

**THE TEXT IS WHAT THE
READER MAKES IT:
APPREHENSION AND GAPS;
COMPREHENSION AND TRAPS**

Salah BOUREGBI

University of
Annaba

ABSTRACT

My modest paper revolves around the difficulty of decoding the clues of a literary text. A text is supposed to enfold the intended meaning of its maker; but are we able to know and unveil such meaning ?

My paper tries to show that the objectivity of a literary text is an illusion, because it steps beyond reality, mainly when the author 'expropriates' our world and makes it something proper to him. Here lies the difficulty ! The author presents something which represents something else, and this something else is beyond, or behind, the language code. This matter causes plurality in interpretation. Thus, what the teacher should do is to help the student (to) make it, but never to make it for him. And the student, in turn, should know that there is no ready-made or ready-to-grasp interpretation of a literary text. He must read (and re-read) and train his nature of sensibility

« What literature communicates then, is an individual awareness of a reality other than that which is given general social sanction but nevertheless related to it. » (1)

My modest contribution is a critical attempt to the literary text and the difficulty to decode it. The questions that pop out and come in one's mind when reading a work of art are: Does the text hold only one message and therefore one communication? Does a text, or a sentence, or a word mean something, or one thing, or everything, or just nothing? Does the theme leap up and emerge at the first reading of the text? In other words, does the language of any literary text generate only the author's attention?

Any text is the representation of its maker, and any maker has a peculiar way of making his text. To understand the artist, we should understand his code, the language he uses. In the language lies his voice, because he is everywhere and seen nowhere. The artist lives in his world-making. His self is in his construction. « The self, » says Avron

Fleishmann, « expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now is before creating metaphors. » (2)

Writing supposes reading, and reading supposes knowing what the writer wants to communicate. The matter is here! Can we really grasp the intended meaning of the artist for the first reading ? Is our interpretation of the text the real intention of the author? The answer , however, is not as we may expect, because on the one hand, the writer cannot, and probably has no right, to make the task easy for the reader; on the other hand, « the objectivity of the text is an illusion. »(3) The reader, then, has to step beyond the words and the sentences, trying to unveil and to decipher the clues of the text. In other words, the reader has to mine and probe deeply inside the text to see the gaps and know the traps in order to explicate them. Hans-georg Gadamer puts it well when he says that, « the meaning of a text goes beyond the author. »(4) Novelists make their readers think and give them signs and clues of meaning throughout the text. There is a buried discourse, and it is for the reader to apprehend it beyond or across the text. The author has to provide and the reader has to decode.

We all know that the same text has several meanings and different strategies of reading. We diverge in reading and interpreting the same text, because the text is always subject to interpretations, or as Frank Kermode puts it, « Stories as we know them begin as interpretations. » (5) To discover the meaning of any discourse is to investigate the features of its language. But the language is not only a social structure; it is also individual: it is a sensation and a perception. It refers to and stands for something else invisible and inner. B. I. Johnson raises such difficulty and claims that:

Language itself is an imprecise tool with which to try to achieve precision; the same word will have slightly different meaning for every person. But what is outside me, I cannot control it. I can only words to mean something to me, and there is simply the hope (not even the expectation) that they will mean the same thing to anyone else(6)

What B.I. Johnson wants to say is that the literary text is a « parole hors langue, comme un message sans code. »(7) The artist modifies and transforms the social code into an individual one and gives, deliberately, larger ambiguity to his work.

To interpret and comprehend a text, the reader tries to apprehend gaps as well as traps in order to reach what the author wants to mean through what he wants to say. And this can only be done through the

clues the text holds. Frank Kermode, conscious of the problem of apprehending a text notifies that:

Reading is not a matter of trying to get through, of guessing, abandoning or modifying the guess, and so on... There is, of course, no 'correct' reading: we are in a world of uncontrollable plurality, not divining structures but producing structurations that are all our own.(8)

The text is a variety of signs that is so difficult to enter. « The words refer equally to difficulty of distinguishing what, hermeneutically, matters and does not matter... We read according to the values appropriate to that kind of attention whether or not there is a series of definite gestures to prompt us... » (9) The problem is: Can we limit ourselves to only one meaning of the text and be satisfied with? Can we impose one's interpretation upon the other? In other words, is one's interpretation the intention of the author and thus, is what the reader should interpret and find out? It is so difficult to accept such claim, because the meaning is determined on the one hand through reading and re-reading, and on the other hand, the something you read can always be related to something else. Even the author, after finishing his work, becomes a reader. He reads himself as his readers read him. The only privilege he has is to be the first reader and interpreter of his work.

