arranged parallel to or in contrast with those already in existence. In this way, similarities, differences, borrowings, and innovations can be foregrounded and revealed. The literary text, in Jaus's view, 'awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations from the middle and end' (Selden 1988: 207). The final judgment regarding any given text derives its impact from 'the successive unfolding of the potential for meaning in the stages of its historical reception' (Ibid.: 211).

If one leaves aside the dialectic of the past and present and its effect on the nature of literary texts, the other issue related to interpretation becomes the question of what is the best procedure for or method of eliciting tacit levels of meaning. If the objective datum or 'literal meaning does not pose a problem for the interpreter, the latent or hidden ones do' (Schauber 1986: 10). Indeed, these meanings arouse much dispute and discontent. The original text is the decisive factor or arbiter in determining the strategy that the interpreter must adopt in dealing with that text. What should be kept in mind, however, is that interpretation must stem from the goodwill of the

interpreter and his readiness to see himself as a collaborator, not a self-imposed censurer or detractor. Any attempt to interpret a particular text according to a ready-made, opinionated, or preconceived set of rules alien to the nature of that text is doomed to failure. To seek another dimension in a text that is watertight in the way of the realistic ones seems obtrusive and forced: an act of violence and encroachment on the artistic integrity of the text. Conversely, the modernist texts in art and literature require a specific and well-wrought mode of interpretation that takes into account their subtle particularity and linguistic concision. In this context, it is necessary to recall Eco's useful differentiation between 'closed' and 'open' texts: The former are texts that expect clear-cut and invariable interpretations, while the latter are texts like Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), which is meant to provide grounds for all types of interpretation. The open ones are known for their potential to be interpreted on more than one level of signification, provided the reader is sufficiently competent to do so (Eco 1979: 79). In other words, interpretation as viewed by those raising its banner appears to be an act of freedom, an attempt that aims—to use Macherey's phrase—'to enlarge the myopic vision of criticism' (Macherey 1978: 174). Indeed, the best, most ingenious interpretations can produce weighty and impressive texts that can be read and enjoyed as autonomous entities provided that they do not go too far in their exegeses and shun reductive strategies in their handling of interpretive materials.

## II

The above-mentioned arguments might give the false impression that the concept of interpretation is unanimously accepted. In fact, the opposite is true. There has been a great deal of distrust and fear of interpretation's reductive and allegedly subversive effects on the text—and to a less extent, the reader. So-called humanist thinkers and critics always look askance at this activity, doubting its practices and intentions. In many cases, these misgivings and scruples emerge as justified; interpretation does have its undermining effects on the process of understanding, which it (interpretation) is meant to heighten and intensify. Needless to say, Susan Sontag's 'Against Interpretation' (1967) is an exemplary text here. The whole article is a ruthless debunking of the interpretive act—which, in her view, does much harm and violence to the texts being interpreted. In her argument, the first misstep is the blurring of boundaries between art and other disciplines, assimilating 'Art into Thought, or, worse still, Art into Culture' (Lodge 1974: 660). What is of primary interest for Sontag is artistic integrity and autonomy, which will be lost forever once the act of

interpretation is practiced 'much less to squeeze content of the work that is already there...In a place of a hermeneutics, we need an erotics of art!' (Ibid.: 660). Sontag refuses the relegation of form to the simple level of "accessory" and suggests that only "content" is necessary (Ibid.: 633). The task of interpretation is really one of translation: 'The interpreter says, look, don't you see that X is really—or really means—A? That Y is really B?' (Ibid.: 654) After many examples of the indiscriminate cases of interpretation and its excesses, Sontag prepares us for her shocking verdict, which is simply that interpretation is 'a means of revising, transvaluing, of escaping the dead past. In the cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling' (Ibid.: 655).

