
THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS:
LITERATURE/CULTURE
AND ITS READINGS

Argument

THERE MAY never have been a more pressing need for an understanding of the processes and mechanisms of interpretation as the current age of social media and fake news. This “truth” (scare quotes intended) is being proclaimed from every part of our screen-covered homes, from every corner of the agora, and from within every academic discipline. Despite its ubiquity, however (or maybe precisely because of it), as all truths, the statement invites qualification: on the one hand, its validity is challenged by the recognition that an awareness of the modes in which we make sense of the world and their limitations has always been imperative; on the other, it is verified by the unprecedented proliferation of mediatic platforms that can propagate an infinite amount of information at unimaginable speeds. It is this very proliferation that foregrounds the basic questions raised by the act of interpretation: what counts as a message? Who produces and who interprets it, and under what kind of conventions? When, and how, is information turned into knowledge, and who uses this knowledge? How do we preserve meaning, and what kind of archival forms determine the interplay between remembrance and oblivion? These are the kind of questions that the essays gathered under the banner of “The Conflict of Interpretations” engage with. Our initial assumption is that the multifariousness of the phenomena under scrutiny can only be managed by providing a diversity of approaches and examples, ranging across theories, media, forms and themes. The result, we hope, will confirm not only the importance and complexity of our case studies, but also the inherent collaborative nature of the act(s) of interpretation, its intersubjective grounding that makes a shared world possible.

When challenged to clarify a (still) contentious concept such as “interpretation,” there is a legitimate temptation to take a few steps backwards, not in the sense of avoiding a possible confrontation, but rather with a mind to gain (a better, perhaps more lucid?) perspective on the matters under discussion. The task the editors of the present thematic issue have taken upon themselves—to invite the contributing authors to reflect on (old and new) positions regarding the possibility of revisiting the “conflict of interpretations” in/through the act of reading—requires such necessary distancing, for the concept under investigation may be addressed from a variety of angles: philosophical, sociological, cultural, linguistic etc. Not coincidentally, perhaps, many of the theoretical or applied demonstrations included in this issue seek to anchor their arguments by way of looking (if not downright stepping) backwards: to recuperate (previously invisible) signs, (lost) memory or meaning. Etymologically, “recuperating” is “taking back,” “re-gaining”; a *transfer* is implied in this process and it is not always a smooth one.

The multiple (re)counted stories that make up our tradition, we are reminded,¹ are “given” to us by way of *transmission*, and it is precisely through this mechanism of “passing on” (that is, of reappropriation) that the bundle of founding, collective, as well as individual narratives survives: “A tradition remains living, however, only if it continues to be held in an unbroken process of reinterpretation.”² In other words, the morphological changes of various forms of representation, occurring in time, are the result of an organic evolution, one which is always in-the-(re)making: “our ‘heritage’ is not a

sealed package we pass from hand to hand, without ever opening, but rather a treasure from which we draw by the handful and which by this very act is replenished.⁷³ Time is of the essence here, again, since these alterations of form attest to the different levels of *temporality* which condition their (re)volution; in Paul Ricoeur's classification: "the time of transmission," "the time of interpretation" and "the time of the meaning itself."⁷⁴ The last level of temporality is particularly interesting for the way in which "the old" opens itself up to "renewal" and "clarification."

While the act of writing (understood as creation) is undeniably "singular"—meaning more than "new" or "unique"—, the act of reading (understood as interpretation) is, more often than not, pluralistic, prismatic. As members of a community, we are the products of several cultural codes imprinted in our "idiocultural"⁷⁵ profile, and this, in turn, is the outcome of several narratives which resurface over time: "The identity of a group, culture, people, or nation is not that of an immutable substance, not that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story."⁷⁶ This objection to the closure of a "fixed structure," of encasing or enframing, provides the clarity needed to see beyond the apparent completeness of a form: it is through the fissures, cracks and splits that light penetrates, however dimly. That is why the act of reading (as interpretation) is viewed as laborious: the ability to make sense of something that is initially invisible, occluded or diffused, to perceive or glimpse through obscurity are no easy endeavors. A "conflict of interpretations" looms behind the contrast between imperfect visions and, perhaps, more illuminating perspectives, the tension between these often amounting to discord and collision.

Essentially human, language itself (seen as speech, text, discourse)—acknowledging/addressing *an*-other—resists assimilation in an enclosed "system": "For us who speak, language is not an object but a mediation. . . . speaking is the act by which language moves beyond itself as sign toward its reference and toward what it encounters" and "beyond the closure of signs."⁷⁷ In the creative fields—such as the field of literature—, language as (inventive) writing is fundamentally *relational*: for a work to be identified as "singular," it needs to assert its distinctive features *in relation to other*, pre-existing "products": "The singularity of the artwork is not simply a matter of difference from other works (what I term 'uniqueness'), but a transformative difference, a difference, that is to say, that involves irruption of otherness or alterity into the cultural field."⁷⁸

This relational ontology is part of the (religious, linguistic, literary etc.) imaginary of most communities (whether local or global) and one of its major achievements is the ability to preserve and reactivate memory through the agency of the narrative function. For it is "through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate our own temporality"; "we are literally 'entangled in stories.'"⁷⁹ Translation and translatability, too, facilitate the transmission of a communicative act. Literature—as a repository of communal values and strategies of making sense of the world—ensures the survivability of memory against the threat of various forms of extinction. In an essay entitled "The Paradox of the Person,"⁸⁰ Robert Esposito reminds his readers of the December 2006 cover of *Time* magazine featuring a computer screen instead of "Person of the year." The screen spells out "You." and the cover explains: "Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world."