If we try to look at the relationship between the artist and his art, we notice that there is a link. But the problem is, do we accept what the artist says about his art? There is a common agreement among literary critics that the artist is the first reader of what he makes, but not the only interpreter of his work. Thus, we should not trust the artist but trust his art. « The author's extratextual comments on the work, » says W. Daniel Wilson, « may be valuable, but they must take second place to an analysis on the work itself and must not be taken as more authoritative than the work's structures if a contradiction arises. »(10) The art should not be seen through the artist, but the artist can be seen through his art. In other words, we should attempt to understand what is written: there are some value-judgements that the reader should unveil through mining and probing into facts. « For interpretation, » says T. S. Eliot, « the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know. » (11) These facts and patterns of the artist as an individual are common to the reader. « Words which, on conscious areas of the mind offer an explanation of how this might simply seem to describe a character or scene or experience, » puts it Richard Dutton, « may trigger off echoes at an unconscious level, trapping or channeling some deep emotional impulse. »(12)

Reading and re-reading the literary text opens many perspectives for wider and constructive interpretation of hidden meaning. « Interpretation, » says Paul Ricoeur, « is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literary meaning. » (13) The ways and levels of reading a text depend on the nature of sensibility of the reader and his disposition to be transported by the author into his world. In his introduction to The English Novel, Stephen Hazell emphasizes the idea of penetrating the world of the author and living his experience in the novel. He says:

One power of a good novel is, indeed, to 'take over' our minds as we read, and we allow it that privileged entry because we recognize that our first (and altogether inventing) duty to a novel is to experience it. This is not a passive experience, for we are re-creating the world of the novel from the signs on the page, and the levels of its power. (14)

The text literaturizes life, and therefore, it holds and incorporates something of the real world. But this something of the real world is no longer of the real world; it becomes a part of the author's world and proper to him.

The problem of reading and interpreting a text is its tightness with reality: the texture of life (reality) and the texture of art (text) are alike. The reality « which underlies that which is conventionally accepted is an elusive one. What the artist creates [expresses] also very elusiveness of what he perceives, » (15) attests H. G. Widdowson. He goes on claiming that the poem is:

a reality which cannot be expressed by normal language usage since this can of its nature only express that reality which is accepted by shared social convention. Individual thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, the private person that lies beneath the public persona, can only be fully expressed by going beyond the limits of what is conventionally communicable. (16)

This hermetic way of storytelling is a problem for the reader. It does not, in one way or another, help him discover the clues and interpret them. In other words, the text resists to the reader. It wants to enfold its secret and not to reveal it to him. « In order to understand the part, » says Frank Kermode, « you must understand the whole, which can't do without understanding the parts. » (17) He goes on claiming that « producing the correct 'reading' is a delicate and complicated task,

involving guessing and trying again — performing with skill and rapidity... »(18)

What then! Do we stop reading literary texts, since what we know of a text is only what we think it is?

Some literary critics have proposed samples for reading and ways for discovering the meaning of a text. Andrew Wright proposes for us a method through which we penetrate a text. He says:

In every novel there are at least two plots; at the forefront is arrangement of the events of the story in such a way as to indicate their significance. Such is plot in the ordinary sense, in the sense of a private treaty between narrator and reader.(19)

The critic Wright is right when he draws our attention to the arrangement of events and what they indicate as significance. But are we able to give relevant and correct significance to such indications? Is the sense of these indications the intended meaning of the author? René Welleck and Austin Warren, conscious of such difficulty, recognize that, « Art imposes some kind of framework which takes the statement of the work out of the world of reality. » (20) On the other hand, Christian Baylon and Paul Fabre, in their book La Sémantique, attest that analyzing a discourse is producing a sense proper to the analyst of such discourse: « L'analyse d'un discours est aussi une production d'un discours par l'analyste sur le discours qu'il traite, donc une production d'un sens. »(21)

