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The Plurality of Interpretation in Questions, Suggestions and Classifications

This book contains some of the papers given at the conference entitled “The Plurality of Interpretation” held at the University of Reims, France, in March 2006. The idea behind the conference was rather selfish. We asked the participants to come up with solutions to the problems we ask ourselves over here in Reims in the English department. These problems have obviously to do with teaching and research. In other words, we asked the participants if they thought they could help us with the questions we are daily confronted with in our job. We added that we would be extremely grateful with anything they might propose, be it practical tips or abstract theories. Any kind of suggestion was indeed welcome.

Maybe it could be useful for our readers to start with a brief list of the problems we regularly encounter. We study and teach literature written in English. Problem # 1 is specific to French universities. Our English speaking colleagues and their students don’t have it. We deal with a literature originating from elsewhere — from another planet as it were. Distance is thus our first problem as we have to interpret texts coming from the USA, Britain, Ireland, Australia, Africa, India, etc. The list is very long. Clearly that literature was not written for us. What are we supposed to do to bridge that gap?

If space is our first problem, time is Problem # 2. That is a problem we all have, even students and their professors in English-speaking countries. We no longer live in the 16th or

the 19th centuries. There is here another type of gap to be bridged.

We are not yet over with our problems. I am not sure that, say, a novel written this year in 2006 would not suffer from some sort of problem of distance. All writers are different. All human beings are different. Generally we don't personally know the writers who wrote the books we are studying. Even if by pure chance we were friends with one of them, we wouldn't probably know what was important in his or her mind when the book was being conceived. Maybe the writer didn't even know himself or herself. That is our Problem # 3. From what precedes, it should now become quite clear that the main question the conference addresses is: what do we do with a text?

Now that these three key problems have been listed, I think we should now turn to a different kind of difficulty. That is a very practical difficulty we've all met. When we have to teach a book or write a paper, very often we try to read what has been written about that book. We've probably all had the same experience. Let us suppose that we are researching a novel by Faulkner, say *The Sound and the Fury*. We find a journal article that says that this particular detail on page 21 means this or that. We will call this interpretation A. My problem is that when I read the novel I assumed that the very same detail meant B, not A. It goes without saying that usually we very quickly discover a second, then a third article that say that the detail means C or D, etc. Here again, our problem is the same: What are we supposed to do? Am I wrong? Are the authors of these papers wrong? How do I know I am right or wrong?

Can I offer a suggestion? I know it is stupid, but it is enlightening all the same... If today I was to write a new book about *The Sound and the Fury*, I should perhaps limit myself to making a list of details from the novel and mention for each of them all the things that they possibly mean: A, B, C, D, etc.

The idea is stupid, as it is impossible to list all the details contained in a book. But that could be our starting point: a given detail can receive several interpretations. (I will just mention an additional problem. Usually scholarly books and articles build their interpretations only on a few carefully selected details. It is sometimes difficult not to suspect their authors to have read the book in a very superficial way. They ignore or do not see so many essential elements, which may be frustrating as, if the writer included those details in his book, they must indeed be important).

There is another way of phrasing this problem. Many critical studies very often give the unmistakable impression that their authors knew what the text meant before they started reading it. One can find this attitude somewhat shocking, especially if you believe that literature should be an adventure. Just like our life, which some of us look upon as a narrative not yet written... That is in fact a problem of hermeneutics. If we simplify a little, we could say that there are two kinds of hermeneutics. The old one was the one practised in medieval universities. In those days, what it meant to read a text was to find in it some sort of preestablished meaning, in other words some sort of Truth (with a capital T). Each and every book was supposed to repeat some other book, preferably the Book (with a capital B). As we saw, a lot of our colleagues consciously or not still follow that type of approach. On the other hand, many of our contemporaries seem to prefer another sort of hermeneutics. The question we'd like to ask is whether a text says something new, which brings us back to the central question of this conference. We could rephrase it in the following way: how can we say something new about a text? And if we discover new readings, what should we do with them?

Our problem is that of choice. Why is it that a detail can receive several different interpretations? We all remember that famous pronouncement by French psychoanalyst Jacques

Lacan, “There is no metalanguage,” which can be construed as meaning that there is no point of view above the others, that is that there is no Truth that would be situated outside reality (in the Garden of Eden?) We all know that if we were to discover such a central point of view, it would but be an illusion. Understanding this may perhaps help us to come up with a practical pedagogical suggestion. Reading a text in a critical way could be analysing as many details as possible and asking ourselves what they tell us about a number of important questions. By important question, I am thinking of a real question about which nobody will agree (which is precisely our problem in this conference). There will never be any sort of universal consensus as to the answer we could give to those questions.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant provides a short list of three of these questions. He refers to entities that we cannot apprehend through our senses. We cannot therefore declare anything objective about them. Kant mentions: (i) God (We certainly won’t agree about the existence of God and, if we consider that He indeed exists, how should we know which religion we should choose); (ii) the self (I can see my face in a mirror, but I will never see my self. In fact, I am not quite sure what my self is, let alone where it is situated); (iii) the world (Here again, we have to simplify. We will probably easily agree that our relationship to our environment is extremely problematic, and that chance often plays a very important role in our existence). Maybe we could add a few other items to that list: (iv) death (What is death? Does it have a meaning? For whom?); (v) society and politics (That is most certainly a most fascinating problem... A constant source of disagreement of course, as everybody knows... More generally, to what social groups and sub-groups do we consciously or unconsciously identify?); (vi) the other (Something we certainly discovered at the end of World War II when we found out about the Nazi concentration camps. The other is

what you must not destroy. The other is like me, and at the same time not like me. He or she possesses a unique identity. We all remember what the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas wrote: the other is a face, a gaze, and you need that other if you want your life to have any kind of meaning. Who is the other? A suggestion: it is an alternative name for chance. The other is that person who enters my life one day whether I like it or not. For instance, he or she can be an unbearable student. We have to love even our unbearable students... The other obviously also raises a series of endless questions, among others the nature of friendship and love). Literature speaks of all those things: God, myself, the world, death, society, the other, chance... There are so many books in our libraries and so many interpretations of those books. Again what are we supposed to do with this plurality?

