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CARY NELSON

## Problematizing Interpretation: Some Opening Questions

1. What is an interpretation? What are its material and argumentative limits? What are the aims of interpretation?
2. Why do we interpret? Can we speak of a will to interpret, a need to interpret, a desire to interpret, a fear of interpreting?
3. Do interpreters seek power over the objects they interpret? Over other interpreters?
4. To what extent do texts themselves control, solicit, and limit our interpretations?
5. Does interpretive writing differ from the kind of interpretation we do continually in the rest of our lives?
6. Are the objects or social practices we interpret themselves interpretations of other, prior objects and social practices? Of life? What is the relation between our interpretations and the interpreting they do?
7. Are some interpretations better than others? How do we decide? Can interpretations be adjudicated? Is it a matter of taste? A matter of politics?
8. What leads you to change your interpretation of a work? Can you describe the experience?
9. What is involved in negotiating your way through a variety of interpretive positions so as to define and establish your own?
10. Do deliberate or unintended misinterpretations have value? Are interpretations typically overstated?

11. How do you describe what an interpretation does?
12. Can interpretations be summarized, translated?
13. Are interpretations themselves like translations?
14. Can a theory of interpretation be summarized?
15. Does an individual's subjectivity determine how or what he or she interprets? In what way? To what degree? Does the act of interpretation itself determine subjectivity?
16. Is it possible to read a text or experience an object without interpreting it?
17. How might we describe or understand the relationship between the initial perception and experience of an object and a written interpretation?
18. How does our understanding of a text or object change as we write a full interpretation of it?
19. Are some things more worthy of interpretation than others?
20. Can *anything* be interpreted?
21. Can one account for the experience of a text or object that seems uninterpretable?
22. Can one define the general nature of all objects of interpretation? Is there a single unified theory that can account, simultaneously, for texts, objects, events, and actions?
23. Is interpretation a methodological question or a question of human nature?
24. Should anything be ruled out of particular kinds of interpretation?
25. Can a full and complete interpretation deal with more than one text, one historical event, or one social practice? Can an interpretation of one Dickens novel, one Balinese cockfight, fully account for another?
26. Can an entire genre be interpreted?
27. Can there be a general theory of interpretation or only regional theories—that is, for cinema, narrative, specific societies?

28. We often argue that a text or a culture needs in part to be described, analyzed, or evaluated in its own terms. To what degree is it desirable to enter into a dialogue with an interpretation on *its own terms*?
29. Does it matter that the author of a text, the participants in a social practice, might be quite unable to comprehend the terms in which we describe and analyze their work?
30. How is difference (sexual, racial, class, national identity) inscribed in interpretation?
31. Does evidence exist within interpretation? In what sense can interpretations be proven?
32. Is there such a thing as a complete interpretation? How would you know? What would the criteria for completeness be?
33. Is any genuine communication possible between an interpreter and an artist or a society distant in time?
34. How long do interpretations continue to have influence? Does it matter?
35. Should interpretations be believing or sceptical in their attitudes toward the objects they interpret?
36. How does a hermeneutics of faith deal with a text it finds abhorrent?
37. Is interpretation better focussed on the observable facts of texts or social practices—their surfaces, as some would argue—or on their deeper meaning? How do we move between these levels? Is this model useful?
38. Can interpretation plausibly focus on what is not present in or what is excluded from a text or social practice? Can such absences be considered structural or determining? Is this still interpretation?
39. Are there hierarchical relationships between different modes of interpretation—description, explanation, understanding, evaluation? Can these moments be differentiated?
40. Is evaluation of or commentary on an interpretation anything more than another interpretation?