Variety in criticism enriches the reader's mind and opens the way for him to penetrate the text, but does no longer give him the meaning of the text — his meaning to the text, thus. It is for the reader to make it, but *not to make it for him*. Marjorie Boulton, a literary critic, goes in the same sense and declares that:

We should read the critics and biographies, attend lectures and discussions; but the most important we can make... is to read the work itself, and to read again, and, after reading some criticism, to read once more, and so on.(22)

What Marjorie Boulton wants to raise in this quote is of great importance. One should not heavily rely on what critics give as interpretations, because we 'damage' our integrity as readers. « The danger, » adds Marjorie Boulton, « is not so much in the critic, as in the student, who may be tempted to use critic's book as it was not meant to be used. » (23) He goes on comparing the critic to a useful map of a city and the reader to an explorer of such city:

A map is very useful to someone who is exploring a beautiful city, especially if he finds its geography hard to grasp and keeps losing his way, but most diligent study of a map—even to the point that we can produce to the experience of walking round it and looking at all sights.(24)

In the text, it is only the reader that speaks(25), says Roland Barthes, because when he reads, he produces meanings and tries to fill the gaps and solve the traps with evidences. « Il s'agit de découvrir un sens sous le discours, un dit sans intention de dire. »(26) as Christian Baylon and Paul Fabre formulate it. To discover 'un sens sous le discours', and decode the clues, the reader has to correlate between linguistic elements in the language with the context in which they occur. He should search the meaning of words when they are alone and their values when they appear in the context, because, in terms of H. G. Widdowson, « It is then the correlation of coding meanings, or significations, with the contextual meanings that linguistic items acquire as elements of a pattern which yields what value these items have as part of a discourse. »(27)

Roger Mucchielli, a psychologist, proposes for us some possibilities for interpretations. He divides the text into two major parts: Hermeneutic and Logic. Behind the hermeneutic there are all the interpretations of the enigmatic texts. This nature of interpretation leads us to psychology and further to psychoanalysis, because, « un sens caché existe à l'abri du texte officiel qu'il faut décrypter avec un code spécial clé des symboles. »(28)

Concerning the logic, the second part of the division, Mucchielli gives some sub-divisions that he considers as scientific: there is the logic of characteristics which looks for the rational, the coherent and the reasonable; there is the logic of the aesthetic characteristics of the piece of art; there is the logic of the epistemological research for diverse words of human knowledge, and finally, there is the linguistic system(s) of sounds, senses and rules.(29) Mucchielli's hermeneutic claim of the text is also stressed by H. G. Widdowson, who says that:

The literary message does not arise in the normal course of social activity as do other messages, it arises from no previous situation and acquires no response, it does not serve as link between people or as a means of furthering the business of ordinary social life.(30)

Roland Barthes, in turn, gives us some codes for reading a text: the proairetic(action), the semic(setting), the hermeneutic, the referential

and the symbolic. The proairetic, the semic and symbolic are in the text; the referential and the hermeneutic are outside the text. (31) This possibility of reading a text helps the student develop his reading skill in literature, but it cannot help him to know the author's point of view__ the author's interpretation of his work. What, also, Roland Barthes has given us is the study of these codes but not the study of the meaning. In other words, he describes the plurality of the work as apprehended by himself. Again, the critic Marjorie Boulton suggests an order for better reading for the sake of academic success and personal development, but not how to find out meanings. He proposes the following:

1- Do a list of preliminary reading if you can find something appropriate, collecting any information that may be useful, but never deluding yourself that this informatory equipment is any substitute for literature itself...

