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UMBERTO ECO AND THE QUESTION OF "OVERINTERPRETATION"

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Before achieving critical acclaim as an accomplished novelist, Umberto Eco had established him-self as a leading scholar in such related disciplines as semiotics, the philosophy of language and literary criticism. It is always a precarious task to set about identifying a dominant theme in a body of work so diverse in its topics and forms. But Eco himself helps us with this task in one of his more recent theoretical works: *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992). In it he explains that since the publication of his *Opera Aperta* in 1962, he has seen the need to redress the general theme of this work; namely, that texts of all kinds (the written word, political and social events, and even the formation of human identities) are always open to, and implicated in, the plurality of meanings brought by us as interpreters. The dominant theme, therefore, is the importance of interpretation.

What provokes this redress in Eco's subsequent works¹, however, is a recent movement to equate this openness of the text with a certain limitless use of the task of interpretation. Eco calls this usage the problem of "overinterpretation", and refers to its practitioners as "reader-oriented" interpreters (an expression he directs mainly at post-modern and/or deconstructionist readings). Like Eco, reader-oriented interpreters rightfully question traditional approaches to interpretation that privilege the intentions of the author as an ultimate source and arbiter of meaning. But, as he argues, they go too far in the opposite direction; they replace the traditionally privileged author (and/or subject) with the plural and infinitely deferred contexts of the reader. The problem here is not so much the status of this newly empowered reader, but the way limitless readings inevitably obscure the integrity, independence, and even, at times, the very "empirical" existence of the object of interpretation itself. This is why Eco begins and ends *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* with the same point: "To say that interpretation... is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it 'river-runs' merely for its own sake."

The integrity of the object - what Eco calls the "intentions of the text" itself - is therefore the gist and counterpoint of his objection to "overinterpretation". This is an important point to which we shall return shortly when we elaborate upon his use of this term. For now, let us be clear that, for Eco, interpretation is never simply done "for its own sake", but is always preceded by a concern for the meaning of something as something - namely, as the empirically existing object (be it a text, an event or an identity).

But why did interpretation come to be conceived, as it has in this debate, as such a significant human activity? It certainly seems that we are inquiring here into something more than a mere mental act, or scholarly enterprise. A brief answer to this question may help us to illuminate not only the experience of interpretation, but also why the charge of "overinterpretation" would strike such a chord.

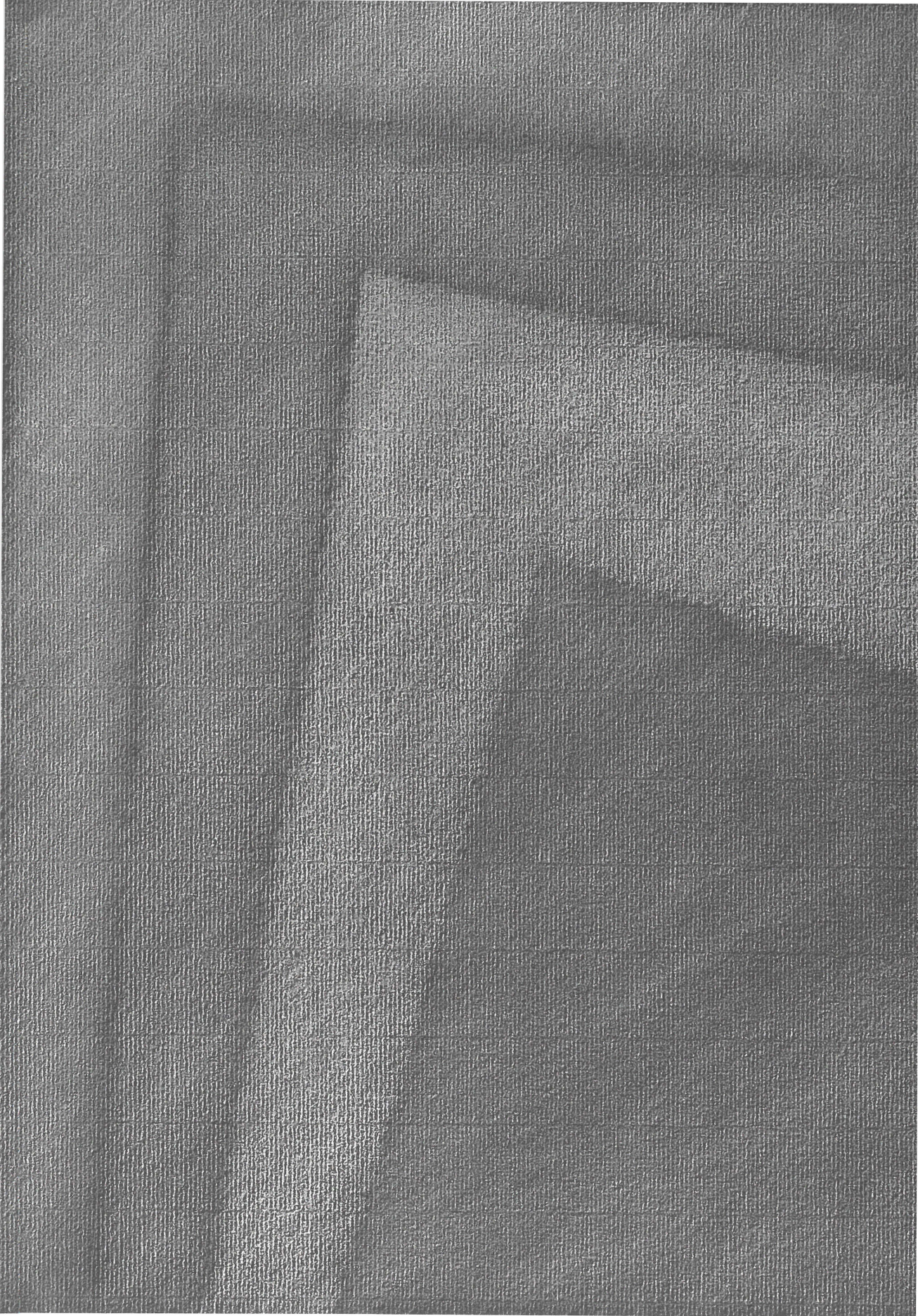
Interpretation, or "hermeneutics" (from the ancient Greek - "erhmenia"), has a long history. It was traditionally restricted to the meanings of scripture and texts of legal jurisprudence. With the nineteenth century German enlightenment, however, the practice of hermeneutics was extended to signify how our historical existence always predeces us by projecting before us the preunderstandings (of culture and tradition) that shape the possible ways in which we and our world(s) become meaningful. Hermeneutics came to mean the 'natural' human activity of bringing these meanings to the explicitness of language, and the light of understanding. Arguably, the profoundest expression of this sense of hermeneutics came from the work of two prominent modern philosophers G. W. F. Hegel and M. Heidegger. It is they who taught us that we exist, most fundamentally, as self-interpreting beings. Yet, even though they share the accomplishment of bringing the hermeneutical experience to light, these two great philosophers differ sharply on the actual practise of interpretation.

