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Ambiguity and Interpretation: An Essay on  
(Textual) Liberation and the State

*I*

*The text has a history.* This generalized paraphrase of Jacques Derrida's seminal project of deconstruction reminds us that insofar as hermeneutics is concerned, no text exists outside of the world. All literature has a past—it is circumscribed within the history of the world as such and it cannot escape this “historicity.” To ascribe revelatory status or substance to any text is to grant some level of objectivity that no text, in and of itself, enjoys by its own merit. It is to privilege—to authorize by virtue of a specific author or authorship—one particular set of words above another for the sake of maintaining the notion of order; in the face of abject ambiguity, the quest for order demands an author, and by proxy, objectivity. Authority and objectivity are the only guarantee of revelatory substance, or so modern iterations of Christianity often assume with their sacred texts (or desire). However, it is not exclusively revelation I am concerned with in the present context, but the intersection of interpretation and liberation; in short, is it possible that the quest for socio-political liberation is in need of textual ambiguity?

As an example of the problem I wish to address, I suggest that, generally, modern iterations of Christianity place an undue level of objectivity (authority) upon biblical texts. The biblical text is the “Word of God” because, presumably, God authored

(authorized) the biblical text. Of course, how exactly this divine authorship came to be is a matter of incessant debate within Christian denominations. Yet, it is not ironic that “authority” and “author” derive from the Old Latin word *auctor*, which was understood to mean “originator, promoter.” The primacy of the author, the “original promoter” of the text, assumes that authorship and authority are intertwined, if not entirely synonymous. Beginnings are essential to order, just as authorship is essential to the order of meaning. As such, one can easily replace “authority” with “objectivity”, and vice-versa, to explain how certain texts, religious or otherwise, are deemed to carry innate revelatory substance (being, presence, hypostasis, et. al.) by virtue of who authored the text. The text is authorized by virtue of a specific author or authorship: interpretation, therefore, must be fixed within the prescribed confines of this “authority.” Meaning, in the interests of discerning and sustaining presumably preexistent, objective truth, is dependent upon the (supposed) existence of the Author.

The Bible is not my primary concern; however, it reflects the same questions of objectivity, order, authority, and authorship that I wish to critique. This symbiotic relationship between authorship and objectivity must be extrapolated out into the realm of politics, for it is the question of authority (authorship, primacy, originator, et. al.) which underlies the insistence upon “law and order.” Ostensibly, law and order depend upon a prime Mover, Author, Originator to substantiate their claim to efficacy and justice. Within our neoliberal society, multiple parties lay claim to objectivity in order to *maintain* the illusion of law and order, as if the law by which we assume our status of “civility” existed before time,

and it is incumbent upon us to ensure its continued longevity. Yet, is not this the underlying assumption which connects biblical interpretation and political ideology? The assumption *is* that some texts, and by proxy, an Author, exist outside of time and space to an extent that human endeavor is *ordered* by the text and its Author, whether that be the Bible or a piece of legislation. What luck that the Author in question has a best-selling collection of literature to corroborate their claim to objectivity!

This, of course, is no laughing matter. Sarcasm aside, the question of objectivity plays a role within modern politics that deserves critique. If we read any text, and in this example the biblical text, as if the Author is dead—if the Author were present to explain and ensure the force of prescribed meaning, interpretation would not be necessary—what then shall we say to those resisting the preexistent law and order of a supposedly civilized society? They too read the text of social order as if the author is dead, recognizing gaps and interpretive openings that would, hopefully, open the possibility of liberation. Interpretive license is the key to liberation. Therefore, objectivity and the question of authorship (authority) are intricately related to both textual liberation (the emancipation of meaning from the confines of preexistent order) and political liberation (the emancipation of people from the confines of preexistent order). Order, for both the text and political action, is the enemy.

Derrida's rejection of the "metaphysics of presence"—the concept that words carry within themselves readily apparent and fixed meaning, and hence his project of deconstructing the text to reveal the inherent ambiguity of language—demonstrates the obvious irrelevance of the author, and therefore the

irrelevance of authority as it relates to the text. The text is not authoritative, because it makes no difference who the author might be. Likewise, interpretation, just as the text itself, is ambiguous. Meaning is not fixed, but encountered as a trace within the interpretive act. We read any text as if the author is dead. Some may wish to ignore this, and argue that their interpretive act is somehow faithful to the “clear, objective truth of the text itself”, yet that even those who propagate this notion of textual objectivity exert near obnoxious effort to affirm their particular interpretation of the same text as their compatriots, suggests that this is all a grand delusion. The necessity of interpretation is the first clue that authorship is largely irrelevant to the pursuit of meaning, and for our tasks, for the pursuit of justice in the face of subjugating order.