2- Either, first, or after a little preliminary reading, read the prescribed work of literature. This is the most essential of all possibly study process.(32)

To round off, I would like to say that the teacher should be the guide to the student, not in interpreting the text but in developing the logic and the awareness of the whatness and the howness of literary communication. He should train the intelligence and the sensibility of the reader to the text. He should help the student (to) look for the message in the text by explaining for him how the language of the literary discourse works and how it is used. The student, in turn, should know that literature does not transmit ready-made, or ready-to-grasp interpretation of codes, but develops in the student the sensibility to the text and a precise response to the range of language uses. He should know how to find out meanings by himself and for himself. He should read, because to read is to produce, and to produce is to make sense. « The text, » says Richard Dutton, « is not a means to an end but a means of looking for information about something else. »(33)

To conclude my paper, I would like to say that to interpret a text is to search for one's inner standing, a sense of self-discovery, i.e., to tell the truth about oneself. But which self?

ENDNOTES

- 1- H. G. Widdowson, Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature (London: Longman, 1975), p.70.
- 2- Avron Fleishmann, Figures of Autobiography: the Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern English (Berkeley, London: University Press of California, 1983), p.25.
- 3- Stanley Fish, « Literature and the Reader: Affective Stylistics, » in New Literary History, 2(1970), pp.160-161.
- 4- Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, Trans. G. Barden and J. Cumming, 1975, p.264, Quoted by Frank Kermode in Essays on Fiction (London: Kegan Paul, 1983), p.68.
- 5- Frank Kermode, Essays on Fiction (London: Kegan Paul, 1983), p.135.
- 6- B. I. Johnson, « Introduction to Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs? » (pp.151-166), in The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction (Glasgow: Fontana, Collins, 1977? Repr. 1978), p.166.
- 7- J. Dubois, and F. Edeline, et al., Rhétorique Générale (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), p.13.
- 8- « Parole above the langue, as a message without code. » Trans. mine.
- 9- Frank Kermode, Essays on Fiction, Op. Cit., p.106.
- 10- Ibid., p.57.
- 11- T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1960? Repr. 1972), p.96.
- 12- Richard Dutton, Introduction to Literary Criticism (Essex: York Press, Longman Group Ltd, 1984), p.63.
- 13- Paul Ricoeur, « Existence and Hermeneutics, » in Joseph Bleicher's Contemporary Hermeneutics, 1980, p.24, Quoted by Richard Dutton, in Introduction to Literary Criticism (Essex: York Press, Longman, 1984), p.29.
- 14- Stephen Hazell, « The Introduction, » in The English Novel, ed. Stephen Hazell (London: Macmillan, 1978, Repr. 1986), p.11.
- 15- H. G. Widdowson, Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature, Op. Cit., p.70.
- 16- Ibid., p.57.
- 17- Frank Kermode, Essays on Fiction, Op. Cit., p.203.
- 18- Ibid., p.104.
- 19- Andrew Wright, Fictional Discourse and Historical Space (London: Macmillan, 1987), p.6.
- 20- René Welleck, and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1956, Repr. 1985), pp.24-25.
- 21- Christian Bylon, and Paul Fabre, La Sémantique (Paris: Nathan, 1978), p.276. « The analysis of a discourse is also a production of

- another discourse by the analyst, and so a production of another sense. »Trans. mine.
- 22-Marjorie Boulton, The Anatomy of Literary Studies: An Introduction to the Study of English Literature (London, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980),p.50.
- 23-Ibid.,p.75.
- 24-Ibid.,p.75.
- 25-Roland Barthes, S/Z (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970, Repr. 1983),p.66.
- 26-Christian Bylon, and Paul Fabre, La Sémantique , Op. Cit., p.275. « It is the matter to discover a sense beneath the discourse; the what to say without the intention of saying. »Trans. mine.
- 27-H. G. Widdowson, Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature , Op. Cit., p.37.
- 28-Roger Mucchielli, L'Analyse du Contenu des Documents et des Communications: Connaissance du Problème (Paris: Entreprise Moderne d'Édition, 1979),p.10. « A hidden sense exists beneath the official text, and that should be decoded through a special code of symbols. »Trans.mine.
- 29-Ibid.,p.10.
- 30-H. G. Widdowson, Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature ,Op. Cit.,p.51.
- 31-For further details, see Barthes' S/Z . Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970, Repr.1983.
- 32-Marjorie Boulton, The Anatomy of Literary Studies , Op. Cit., pp.78-79.
- 33-Richard Dutton, Introduction to Literary Criticism, Op. Cit.,p.116.