When we read and re-read a literary text, maybe the most crucial problem has to do with the questions we ask the text and ourselves. There is not one question we can ask. Obviously the list is not infinite, but there are a great many questions that have been directed to a given text ever since it was published and new questions will appear as time passes and our universe changes. Another practical suggestion could be to adapt and subvert the old medieval hermeneutics. Most of us are no longer concerned with sacred books, but it is always fruitful to remember the hierarchy of questions our distant ancestors asked books. They proceeded through four levels: (1) literal; (2) allegorical; (3) moral; (4) anagogical. Today, we certainly could consider that texts (1) tell us something about reality as it were in a mimetic way: literature is a privileged medium for learning about other cultures — indeed for discovering that our world and our values are only possibilities among others. (2) We are able to read a text because we have already read other texts. The question in this respect could be: what do we want to read in a text? Do we want a confirmation of our preconceived ideas or do we want

to find new ways of decoding texts? Do we look for what is familiar in texts or for what resists our preconceived codes? (3) Constructing a moral content from a text is of course an excellent way of asking the question of the other. (4) Last but not least, we read books to try and understand who we are, what our relationship to the world and the divine is. Needless to say that this hierarchy could be rearranged: what is more important: level 3 or level 4? We mentioned Lévinas. He says that the infinite can only be found in the other, not in me...

It is time to offer one last suggestion. Concerning the fact that texts may receive a plurality of meanings and that we all have at one point or another to choose, the question we now have to ask ourselves is why we read. Again, if we simplify things, there are two main options: (α) we look for the content of the text or (β) we try to find out who we are, and we use the text to construct ourselves. Man as a species does those two things all the time. We are always producing new meanings and we are always producing new images of ourselves.

Let us start with the first option (α) and ask where meaning is situated. There are five possibilities: (a) in the reality described by the text; (b) in the writer's mind; (c) in the text; (d) in the reader's mind; (e) it is something constructed through a dialogue between text and reader. Today, we generally accept the fifth possibility as the most fruitful. (a) is seen as naive, as texts very rarely reflect reality passively — when they do claim to reflect reality; (b) is impossible to discover and besides texts belong to culture and therefore embody much more than what the author intended to convey; (c) is limited as texts are far too rich to be exhausted by means of one single reading; (d) in the same way is limited as readers all have had a unique personal life and belong in addition to a great many social sub-groups. It follows that meaning is something which is constructed (e) and, as readers are almost infinite and as we do not live outside history, meaning can only be a plurality.

It goes without saying that meaning as it is constructed (e) will borrow more or less from the materiality of the text (c) or the personality of each individual reader (d). Hence the two main options we mentioned above. (α) Looking for the different meanings imbedded in the text can be seen as basically positivist. We are all familiar with that approach as it is our main activity as academics and teachers. We look for some sort of objective interpretation of the text, or at least for an interpretation which will not be contradicted by a single element in the text. (β) Looking for ourselves is what we normally do in our private, non-professional life when we read for pleasure or more generally for personal reasons. What we are concerned with then is ourselves. We try to find out who we are and in what way we should fashion our future. In this respect, there are two fascinating remarks in *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust (quoted by Gilles Deleuze in his *Proust and Signs*). I'd like to end this brief introduction with them. In the first, Proust says that books are like those ready-made glasses sold by the optician at Combray. You have to try on several of them before you find the right one. In the same way, you read a lot of books before you discover something new about yourself and the world, that is something that was there already but you hadn't noticed. Proust also mentions the painter Auguste Renoir whose pictures were first regarded as shocking and unacceptable by the general public. Then people began to look reality as if they themselves were part of a painting by Renoir. In other words, as we are all unique, maybe what matters is not meaning (or interpretation...), but new possibilities of life...

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The following appendix contains the questionnaire used for the preparation of the conference.

1] Is it possible for a literary text to receive an infinity of interpretations? If that indeed is the case (or just assuming that a text can at least receive a large number of interpretations), does it make sense to ask ourselves whether we have to choose among these interpretations? How then do we choose? Can we reconstruct the procedures that led us to our interpretation(s) a, b and/or c, etc.?

2] What does it mean exactly for us to interpret a literary text coming from a culture different from our own? How does such a text make sense for us? (The problem is important for us over here in France, as we study texts coming from Britain, Ireland, the USA, African countries, etc.)

3] How is a new interpretation produced? Bearing in mind that we read with codes already present in our minds, how can we say something new?

4] Can we consider that there is an essential difference between a university dissertation, a student paper, a newspaper review, etc.? Is the dissertation closer to the “truth” of the text?

5] How can we teach the art of interpretation to students who are obviously not good at it? Should we say it is somewhat like listening to music: you only enjoy music because you have already listened to a lot of music? More specifically, can we help students coming to university from families who did not provide them with the necessary “cultural capital”?

6] Any essential question you feel should have been added.