



Philosophy of Interpretation

## **Reading 'Jabberwocky' Rightfully: Meaning, Understanding, and the Politics of Interpretation**

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**ABSTRACT:** In his essay "The Politics of Interpretation: Spinoza's Modernist Turn," Berel Lang attributes to Spinoza the view that interpretation presupposes or implies a political framework-in effect, that interpretation is itself a politics. The thrust of Spinoza's argument is against "interpretation from authority," i.e., against the view that the meaning of a text can be determined by an external authority. Understanding cannot be coerced, according to Spinoza. In my paper I attempt to make the relationship between reader and text even more direct and "free" than it is in Spinoza. I argue that any approach (such as Derrida's) which posits an interpretation between reader and text places constraints on the notion of a democracy of free readers. I argue that in a truly literate democracy readers have the right to claim that they have understood or grasped their texts without having any kind of intermediary placed between themselves and their texts, regardless of whether this intermediary takes the form of an external authority (in Spinoza's sense) or an interpretation (in Derrida's sense). In the course of the paper I draw upon Michael Dummett's philosophy of language in order to critique the "humpty-dymptyism" of the interpretationist school. I place myself firmly on the side of Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, and spend some time discussing the significance of the difficulties which she experiences with the nonsense poem, "Jabberwocky."

Most philosophers of language who have referred to the confrontation between Alice and Humpty Dumpty in Chapter Six of Lewis Carroll's book, *Through the Looking-Glass*, have used that famous scenario to illustrate certain contrasting approaches to a philosophy of language. In general, most philosophers who cite the famous scenario tend to take the side of Alice against Humpty. I want to suggest, however, that, while Alice is right about something, she is also wrong about something. I want to suggest that she makes a mistake, not in her philosophy of language, but in her politics, especially the politics that surround the act and practice of reading. She makes a mistake not in the course of her defence of the objectivity or publicity of meaning, but in her acknowledgement of Humpty as a putative authority on meaning. She makes a mistake, one might say, about the nature of her rights and powers as a reader.

This mistake becomes apparent when we contrast the scenario in Chapter Six with a less famous but equally significant scenario that occurs in Chapter One of Carroll's book, a scenario which occurs shortly after Alice enters the Looking-Glass House. This is the

scenario in which Alice first picks up and tries to read the text of the poem 'Jabberwocky'. At first glance it makes no kind of sense at all since it seems to be written in a strange language; then she realises that she knows the language after all, that the script of the text has been inverted so that she can make it out by holding it up to the mirror. At this point she has not yet fallen foul of the anarchic, topsy-turvy ethos of the looking-glass world. She is still a good reader. Although she doesn't quite recognize the poem for what it is, viz., a nonsense poem, her initial response is correct. Her response is close to that of someone who knows how to read and appreciate nonsense verse. She is right, for example, to think that it is a very pretty poem and at the same time rather hard to understand, that somehow it seems 'to fill her head with ideas', only she doesn't know 'exactly what they are.' She sums up the theme of the poem as 'somebody killed something,' adding 'that's clear, at any rate.' And this is pretty much what the poem means. If it meant any more it would cease to be a nonsense poem. Instead of leaving it at that, however, she makes the mistake later in the narrative of asking Humpty Dumpty what the poem means, as if there existed a level or range of meaning which is available to Humpty but not to her — as if nonsense verse hides a deeper, clearer meaning which is available to more expert readers. The real mistake here is Alice's, not Humpty's. She has lost confidence in her own ability to read, in her own power as a reader; she assumes there must be more to the nonsense poem than meets the eye, and proceeds to defer to the hermeneutical authority of Humpty. Humpty, of course, is happy to declare that he 'can explain all the poems that ever were invented', and proceeds to assign meanings to all the obscure terms that give the poem its playfulness, thus depriving the poem of its charming nonsensicality. The important point, though, is that as soon as Alice decides to consult Humpty about the meaning of 'Jabberwocky' she reneges on her rights as a reader. She is no longer reading the poem *rightly*, but, more importantly, she is no longer reading it *rightfully*. It is this sense of reading rightfully that I want to address in this paper. I want to recommend to you a concept of the rightful reader, as part of my small contribution to a politics of interpretation. My main point will be that interpretive pluralism does not provide an adequate politics of interpretation.