Sontag is, of course, an exception in arguing vehemently 'against' anything transgressing the artistic integrity and the indivisible unity of form and content. However, there have been other creative writers and critics who have been no less adamant in their condemnation of the interpretive process and its ostensibly subversive role in art and literature. The name of the Russian writer Tolstoy figures largely here; he argues along similar lines in his renowned *What is Art*. With an argument that foreshadows the views of the so-called New Critics, he asserts that interpretation is virtually needless because the artistic text is actually a self-contained totality that never permits the touch of the interpreter's scalpel of dissection and artificial fragmentation, as it were:

Critics explain, what do they explain? An artist, if he is a true artist, has in his work conveyed to others the feeling he has explained: what is there to explain? If the work is good as art, the feeling expressed by the artist, regardless of whether the work is moral, or immoral...all interpretation is superfluous...Artistic works can not be interpreted. (Tolstoy 1945: 94)

The terrible experience of Beethoven's deafness is evidence used by Tolstoy to indict the interpreters who have defended the poor musician, even in the mess he has made in conveying his music (Ibid.: 97). All of this is indicative of the unreliability and unpredictability of interpretation as conceived of by the Russian novelist and cultural critic.

Tolstoy has his own disciples and followers who will pursue his train of thought in seeing the whole interpretive enterprise as fundamentally redundant and generally suspect. Wayne Booth (1921–2005), in his 'Freedom of Interpretation', argues in parallel terms that 'As the general domain of pure freedom thus becomes good per se, so long as it maintains its autonomy. A poem should not mean but be. To judge what it means or does is a form of tyranny' (Mitchell 1982: 54). One of the leading

deconstructionists, Harold Bloom (b.1930), warns us that 'poems do not have meaning at all,' and that 'the meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but another poem, a poem not itself' (Culler 1981: 178). The New Critics have already shown the fallacy or heresy of paraphrase (analysis and interpretation); such an act could violate, in their view, the unity and integrity of the poetic text and its well-wrought structure.

Another charge directed against interpretation and its implications or misuses is ideological in nature. Seen from the wide perspective of criticism in its entirety, interpretation can be considered a debilitating activity that inflicts significant harm on the text rather than doing it a service. As Gerald Graff puts it,

Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler choose representative names here, suggesting that the entire artistic tradition in the West has been exposed to a kind of hypercritical imperialism, akin to the aggression and lust for conquest of the bourgeois. The analytic and interpretive criticism neutralize and domesticate its perpetually liberating energies. (Ibid.: 31)

Here, the critical argument tends to place interpretation within the hegemony of politics or in a position of undoing or resisting. Another critic, Hayden White, in his 'The Politics of Interpretation', finds that disinterested interpretation is virtually impossible: 'The disinterested and 'pure' interpretation', the enquiry into anything whatsoever unthinkable as an ideal without the presupposition of the kind of activity which politics resents' (Mitchell 1982: 120). Politics and ideology, as a matter of fact, do play a vital role in boosting or subverting all types of interpretation in accordance with the perspective adopted. In contrast to the formalists, structuralists, and post-structuralists, the advocates of politics in criticism (especially the Marxists) see the text differently. If the reader-response theorists find that the full meaning cannot be fully attained without the fruitful collaboration of the reader, Pierre Macherey sees the matter differently. He is of the opinion that whatever the reader or interpreter does, his job remains that of 'repetition [in which] they say more by saying less'—that 'the interpreter accomplishes his liberating violence' (1978: 76). In other words, Macherey takes the monosemic principle for granted in that the original authorial meaning is a factor to be taken into account in judging the final message. In other words, he does not believe in the text's potential to generate new concepts and meanings. In this type of argument, the author seems to be the master of the situation and the sole controller of its meaning. In the same vein lies the argument of Frederic Jameson's 'the Political Unconsciousness'. As a Marxist, Jameson feels that all interpretive methods are geared toward

'one interpretive code or 'master code' according to which the text is rewritten' (McGuirk 1994: 99). Indeed, Jameson repeats Tolstoy's argument verbatim in his insistence on the invalidity of interpretation and its dubious intentions:

All thinking about interpretation must sink itself into strangeness, the unnaturalness of the hermeneutic situation; or, to put it another way, every individual interpretation must include an interpretation of its own existence, must show its own credentials and justify itself: Every commentary must be at the same time a meta-commentary. (Ibid.: 202)

If we piece together the pro and con arguments about interpretation, it becomes evident that the issue has reached such a degree of complication and polarisation that it is very hard to reach any sort of compromise or reconciliation. As a matter of fact, the afore-mentioned arguments show that the ordinary activity of interpretation, which any individual may mentally perform while exposed to the act of reading, is difficult to settle or reach. It is this rigmarole about a very ordinary or even a natural activity that renders Northrop Frye impatient; he calls for an end to all such views, suggesting that 'the critical theory has elapsed into a confused and claustrophobic battle of methodologies where as in Fortinbras's campaign in *Hamlet*, the ground fought for is hardly big enough to hold the contending armies' (Harris 1988: 1).