For Hegel, interpretation is inseparable from the dialectical reasoning that moves and shapes human history. The hermeneutical experience is therefore essentially tied to the dialectical growth of consciousness; a rational consciousness that frees us to understand both ourselves and the surrounding world that shapes this understanding. Now, the certainty of the dialectic is exactly what Heidegger rejects in the practice of hermeneutics. In his view, the dialectic of western rationalism is an imposition of power that "covers over" the meaning of not only the possibility of human being, but of the meaning of being in general. By subjecting the existential nature of meaning to the rational demands of the dialectic, we have constrained ourselves to treating both human and non-human being as objects (and/or concepts) waiting in reserve for the infinite dispositions and goals of human will and reason. The possible meanings of human and non-human being come to be understood only as that which can be rationalized, made present, actual and controllable for the human subject. But Heidegger's greatest indictment against Hegel is the view that the expansion of dialectical reasoning in the west has "covered over" difference - namely, the "difference" of the possibility and origin of existence (i. e. the "meaning of Being") from its actual and palpable forms. Nihilism, in Heidegger's view, is the completion of this expansion to the point where human and non-human being can mean anything, and therefore nothing. One can characterize the disagreement between these two great thinkers, as many commentators have, in the following way: whereas Hegel approaches the hermeneutical task out of trust in its reasonableness, Heidegger does so out of suspicion for the same.

This disagreement has been recaptured and excellently extended by two leading contemporary philosophers, who are also, arguably, two of the best living interpreters of the work of Hegel and Heidegger: H. G. Gadamer and J. Derrida. In their celebrated encounter of 1981, they revealed that the clear issue at stake in the hermeneutical experience is the status of reason and dialectic - what both refer to as the western "logos". Gadamer argued that the dialogue and dialectic of interpretation can be trusted because these always have projected before them, even in times of conflict, the "good will" of understanding². Following Heidegger and Nietzsche's emphasis on difference, Derrida replied that Gadamer's so-called good will, is actually the "good will to power" of reason and understanding. This rationalized will to stabilize meaning and reconcile it with difference and otherness is for Derrida emblematic of the oppressive "logocentrism" of the West. The political overtones of this encounter are not difficult to see.

In a fine introductory essay, Stephan Collini places Eco squarely within the political context of this debate: "The attempt to limit the range of relevant meaning-conferring contexts or to halt the endlessly self-dissolving instabilities of writing has been stigmatized as 'authoritarian'..." Indeed, Eco's emphasis on "overinterpretation" amounts to an attempt to turn the charge of authoritarianism around against "reader-oriented" interpreters themselves. This was the purpose of his comparing contemporary overinterpreters with the hermetic and gnostic cults of the medieval and renaissance periods. They too rejected traditional principles of reason in favor of "initiation" into secret knowledges that allowed for the infinite shift of meanings. By sheer similitude and analogy, these overinterpreters would dissolve the object of interpretation into its opposite: all things could mean both what they are and what they are not. Eco's "intentionality of the text" and the "Model Reader" who trusts the reasonableness of these intentions, constitute his response to his adversaries.