41. Is all writing interpretation?
42. Can an interpretation ever overcome the distance between itself and the object it interprets?
43. Does true interpretation depend on an emptying out or negation of the self?
44. Is interpretation bound to identify with, adopt, or defend a text's ideology?
45. To what degree do interpretive communities, disciplinary conventions, control the nature of interpretations?
46. Is interpretation in any sense economically motivated or determined?
47. Are interpretive positions and conclusions historically and culturally specific? Are they historically, sociologically, and politically determined?
48. Can we specify the conditions that make possible the emergence of a particular interpretation?
49. How do interpretations that claim to limit themselves to aesthetic or historical issues also communicate and advocate specific value systems?
50. How are theory and practice related in interpretive writing? Are they separable?
51. Do interpretations speak differently to (and establish different kinds of relationships with) the texts they interpret and other interpretations?
52. Does an interpreter communicate to us as an individual in interpretive writing? Do interpretations have a "voice"?
53. Do we interpret so as to gain an understanding of an author's intention? Do we treat the aims or accomplishments of artistic works as the intentions of individuals even when we do not intend to do so?
54. If a work exists in more than one version, does any version typically have priority? The first? The last? The best? Do the same answers apply to interpretations existing in more than one version?
55. Can a work be perceived in such a way that it is free of, independent of, all interpretation?
56. Are some interpretations more theoretical than others? More philosophical? More self-reflexive? More political? Are there any interpretations that cannot be analyzed in these terms?
57. Is evaluation necessarily a part-of interpretation?
58. Do interpretations have aesthetic qualities of their own?
59. In what sense can interpretations be original?
60. Is there a decisive difference, any difference, between interpretation and creation?
61. To what extent is the practice of interpretation mimetic?
62. Are interpretations performances?
63. Do interpretations always have political consequences?
64. Is the history of interpretation progressive? Are our interpretations better than those of earlier periods?
65. What is the use, appeal, or intrinsic worth of an interpretation with which you disagree?
66. Does (should?) interpretation follow a certain logical sequence? Explicitly? Implicitly?
67. Is interpretation preeminently a form of knowledge?
68. Do interpretations aim to communicate?
69. Do interpretations assume that texts aim to communicate?
70. Do interpretations implicitly posit a concrete audience for a text?
71. Could a history of interpretation be written? What should its object and focus be? Who should write it? How long might it last?
72. Can you formulate a psychology of interpretation? An ethics? A theology? A politics?
73. Does this list (or any of the questions) have an implicit ethics, theology, or politics?

## Problematizing Interpretation

74. What role does the classroom, teaching, play in the development and writing of interpretations?
75. What libidinal investments are involved in interpreting a text, negotiating a theoretical position?
76. How would you change these questions?
77. Reread this list of questions, applying them specifically to the scene of pedagogy. Do your answers change?
78. Would this list of questions have any use in the classroom?
79. What sort of text is this list? Obsessional? Playful? What is its structure? Linear? Circular? Metonymic?

WILLIAM R. SCHROEDER

## A Teachable Theory of Interpretation

To fully understand a theory, one must grasp the problem it seeks to solve. The traditional problem to which theories of interpretation have sought to respond is the plurality of interpretations. One school seeks to transcend this plurality by using the author's intention to establish the correct interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Another contends that this plurality is unavoidable because the historical situation limits the perspective of any interpreter.<sup>2</sup> Instead of eliminating the plurality, this school seeks to explain it.<sup>3</sup> Although the theory presented here can be located within these traditional disputes, it is better understood as addressing a different problem and thus pursuing a new goal.<sup>4</sup> The paucity, not the plurality, of bona fide interpretations is its guiding problem; its goal is effective strategies for producing genuine interpretations. To some the fields of criticism may seem overrun by interpretations, but to me instances of genuine interpretation seem all too rare. Though contemporary critics are prolific, engaged in many different, important projects, and more widely cognizant of other disciplines relevant to criticism, they rarely attempt genuine interpretations—full syntheses of the elements of texts and careful formulations of their implications. Instead of a gourmet's feast, we have only a beggar's breakfast.

Two aims can function as standards with which to evaluate the present theory. First, it seeks to elucidate some of our shared intuitions about interpretation; this is its *descriptive* component. Second, it seeks to defend a new ideal of criticism; this is its *prescriptive* component. Thus, though this theory builds on our current intuitions, it aspires toward something richer and more ambitious. Although other critical projects are important, I shall