theories and methodologies

Interrogation Over

JAMES SIMPSON

GOOGLE NGRAM VIEWER REPORTS THAT USAGE OF THE WORD *INTERROGATION* HAS BEEN CLIMBING STEADILY SINCE 1942. LIBERALS WILL of course argue, not without force, that the George W. Bush administration's embrace of "enhanced interrogation" (i.e., torture) drove the recent steady rise. To that sound point one might, however, also advance a less palatable observation: that representatives of the academy were in the interrogation room, doing the interrogating, long before the Bush administration got into the act.

The phrase "literary interrogation" (again, according to *Google Ngram Viewer*), has been on the rise since 1980, and there has been an especially steep spike since 2003. How so? In the 1970s, some literary scholars turned to the lexis of revolution for their preferred locutions: texts were "subversive" or "explosive" liberators. Sometimes, indeed, texts challenged power as "terrorists to received ideas" (Felski 118). Across the 1970s, however, Foucauldian critique in particular understood power differently: power was not out there but in here. Power (now personified) was diffused throughout cultural systems so as to shape agents, even as agents seemed to be resisting It. This understanding of Power produced its own hermeneutic: texts potentially became double agents and were sent to the interrogation room, there to be cross-examined for evidence of the way in which the ostensible liberator was in fact an agent of the Hegemon. The word *interrogation* had, perhaps, a slightly scarier edge in English than in French, since the English *interrogate* cannot shake off police-state connotations, unlike the more neutral French *interroger*.

Like many hugely influential hermeneutic movements (e.g., late antique biblical exegesis, which dominated biblical reading for at least a millennium), the quarry was always the same;[1] in the Foucauldian case it was Power. As Rita Felski effectively says in *The Limits of Critique*, in her extended and witty comparison between critique and the whodunit, the difference is a downer: whereas the detective narrative keeps us in suspense as to who the bad guy is, Foucauldian critique obsessively heads for the same, relentlessly predictable

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PMLA 132.2 (2017), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.377 Published online by Cambridge University Press

denouement, well known from before the interrogation began. The bad guy is always the Hegemon (or some capitalized, personified avatar thereof, such as Language, Logos, or the usual suspect, Power). Readerly curiosity, surprise, guesswork, and wonder do not figure in this plot line.[2] Allegory (saying one thing and meaning another) was the master trope, but the critic knew the allegorical code before the game began. The critic knew what the text was hiding and would have it out by the time the interrogation was finished.

Stripping the traitor Power's mask, however, was by no means the triumphant climax of the revolutionary tribunal's legal process. On the contrary, the reeducation or elimination of the text was just the beginning of a much more painful *procès*, in which the commissar was obliged to confront and then interrogate the interior hypocrite. That is, the interrogator was faced with the deeply unsettling fact that Power was always already constitutive of the legal process and therefore also of its agents, from which there was no escape.[3] Power constituted the subject of both text and interrogator, in a tragic drama that demanded constant vigilance and repudiation of self, without ever offering any chance of moving out from under the heel of the hegemon. Both text and commissar had a subjectivity (etymologically a "thrown-downness"): they had both been thrown down by Power. The only difference was that the texts deserved denunciation for trying to hide it. The critics, by contrast, wore fifty shades of gray and black as a confessional mark of the tragedy that had befallen them, even as they kept going to conferences. Only the stern vigilance of self-critique could keep the commissar one step ahead of the doomed text, so as not to join the text in the tumbrel and to keep the critic at those conferences.

That's all on the one hand. On the other, I personally learn so much more from texts that need and try to hide something and that implicitly invite me to see behind their masks (the same is true of my interactions with human beings). The spectrum of reasons that might produce masked indirection covers pretty well all human communicative situations: enjoying the pleasures of irony with intimates, playfulness, kindness when circling around a painful subject, discretion, deference, persuasive intent, anxiety, fear, censorship, serving as a double agent, warfare. Each of the positions on this spectrum might be the tactical motive for indirection in a text, let alone in any communicative situation we find ourselves (most departmental meetings, for example, involve a mixture of each, except the last two). And beyond tactical indirection, all great works of art move beyond tactics, by somehow saying more than they know—by giving away more than the mask of their surface would allow.

Licit impropriety with regard to literalism (the rhetorical definition of all tropes) stands at the core of literary discourse; without it—without masks—we have no literature. Only the legislative chambers of liberal democracies theoretically enjoy the legally protected status of completely free speech, where one says what one means; the rest of us necessarily inhabit the world of indirection and therefore of masks, as persons, or *personae* (etymologically the masks of the Roman actor, through which the magnified voice sounds, *per-sonans*). To be a person is to wear a mask or masks.