The concept of a 'politics' of interpretation is one that I take from Berel Lang's essay on Spinoza, an essay in which Lang has some thought-provoking things to say about Spinoza's rejection of the authorized reading of texts (Lang 1990: 217-243). Lang attributes to Spinoza the view that interpretation presupposes or implies a political framework - in effect, that interpretation is itself a politics. In his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza is of course writing about the Bible and its interpretation, but, as Lang points out, much that he says can be extended to other kinds of texts as well, especially to literary texts where questions of interpretation also arise. The thrust of Spinoza's argument is against 'interpretation from authority,' against the view that the meaning of a text can be determined by an external authority. While Spinoza accepts that external authorities have rightful power over the domain of actions, he denies that they have rightful power over the domain of thought or interpretation. States and sovereigns are not concerned with questions of meaning or interpretation *per se*, but only with actions. Understanding cannot be coerced — it remains the right and the power of the individual, determined by his capacity for the light of reason. Just as no-one has the right to coerce thinking or judgment, so no-one has the right to coerce interpretation. 'The individual justly cedes the right of free action, but not of free reason and judgement' (1951: 259). However great or just the authority of sovereigns or governments, they can 'never prevent [individuals] from forming judgments according to their intellect' (258). The right of interpretation is a right of the individual, along with freedom of thought in general. The right and power of the individual to think, reason, and interpret should be reflected at the political level, or in the public sphere, as a freedom from coercion by external authorities.

What I am interested in here is Spinoza's notion of a politics of interpretation, his notion that reading can be spoken of in terms of freedoms and rights. In the same way that

Spinoza rejected the notion of an external authority that purports to mediate between reader and text, so I want to reject the notion of an internal entity or process, such as an interpretation, which is posited between reader and text. My intuition is that interpretive pluralism posits such an intermediary. What the reader takes with her is never *the* meaning of the text but an interpretation of the text which is not identical with the meaning of the text. The reader is thereby denied direct and full access to the meaning of the text. Indeed, this whole way of stating the reader's relationship to the text — i.e., in terms of direct and full access — is dismissed as logocentric, presupposing a metaphysics of presence, derived from a false model of the reader/text relationship. The effect achieved by interpretive pluralism is similar therefore to that achieved by Spinoza's external authorities. In both cases the reader's power is alienated, her right of direct access to the text theoretically denied. Consequently, the free and rightful reader must reject interpretive pluralism as firmly as she rejects Spinoza's external authorities. The free and rightful reader cannot be satisfied with anything less than full and direct access to the meaning of the text. To the extent that she may wish to claim right of access to texts, then to that extent she must be prepared to reject a full-blown interpretative pluralism. By a full-blown interpretive pluralism I mean a theory which commits us to the view (a) that reading any text is essentially an activity of interpretation, (b) that there can be more than one valid interpretation of any text, and (c) that there can be no authoritative or final reading or interpretation of any text. Interpretive pluralism is currently the dominant theory of the relationship between readers and their texts; and it is dominant, I believe, because it seems more politically liberating, more tolerant, than the traditional alternatives. On the pluralist model, the reader seems freer than she has ever been before — free from the tyranny of authorial intention, free from the tyranny of those who would claim to possess the one true reading of the text, free from the priestcraft of hermeneutical authorities. I want to suggest, however, that interpretive pluralism is not as liberating as it appears to be, that it places constraints on the reader which are inconsistent with a fundamental principle of democratic practice. Interpretive pluralism places constraints on the reader precisely because it theoretically denies the reader full and direct access to the text, thus theoretically disempowering the reader and confounding the democracy of free readers.