Richard Rorty, Jonathan Culler and Christine Brooke-Rose provide varying defences of "overinterpretation". Rorty calls for the "pragmatic uses" of a text, where meaning is limitlessly "bent" by readers to suit their purposes. Culler suggests a text is "interesting" only when it is "pushed" beyond its limits. Trying to distance himself from Rorty, Culler also advances the questionable distinction between infinite "uses" and infinite contexts within which texts are interpreted. Brooke-Rose reminds Eco of the infinitely textual nature of history (what she calls "Palimpsest History") and how recent forms of the novel - like "magical realism" - follow from a recognition of this textuality. Eco's reply is coy but pertinent. Much like Gadamer, he contends that his adversaries' inclinations to clarify their viewpoints, betray an admission that there is something to be interpreted as something.



Interpretation and Overinterpretation is an important text. It is a testament to the breadth of Eco's understanding that in a specialized work of this kind, he can still direct us to the greater question of what it means to be a self-interpreting being.

1) These works extend into the 1980s, and are all published by Indiana University Press: *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader* (1979), and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (1992) is in fact a more condensed and extended account following directly from his *Limits of Interpretation* (1992).

2) "Although Gadamer is the greatest living follower of Heidegger's philosophy, he breaks with his mentor on the status of the dialectic. In works such as *Truth and Method* (1960) and *Hegel's Dialectic* (1971), Gadamer argues that Heidegger was too quick to characterize the dialectic as an imposition of the existential priority of the meaning of human and non-human being. By emphasizing the experience of dialogue, and the existential dimension of conversation (as revealed to us in Plato's dialogues), Gadamer contends that the dialectic – even as Hegel conceived it – can be revealing of the being of its speakers, and need not be only an imposition of rationalism upon our existence.

Interestingly, Derrida also breaks with Heidegger on certain profound issues, but not on this central question: namely, the potential oppressiveness of dialectical reasoning. Hence, we see why Gadamer and Derrida would be so opposed on the question of interpretation even though they share such similar influences."

Used sources:

Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, 1927, Hegel, G. W. F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Michelfelder, D. P. and Palmer, R. E., (editors) *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, 1989

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z poznania tejto textovosti. Eco odpovedá zdržanlivo, ale výstižne. Podobne ako Gadamer tvrdí, že sklony jeho protivníkov vyjasniť vlastné názory prezrádzajú, že sami pripúšťajú prítomnosť niečoho, čo treba interpretovať ako niečo.

Interpretácia a nadinterpretácia je významný text. Dokumentuje, do akej miery Eco chápe, že špecializovaná práca tohto typu nás môže viesť ešte k dôležitejšej otázke: čo znamená byť sebainterpretujúcou bytosťou.

1) Práce pokračovali aj v 80. rokoch a všetky vyšli v Indiana University Press: *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976), *The Role of the Reader* (1979) a *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1984). *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (1992) je vlastne kondenzovaná a rozšírená úvaha nadväzujúca priamo na jeho prácu *Limits of Interpretation* (1992).

2) Hoci Gadamer je najväčším žijúcim následníkom Heideggerovej filozofie, rozchádza sa so svojim mentorom v interpretácii dialektiky. V prácach ako *Pravda a metóda* (1960) a *Hegelova dialektika* (1971), Gadamer tvrdí, že Heidegger sa unáhlil vo svojom ponímaní dialektiky ako nastolenia existenciálnej priority zmyslu ľudského či neľudského bytia. Práve skúsenosť, zdôrazňuje Gadamer, ktorú nadobudneme počas dialógu, existenciálny rozmer samotného rozhovoru (tak ako to poznáme z Platónových dialógov), sú práve možnosťami, ako sa dá dialektikou – aj v Hegelovskom ponímaní – obnažiť bytie tých, čo sa zhovárajú. Dialektika nemusí znamenať len nastolenie racionality nad našou existenciou.

Stojí za pozornosť, že aj Derrida sa s Heideggerom rozchádza v niektorých kľúčových záležitostiach, ale nie v tejto zásadnej otázke, t.j. v otázke možného nátlaku plynúceho z dialektickej argumentácie. A tak vidíme, prečo sa Gadamer a Derrida rozchádzajú v otázke interpretácie hoci boli rovnako ovplyvnení Heideggerom.

Použité zdroje:

Heidegger, M., *Bytie a čas*, 1927, Hegel, G. W. F., *Fenomenológia ducha*, Michelfelder, D. P. and Palmer, R. E., *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, 1989

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