Inhabiting a complex social world, and therefore the world of signs, we are—for purposes of both pleasure and self-preservation—habitually sign readers. We dig below or reach above textual surfaces to intuit the messages masked by them. Hermes, the messenger between the polytheistic gods and multiform humanity, is said to have given his name to hermeneutics;[4] even if we decide to leave the decryption of divine messages to those who are confident in the existence of the heavens, we nonetheless experience at least some faint reverberation of divine frisson and enter upon some otherworldly journey, either up or

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.377 Published online by Cambridge University Press

down, whenever we enter the flow of the interpretive act.

So we inhabit, willy-nilly, a world of masks, which invite interpretation at every turn. Some merit suspicion, many not. To be sure, hypocrites do exist in the world, and they are out to fool us, often with lethal effect. Students need to emerge from a literary education capable of suspicious decryption: malign forces are most definitely at play in the mesmerizing phantasms thrown up by political or commercial advertising (most recently in the form of fake news), and we need to arm our students against them.

But by no means do all masks in the world belong to the hypocrites, despite what the literalist commissars and their Calvinist ancestors would have us believe. So where does someone like me go from here, caught as I am by the love of masks and the recognition that some masks deserve our suspicion? One solution would be to settle for the surface (Best and Marcus), but the very idea of surface, however well we describe it, implies something beyond it; I'm myself incapable of not going to those implied depths or heights, below or above the surface.

So instead I start by making distinctions between masks that deserve interrogation and those that deserve trust. The world is brimming with masks; works of art are, happily, a veritable forest of masks, at both micro and macro levels. Only a tiny proportion of the world's masks belong, however, to the double agent. Once we assume that all masks belong to the hypocrite, we convoke all masked texts (i.e., all texts) only to denounce, convict, and sentence them to a death long foretold. That way we don't do justice to art; on the contrary, we send many innocents to the gulag or guillotine. The purges of the revolutionary regime always end up overdoing it, after all, consigning the innocent no less than the counterrevolutionary to undeserved suffering.

Not only that, a hermeneutic of universal suspicion consigns us to universal ignorance. The Austrian imperial diplomat Metternich is reported to have commented, on hearing about the death of the French diplomat Talleyrand in 1838, "I wonder what he meant by *that*?" Metternich was joking, but the joke reveals how the hermeneutics of international relations, not to speak of any other interpretive environment, needs an element of trust. Without that element of trust, or secular faith, the blind lead the blind; we end up falling, as our often misnamed intelligence services so spectacularly fell in the lead-up to 2003, into the ditch of ignorance (think weapons of mass destruction). Radical mistrust inevitably expands in widening, concentric circles of mistrust, leading surely to radical error. Radical mistrust is, for example, incapable of decoding irony.

Religious interpreters unabashedly place trust, or faith, at the beginning of the interpretive process—*fides quaerens intellectum*, or "faith seeking understanding," in the neat formula of the theologian Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). Most of us would judge that formula to have the interpretive process precisely the wrong way around: if we exercise any faith, we'd say, we'd do it on the basis of understanding. Analysis of the interpretation of any communicative act, however, reveals that understanding is in fact premised on trust. We exercise implicit faith at every turn of the interpretive game: communicative acts can never explicate the grounds that ensure their effective interpretation; we move from what an utterance can mean to what we think it does mean, by acts of faith (Simpson, "Faith").

"No man is an island, entire of itself." No, indeed, we might say, but before we dismiss that statement as true but seriously uninformative, we implicitly assume, by an act of faith, that John Donne is not insane—that he would not bother us with a wholly uninteresting truism and that he would not be talking about islands in a meditation. He must mean more than that no man is an island. So we make a decision, on the grounds

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.377 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of both experience and faith, to read "is" as a metaphor. Every communicative act is potentially unintelligible, potentially a *disiunctum membrum* floating randomly in discursive space ("This door is alarmed" say many of the doors in my university library). We render the world pragmatically intelligible every day by drawing on multiple forms of faith to supply what utterances do not, and could not possibly, say about their meaning. We reenact Donne's point by moving, through both faith and experience, from what Donne might mean to what he plausibly does mean. People are least like islands, we might conclude, when they trust each other. The richest forms of truth, as the etymological relation of the word *truth* to *troth* would suggest, are relational and grounded in trust. To have arrived at interpretive truth is to have trusted.