Likewise, the law itself is not objective, but like the biblical text, is circumscribed within human history; it is constructed in order to substantiate a particular concept of order. Yet, as has been suggested, is it *possible* that order, in and of itself, becomes an illusion if we realize that the Author is dead? If the Prime Originator is absent, what then shall we make of our existing law and order? Does it deserve to be enshrined and revered, or dismantled in the fact of abject subjugation? It is not a question of blind nihilism, or radical subjective notions of what is true, good, and beautiful, but recognizing that what we deem “law and order” within our societies relies upon the concept that the law is substantiated by an objective force. Yet, that the law is subject to change (or destruction altogether) is akin to the same reality that the text is in constant need of interpretation; meaning is becoming, and so is liberation. Both rely upon the possibility of another interpretation in

contradistinction to the existing order of interpretation.

It is the abject need for interpretive rigidity, and likewise the notion of textual objectivity, that I wish to deconstruct, and instead affirm textual ambiguity as the catalyst for interpretive liberation, liberation through interpretation. Is it possible that interpretation could be freed from the confines of authority (author, authorship, etc.) in order to embrace textual ambiguity, and therefore actualize liberation? Is the quest for socio-political liberation in need of textual ambiguity?

## *II*

Liberation through interpretation. Consider, for a moment, the possibility that meaning is in fact constructed. Meaning, the hopeful outcome of interpretation, does not exist or occur outside of time, space, and context. Meaning is contextual, derived from history, but not dependent upon history. It is reflective of a particular moment, the connection of past, present, and future simultaneously occurring. In other words, meaning is becoming, and becoming has a history, or is, at least, indebted to a history. What then can be made of the assertion that liberation is possible through interpretation, or more specifically, textual ambiguity? Suffice it to say, liberation is only possible if the text is presumed to be open to the possibility of difference. If the possibility exists that other meaning is becoming, not-yet visible but approaching, then likewise, liberation is possible.

Of course, these assertions depend upon assumptions, postmodern (or post-structuralist, if you so choose) in

their generality, but realistic in their specificity. It is the radical historicity of the text which animates the assertion that socio-political liberation is possible through textual ambiguity, and the worlds of interpretation which become visible in light of the preexisting ambiguity. The Author is dead—or so we presume unconsciously, even those of us fascinated by the Author to resist this reality—and it matters not who the Author was or might have been. *The Author is dead*. As such, we are expected to interpret in light of their absence. The question now becomes whether our interpretation will serve the existing order of things, or open the possibility of difference, of other-order, of new interpretative worlds.

Herbert Marcuse, one of the key figures in the Frankfurt School and critical theory, suggests that revolution and liberation are inextricably linked with interpretation. In the moment where the oppressed recognize the façade of order, meaning, and “needs” prescribed by the existing State, an act of interpretation occurs. It is the interpretive act of recognizing the glaring gaps within the text of the State that allows for the possibility of change, and hopefully, the possibility of liberation. In his seminal treatise, *An Essay on Liberation* (Beacon Press, 1969), Marcuse writes, “But while the image of the liberation potential of advanced industrial society is repressed (and hated) by the managers of repression and their consumers, it motivates the radical opposition and gives its strange unorthodox character” (51). Under the hand of oppressive “order” and “meaning” of the State, dependent as it is upon the concept of objectivity and authority to corroborate its action, those who are oppressed hold in their mind this “image of liberation potential” which is, of course, of a “strange unorthodox character.” It critiques the

system as such by virtue of its interpretive license. Taking into account the shared text of what constitutes the State, we can see how minority groups interpret this text differently in order to achieve liberation; the act of interpretation, in itself, is liberation, as it removes the subject from the confines of prescribed meaning into the possibility of something new.