In light of the recent, heated debates on the alleged “autonomy” of AI-generated content, one might condescendingly look back onto the message, musing at this privilege of centrality the reader is given or wondering: “What/Who is an/the author?” Similar reflections and questions are formulated by the authors of this thematic issue.

The volume opens with Horea Poenar’s foregrounding of the imperative—in an age of blind adherence to distant reading practices and of volatilized interest in singular and authentic acts of interpretation—to engage with, in the sense of read through, the turbulent, destabilizing force of ever renewable forms. Drawing on the example of the ceaselessly non-reiterable difference emergent from the improvisational aesthetics of jazz, Poenar presses for breaking the cake of convention through hermeneutic endeavors that are to emancipate themselves from prescriptive ideologies and creatively participate in the multiplication of forms that grant meaning to continuously shifting worldviews. Performing a genealogical descent into the structuring pillars of symbolic anthropology, Ruxandra Cesereanu’s meticulous cartography of the field of imagination studies reveals a change of focus, in contemporary research, from the inflexible force of archetypal schemes of interpretation onto anarchetypes and their disruptive, form-shattering impetus. In a compelling foray into Scottish novelist Muriel Spark’s narrative experimentation with modes of intersubjective cognition, Petronia Petrar’s discussion of the ethics of form highlights the crucially disorientating and unsettling stance that ought to steer readers’ approaches to the radical otherness of the fictional world. The first in a group of three essays exploring the re- and trans-figuration of the colliding temporalities of contemporary Irish fiction, Carmen Borbély’s inquiry into the promissory framework of the time-ecology presaged by Mike McCormack’s novel *Solar Bones* outlines the importance of heeding the objectual timescape in its enmeshments with the human. Focusing on the co-constitutive dynamics of conflicting or competing discourses of trauma and loss in two of Colum McCann’s novels, Elena Păcurar discloses the possibility of translating—in alignment with the ethics of transculturalism—the rhetoric of trespassing into an irenically aggregated and coherent memorial(izing) narrative. In another take on the discordant relation between hegemonic and marginal practices of recollection in McCann’s fiction, Călina Părau sets the foundations of a poetics of indeterminacy, dissonance, and ambiguity, viewed not as averse but as conducive to the articulation of a paradoxical memory of disremembrance. This avenue of interpretation continues not only in Amelia Precup’s reading of the intersected encodings of vulnerability and resilience at the interface of environmental and transgenerational memory in Anthony Doerr’s short fiction, but also in Rareș Moldovan’s examination of the technological inscription of (ir)reproducible memory in Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Filtering her arguments through an analytical lens that is unconstrained by convention, Alina Preda sieves through different, incongruous readings of Jeanette Winterson’s *Art & Lies: A Piece for Three Voices and a Bawd* to show that it is an unconventional text positioned on the cusp between novelistic narrative and anatomy of fiction. The problematization of disjunctive voices in Preda’s essay is also addressed in Paul Mihai Paraschiv’s reflections on the ethics of nonhuman narratives in two eighteenth-century novels. Rethreading the ethical textures that seam through, in contrapuntal manner, the acts of reading hosted by this volume, Dragoș Bucur’s investigation of the reception of Jewish-Romanian lit-

erature in the period between the two world wars unveils the need, in contemporaneity, to acknowledge its vibrant formal innovations and linguistic experimentations. Last but not one in our polyhedral ensemble of perspectives on the conflict—or, rather, dialogical field—of interpretations is Mia Biligan’s transversal retracing of the differently framed readings imparted to the works of postwar Romanian novelist Sorin Titel, whether consonant with, or dissonant from, the canonical tendencies of the time. Finally, Mihai Ignat examines a number of more or less recent novels that, despite their thematic diversity, have in common the experimental dimension, reflecting the tendency towards disaggregation, ambiguity and discontinuity of the postmodern reality.

The only measure for success will be the degree to which the Romanian academics at Babeş-Bolyai University, featured with their papers in this volume, may contribute to a larger, ongoing process of research in this renascent field of contemporaneity and into an increasingly changing, shifting world. They display their diverse and valued potential as they are exceptionally designed to provide a genuine inter-cultural context for the study of the *complex and systemic process* of the reading-interpretation routine, regularly holding the ground for a ‘conflict of interpretations.’ For better and for good, the interpretation of the literature of readers has always been creatively adapted to and influenced by cultural geographies and circumstances, setting forth new productive visitations of literature, beyond the traditional chronology, under the umbrella of a set of textual practices. These essays are what they were meant to be: an *examination, inspection* and *exploration* of a range of practices, rather than an investigation of a temporally neat construction or diachronic re-visitation of reading programs, within and without their network of alternatives.



THE EDITORS

Notes

1. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Action*, edited by Richard Kearney (London–Thousand Oaks–New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1996).
2. Paul Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe,” in *Hermeneutics of Action*, 8.
3. Paul Ricoeur, “Structure and Hermeneutics,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, edited by Don Ihde (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 27.
4. Ricoeur, “Structure and Hermeneutics,” 27–28.
5. “Idioculture is the name for the totality of the cultural codes constituting a subject, at a given time.” See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London–New York: Routledge, 2004), 22.
6. Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos,” 7.
7. Paul Ricoeur, “Structure, Word, Event,” in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 84–85, 96.
8. Attridge, *Singularity*, 136.
9. Ricoeur, “Reflections on a New Ethos,” 6.
10. See Jane Elliott and Derek Attridge, eds., *Theory After “Theory”* (London–New York: Routledge, 2011).