The issue, then, as Felski subtly points out more than once in her courageous and entertaining book, is not to outlaw interpretation (53, 57, 175). In fact Felski adroitly sidesteps outlawing anything or anyone (even if she comes close in citing the real commissars who insist that there is no alternative to critique).[5] Critiquing the critiquers is tricky work, since an unremitting critique—of which Felski is clearly capable—could end up replicating the same distrustful, pitiless, and forensic gaze from which Felski would like to move us. No, outlawing interpretation is no solution to anything (even if we were capable of not interpreting, which we are not, since we are hardwired to interpret from surface to depth; anyone who understands the metaphor of *hardwired* has just proved my point). We are *animales hermeneutici*. The problem is not hermeneutics; it's hermeneutics always determined to enter the underworld, there to discover a crime.

As someone devoted to profiting from nonsuspicious hermeneutic practice, I am prompted to develop Felski's scattered references to different kinds of human relation implied by different interpretative traditions.[6] Our interpretive relations to texts can be categorized in a simple typology of personal relations. Stranger, friend, and lover, each with their distinctive affect and postures, are in my view the most capacious categories for accommodating the classic hermeneutic traditions. Textual criticism, dating from the fifteenth century,[7] and various forms of post–World War II critique treat texts as strangers (Felski 144–45). Eighteenth-century aesthetics treats texts disinterestedly, as friends.[8] Scholarly movements produced by identity politics (grounded in Romanticism), whether related to gender or ethnicity, treat texts as lovers.[9] The affect of stranger, friend, and lover is, respectively, cold, friendly, and enthusiastic. There are, of course, many other generic human relations between interpreter and text—for example marauder, at the brutal end of a spectrum,[10] and guest or acquaintance at the other, polite end.[11] I will remain with the more capacious grouping here—stranger, friend, lover.

Traditions that regard texts as either strangers or friends or lovers maintain distinctive postures with regard to the past. Critique treats the past as it treats the text: as a stranger, usually because the past is experienced as a catastrophe. Intellectual history in our field tends to locate *ostranenie* and the *Verfremdungseffekt* in Russian formalism and in Brechtian drama, respectively. Alienation effects are not, however, restricted to particular revolutionary intellectual movements; they have much deeper roots, in the catastrophes of twentieth-century history, not to speak of the catastrophes of Euro-American culture before the twentieth century (slavery being the most egregious instance). These catastrophes have served to estrange the entire past (Kemp), to render every act of culture an act of barbarism.[12] Critique's unrelenting suspicion of culture derives from these fundamental failures of Western civilization. Critique is driven by a revolutionary historiography, whereby the past must be closed up (or down)

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.377 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between epistemic crevasses, so deep as to disallow the virus of the past to leap across the crevasses and into the present.[13] The scholar who treats texts as strangers will predictably repudiate presentism and look instead to the past "in its own terms." We stand with regard to the past, says such a scholar, in a relation of estrangement and radical alterity; our salvation depends on preserving that alterity from the wholly disastrous past at all costs.

Disinterested aesthetics, by contrast, manages to contemplate heterogeneous, often mutually hostile traditions in the same disciplinary frame, now available for all to understand, regardless of the religion, race, or gender of either the producers or receivers of the artifact. Across the eighteenth century, after 150 years of vicious European religious warfare, aesthetics invented a way of disinterestedly enjoying and learning from traditions of art, from broad chronologies, distinct from the critic's own ideological tradition. A Protestant viewer was now permitted to admire Catholic subjects in painting or literature, for example, within newly invented discursive spaces called art or literature. The effort to shape that space wrested images and texts from culture wars and pulled images back from the iconoclast's hammer (Simpson, *Under the Hammer* 116–54). Aesthetics treated the past as a potential friend, even when the past was at serious ideological odds with the reader. Disinterested aesthetics will not close off the past; on the contrary, the past is opened for curiosity by a diachronic historicism (Dimock), connecting present and past in a larger story. Syllabi grounded in that still vital tradition include both revolutionary John Milton and royalist John Dryden, Catholic William Langland and Baptist John Bunyan. Disinterested friendship understands that friends disagree. It also depends on readiness to learn the code that animates and individuates our friends. Texts, we might argue, are no different—we can entertain them despite significant ideological difference, though we do need to learn their code (which we call genre). We come to understand friends and texts through habituated recognitions; cognition of both depends on trusting recognition (Simpson, "Cognition"). That neither texts nor friends are understood by interrogation from any commissar's single point of view is the lesson of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film *The Lives of Others*. Here the Stasi interrogator heroically comes slowly around to trust his victims, and their works of art, as friends of sorts.