All of what has hitherto been said about the excesses and loopholes of interpretation may sound a bit biased or unnecessarily exaggerated. However, it is not. Any passing look at critical texts, whether in art, history, philosophy, anthropology or epistemology, will attest to the validity of many of the views raised against interpretation or at least will acknowledge its wild and unrestrained extravagance. The reason is simple enough. The interpretive paradigm that is expected or supposed to be highlighting, foregrounding, disambiguating and illuminating new horizons and vistas in literary and intellectual texts gives way to counter-interpretations that, in turn, generate further interpretations ad infinitum. Even in ordinary conversation some statements are put in such equivocal terms that the final meaning becomes too difficult to pinpoint. I think Trilling's comment on Frost's poetry and Frost the man is highly relevant here and shows the extent of the mystification that language can entail. Lionel Trilling gave an after-dinner address in which he specified some poems that he admired. This led him to call Frost 'a terrifying poet who depicted a terrifying universe' (Johnson 1983: 184). In that awkward situation, Frost failed to interpret the message behind those words: He was not sure whether he had been praised

or attacked. Also, many of his friends were 'outraged (as they took the speech to mean the second) and all that caused a furor' (Ibid.: 184). The right interpretation in a situation like this might lead to self-satisfaction or discontent, depending on how the same words are viewed and judged.

One of the serious limitations of interpretation is that the desire of the interpreter to find as many interpretations as possible may entice the individual undertaking this act to interpolate or make up certain points that may not be there or at least may not have been intended by the author. Indeed, some of these interpretations are often imposed on the text being interpreted simply because of the interpreter's own desire to show his skill or ideological and intellectual biases. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) is one of those texts in which a certain consensus cannot be easily reached. The novel and its writer have been criticised as lacking the convincingness of his other novels: 'Conrad was helpless against his own compulsions and he wrote as a generalist', as Marianna Torgovnick asserts (Nadelhaft 1991: 31). Conversely, Conrad's novel appears to be the pioneer of everything suggesting avant-garde and contemporary trends in criticism and art. Indeed, the list of the views and schools of art and literary theory supposedly suggested by Conrad's novel is too long to believe and accept as reasonable and plausible. If we accept all these as legitimate, Conrad begins to resemble a critic writing a critical treatise rather than a novelist writing a work of fiction. The biographical information about Conrad shows that the man did not contribute to the abstract theories in which contemporary literary theory is fully steeped. Here is the interpretation of Marlowe's and Kurtz's experiences in the Congo,

The narrative dexterously embodies literary theories which were to be formulated: defamiliarization, deconstruction, delayed decoding, covert plotting...(It) can be related to a diversity of traditions, generic and technical, including, political satire, protest literature, traveler's tale, psychological odyssey, symbolic novel, mediated autobiography. (Watts 1990: xv)

This example of interpretation shows how the text is subjected to all types of reading and obtrusive discourse, including those that the author never contemplated. Any common-sensical view of Conrad's novel is bound to rule out most of this as the too-inflated and too-enforced exegesis of a sea novel about colonialism and cultural and racial conflicts.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is another instance of the contrasting views that interpretation can eventually lead to. There is a wide variety of surprising judgments of the play and its writer, some of which are implausible. Curiously, the arguments turn out to be in defence of or to reject older