The main problem for the democratic reader is how to express tolerance for other readers without at the same time conceding that their readings are as valid as her own. The problem of tolerance arises in this way. If I can claim to understand, to *grasp* a text in a logocentric sense of grasping, what am I going to say to someone who seems to understand it differently from me? Suppose someone begins to talk about, say, a poem in a way which indicates that she has understood it differently from me - so differently, in fact, that I am obliged to think that she has misunderstood it. Suppose also that, after much discussion, I am still convinced that I am right and that she is simply mistaken about the poem. I seem to be in danger now of falling into an intolerant stance in relation to this other reader. Instead of saying: 'Your interpretation is as valid as mine' (which is what the interpretive pluralist would want me to say), I seem to be saying to the other reader: 'You have misunderstood the text'. I seem to be adopting a position of cognitive superiority — of cognitive intolerance — *vis-à-vis* the other reader.

This problem of tolerance is in fact easily solved by the democratic reader. It is solved by applying a simple distinction that is fundamental to liberal-democratic philosophy, i.e., the distinction between cognitive tolerance and civic tolerance, between tolerance of the belief and tolerance of the believer. At least some interpretive pluralists seem to think that tolerance at the political or civic level must be reflected in tolerance at the cognitive level. They seem to assume that, by conceding that others have the same right to interpret texts as oneself, we are somehow committed to acknowledging that these other readers' interpretations are all equally valid and indefeasible. But this is like saying that the right to freedom of expression somehow commits us to acknowledging that all opinions are equally

valid and infeasible, as if the price of civic tolerance is compromise of private conviction. For the democratic reader, this should not be the upshot of applying principles of freedom or tolerance. Speakers, believers, readers, and interpreters are all systematically tolerated because they are citizens of democracies, not because they are ultimately right in everything they say or think. The mistake of the pluralists is to assume that if the state is pluralist, and the civic ethos is pluralist, then the cognitive process must be pluralist — that, just because the state accommodates many polarities, each believer must accommodate these polarities at the cognitive level. Right of belief is conflated with rightness of belief. In the case of reading, such conflation leads to interpretive pluralism, i.e., to the idea that right of interpretation implies rightness (or validity) of interpretation. For the democratic reader, however, pluralism is in the state and in the civic ethos, not in the cognitive or interpretive process. A reader's ability to systematically tolerate those whom she believes to be mistaken in their cognitive or interpretive claims is more fundamental to democratic practice than the ability to say that other interpretive claims are as valid as one's own. Citizens agree to differ and the state systematically accommodates the differences; and each citizen acknowledges the democratic accommodation by his or her preparedness to say: I disagree with what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it. This applies as much to interpretive statements as it does to other utterances, and it is a principle very different from, and more radical than, that of interpretive pluralism.

What we should say about readers in particular is they have the right to claim that they have understood their texts without having an intermediary posited between themselves and their chosen texts, regardless of whether this intermediary takes the form of a 'public' interpretation sanctioned by an external authority or the more 'private' sort of interpretation generated by each reader out of the play of signifiers. The intermediary has been posited in one case to facilitate external authorities, in the other case to facilitate interpretive pluralism, but in both cases the reader has constraints placed upon her — placed upon her right of direct and full access to the meanings of texts. She is denied this right in the name of interpretation — and this denial is the same whether it is done in the name of external authorities or in the name of interpretive pluralism. We have not gained much democratic ground if we abandon Spinoza's external authority, only to find that we are still effectively denied access to the text, this time by an internal intermediary in the form of an interpretation that cannot be assumed to be the meaning of the text.

I began by saying that while Alice is right about something, she is also wrong about something. I want to conclude by suggesting that while Humpty Dumpty is wrong about nearly everything, he is right about one thing. 'The question is,' said Humpty, 'which is to be master - that's all'. If our politics of interpretation is democratic, then the *reader* is to be master of the text in the sense of having full and direct access to its meaning, free from the constraints imposed practically by external authorities or theoretically by cognitive pluralists.

## Bibliography

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