Scholarly movements of identity politics tend to erase the past altogether, as they wholly identify with the fellow in the past, by saying "I am you" (Morrison). Instead of forever claiming difference from the past, the Romantic claims identification. Instead of positing historical discontinuity, as the skeptical philologist or the suspicious practitioner of critique does, the Romantic posits deep continuity. The Romantic enthusiast embraces the past as now and us. The past is not dead ("it isn't even past"); it lives and we can embrace it. They were us; we are them (*Teaching*). Syllabi grounded in this tradition will habitually be restricted to texts from one tradition.

So which personal model do I choose for my textual relations: stranger, friend, or lover? Whichever way, interpret I must: apostasy to Hermes is literally unthinkable. I will continue to accept his guidance as I move up or down, to heaven or the underworld, from the textual surface.[14] With Hermes as my companion, I try to make friends with texts. I try, that is, to follow the finally luminous hero of *The Lives of Others*, moving between the small subset of texts that deserve suspicion to that much wider, infinitely more life-enhancing set of texts—companionable forms—with which one can be friends.

Our friends disagree with us; they sometimes infuriate us; we struggle with them; they can fail us; we can fail them; yet our deeply pleasurable and mutual commitment to them abides, disinterested and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.377 Published online by Cambridge University Press

indispensable as it is. We don't divorce our friends; they can be of any age; one more does not mean one less; we long to share them with groups of other friends; even if we have material interests in knowing them, we can bracket those interests and still enjoy disinterested friendship; we learn from them as from no one else; we need to recognize them when we're in trouble.[15] Just like literary texts. Thanks in part to Felski's bold book, I feel sure that friendly hermeneutics now offers a cogent alternative to interrogation.

Notes

I thank each of my friends who commented on earlier versions of this essay; none wholly agreed with it, but each offered an exemplary instance of friendly hermeneutics.

1. For Augustine, every reading of scripture should end up in the same place—charity. Augustine puts the matter in this political way: "With the tyranny of cupidity thus overturned, charity reigns with most just laws of love of God for God. Let this rule apply therefore in figurative [biblical] statements, that a reading be diligently considered until the interpretation should be led to the realm of charity. If the statement leads to charity through its literal sense, then it is not to be considered a figurative statement" (3.15.23, p. 91; my trans.).

2. See, e.g., Felski 93: "Indeed, critics often let the cat out of the bag at the very start by invoking the guilty party. The identity of the criminal is rarely a mystery, preceding the specifics of any individual crime."

3. See Butler: "The feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (2).

4. See Felski on Hermes ("the friendliest of the gods"): "He is the deity of roads, crossroads, thresholds, boundaries—of translations and transactions across realms" (174).

5. See the section headed "Critique does not tolerate rivals" (147–50).

6. E.g., "Art works can only survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching onto receptive hosts" (165). In categorizing interpretive movements within a typology of personal relationships, I am inspired by the model of Lynch.

7. I am thinking of the philological demolition of the Donation of Constantine by Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457).

8. For eighteenth-century aesthetics, see Lynch 31–32.

9. For a rich and subtle account of unashamed love for and identification with the objects of philological study, see Watson. For the broader history, see Morrison; Lynch.

10. Thus Jerome (d. 420) encourages Christian readers to treat pagan texts as Deuteronomy 21.10–14 encourages the Israelites to treat women taken captive in war: should the Israelite soldier desire to marry the woman, he should "shave her head and pare her nails." The Christian was likewise licensed to convert pagan texts "to our dogma"; see Jerome, epistola 21 (379–94), at column 385.

11. Thus Thomas More (d. 1535) compares readers who don't feel affection for the authors of books they enjoy with "rude guests who after a splendid dinner party go home stuffed with food, without saying a word of thanks to their host" (32).

12. I am obviously thinking of Adorno's claim that "[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34).

13. The sealing up of the past is what prompts Felski to turn to diachronic historicism (154–61), a turn whose reason was not immediately clear to me. Late medievalists in English studies have been making the case for a diachronic historicism for some while now, seeking to define a historicism that does not lock the past in periodic boxes of radical alterity (see, e.g., Simpson, "Diachronic History").

14. For a profound meditation on the value of hermeneutics in the contemporary academy, see Pfau.

15. For an especially rich appeal by an author for friendly reading, see Nathaniel Hawthorne, who imagines his reader as "a friend, a kind and apprehensive, though not the closest friend," with whom the author shares a "genial consciousness" that permits Hawthorne to speak of himself "but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil." Such a relation keeps an author from "violating either the reader's rights or his own" (6). I thank Luisella Simpson for this reference.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2017.132.2.377 Published online by Cambridge University Press