interpretations that do not appeal to the newer interpreter. It seems that the last thing interpreters can think of is the common reader who receives the brunt of all these clever and dazzling views. The result is the inevitable loss of the original, spontaneous signification of the text as understood by its first theatre-goers or the author. If Bradley (1904: 93) stresses the morality of the text—'the violent shock of the hero's moral being'—the romantic poet and critic Coleridge, finds in the hero an alter-ego: 'I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so' (Bate 1972: 18). C.S. Lewis (1942: 149) sees the predominance of lyrical and linguistic aspects at the expense of the dramatic ones, which is not to the play's favour. The same holds true for T.S. Eliot's seminal assessment of the play as an artistic failure; it lacks, in Eliot's view, 'the objective correlative'. 'That is why Shakespeare has left superfluous and inconsistent scenes' (Eliot 1996: 13), he suggests. Ernest Jones, a loyal disciple of the Freudian school, sees in Hamlet the incarnation of the Oedipus complex, 'a mini Claudius who is strongly attached to his mother' (Jones 1949: 86). Worse still, Hamlet is relegated to the position of a female or effeminate individual 'who longs for the male closeness as seen in the idealisation of his father and Horatio' (Leverenz 1992: 135). Paradoxically, the biographical interpretation of the play and its author is not provided by a critical account; rather the account is a creative text this time. It is James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), where Joyce's mouthpiece, Stephen Dedalus, discusses the play from a biographical angle. His argument, albeit one that inspires questions, is worth quoting in some detail:

Shakespeare is to be identified with the ghost of the murdered king...as actor, he himself played...Ann Hathaway was eight years older than William Shakespeare, and she took the initiative...after three years of domesticity, he left to seek his fortune in the capital. While he was away, over himself. (Budgeon 1972: 111)

In contrast, John Dover Wilson finds that there should be a certain distance between the dramatic persona and the actual events: 'There is no Hamlet; he is a really dramatic persona and should not be dealt with in terms of modern psychology' (1935: 218). Such a laudable appraisal of the character and its creator is rare, given the sizeable number of interpretations in which the writer and his persona have become exchangeable.

From a New-Historicist viewpoint, *Hamlet* appears to be muddled and to lack coherence. The play appears to be 'a contradictory, transient text, and one not yet fully assimilated into the discursive order which has claimed it: the promise of essential subjectivity remains unfulfilled' (Barker 1992: 164). The fact of the matter is that it is next to impossible to cover all

interpretations of the play, its hero, and its author: the writings of patriotists, linguists, existentialists, Marxists, nihilists, romantics, philosophers, feminists, historians, art directors, aestheticians, deconstructionists, sociologists, formalists, advocates of the archetypal school of criticism, etc. However, the question that must be posed here is which of these interpretations is the right one, and which has the plausibility to be the conclusive. The maze of interpretations only serves to further complicate an already complicated issue. The answer to this question becomes the more demanding, tantalising and challenging if we recall the ostensible tone of plausibility and persuasiveness in which these interpretations are put. The only thing of which one can be fairly certain is that Shakespeare could not have thought of all these possibilities when writing this or dreamt that his play could arouse all such heated and inexhaustible controversy. Had he thought in the same manner as his interpreters think or as they have sought to use to convince us, he would probably have spent all his life revising, deleting and expanding his play in the way Walt Whitman did with his *Leaves of Grass*. It is helpful here to recall Nietzsche's comment that the contradiction attributed to the author is not found often in the author's book but in the reader's mind (Nietzsche 2001: 19). Contemporary theorists in criticism and semiotics have shown that over-interpretation can become a limiting (if not harmful) pursuit. This is what Jonathan Culler warns us about in his insightful analogy:

One might imagine overinterpretation to be like overeating: there is proper eating or interpreting, but some people do not stop when they should. They go on eating or interpreting in excess, with bad results. (Culler 2007: 168)

## CONCLUSION

In short, the present study has hopefully shown some manifestations of the problematic nature of interpretation in contemporary literary theory. Interpretation is the repository of polar opposite and otherwise incompatible views in favour of or against particular judgments or readings (or even mis-readings). The attitude displayed over the course of the present study has been ambivalent: It gives an account of the phenomenon in question, its principles, its justifications and arguments against it. It is obvious that criticism, once stripped of the ingenious and weighty contributions of interpretation, will be drastically inadequate and impotent. Indeed, interpretation, despite what has already been stated about its negative repercussions, remains an indispensable and invaluable tool for judging a

text's richness and multi-levelled potentiality. As such, it deservedly engages the great space in literary theory, whether in terms of agreement or detraction, adoption or castigation. In all these interpretation remains a tempting device for exercising one's skill, wit and intelligence to see what the text has in store for us—if it is a truly great or valuable one.

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