Marcuse critiqued the “advanced industrial society” because it commodified human subjects and created a virtual reality of sorts, which propagated false notions of needs and morality in order to substantiate the totalizing system as such. In many ways, his critique is still viable today within our neoliberal order. Just as Marx began his critique of capitalist political economy from the basis of human needs, so too does Marcuse recognize that human needs are either ignored, distorted, or both within capitalist societies. What separates Marcuse from Marx, however, is that Marcuse situates human needs into the “biological” stratum of human nature and existence, not merely the psychological or existential, important as these are for the overarching critique. In other words, by suggesting that the actual human needs being ignored or distorted by capitalist societies are a biological precondition of human nature, Marcuse is able to emphasize the visceral nature of liberation for those who recognize their repression. Liberation, as such, becomes more than increased personal freedom—though it surely includes this dimension—but the destruction of the capitalist State in the pursuit of fulfilling biological needs and satisfaction. The quest for liberation is in fact a quest to become more human. In the aforementioned treatise, Marcuse writes, “Inasmuch as these needs and satisfactions [produced and commodified by capitalism] reproduce a life in

servitude, liberation presupposes changes in this biological dimension, that is to say, different instinctual needs, different reactions of the body as well as the mind” (17).

For Marcuse, liberation is the possibility of something other than what passes for normal, good, or proper within the existing State. This possibility relies upon interpretive license in order to see through the façade of normativity and order. As mentioned previously, if the Author is dead—and no one can claim access to objectivity in this absence—then the text, whether written or political, is open to interpretation. And no one interpretation will suffice. This, I suggest, is the undercurrent of Marcuse’s critique: the oppressed must interpret their situation *differently*, which unlocks the reality of liberating possible worlds.

In another seminal text from Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), the full force of interpretation as the key to liberation comes into view. Marcuse notes how “universals” within analytic philosophy—such as “nation,” “state,” “university,” or “corporation”—are not representative of the people or entities subservient to their function. In other words, the nation does not represent its citizens any more than a spokesperson represents a corporation. Yet, these universals “exist” and are fueled by the associated subjects, functions, and relationship of their constituted components. However, as Marcuse notes, “In their decision (vote, pressure, propaganda)—itself the outcome of competing institutions and interests—the Nation, the Party, the Corporation, the University is set in motion, preserved, and reproduced—as a (relatively) ultimate, universal reality, overriding the particular institutions or peoples subjected to it” (206).

There are two points expressed in this quote which deserve further analysis. First, the reality that these “universals” are comprised of actually-existing human subjects and the relationship of associated institutions. Universals, therefore, do not *actually exist*, but within discourse, represent something ostensibly larger than what their subjugated components represent on their own. However, Marcuse’s point is that the readily apparent translation of these universals to *be* representative of their parts is the problem. These universals should not exist, but they do, and so the question becomes: to what purpose? How do we interpret these universals in the face of their abject fragmentation and veneer of existence?

The second point deserving of analysis is that these universals thrive upon subjection to a particular, constituted order. This unlocks, for our purposes in this essay, the reality that the State is a Text. To be fair, Marcuse does not make this connection, at least not explicitly. However, the paragraph following the aforementioned quotation I referenced above reveals this connection between Text and State:

The disharmony between the individual and the social needs, and the lack of representative institutions in which the individuals work for themselves and speak for themselves, lead to the reality of such universals as the Nation, the Party, the Constitution, the Corporation, the Church—a reality which is not identical with any particular identifiable entity (individual, group, or institution). Such universals express various degrees and modes of reification. Their independence, although real, is a spurious one

inasmuch as it is that of particular powers which have organized the *whole* of society. A retranslation which would dissolve the spurious substance of the universal is still a desideratum—but it is a political desideratum. (Ibid., emphasis in the original)

Marcuse, without saying it explicitly, suggests that the State is in fact something which necessitates interpretation, and yet it is this interpretation which is necessary for the liberation *from* the text, the State of the Text, the Text as State. Earlier, I posed the question: How do we interpret these universals in the face of their abject fragmentation and veneer of existence? The answer, following Marcuse, is rather simple. We interpret these universals as texts, and since the Author is dead, and objectivity is a false ideal, the possibility is open for difference. It is this radical reinterpretation of the State as a Text which allows for liberation, for if the State can be *reinterpreted away*, so too can the systems of oppression. Order, as our ultimate enemy of progress and justice, is now deconstructed by its nature as a subtext of the Text, neither of which are deserving of the meaning they ostensibly hold. The task of interpreters is not to discover the finality of meaning, but to create new meaning as resistance to the prescribed order of the State.

### *III*

I therefore suggest that ambiguity and liberation go hand-in-hand. If we conduct our politics with the knowledge that what passes for universals, objectivity, and authority are in and of themselves false constitutions of order, then they can be interpreted to

become something other-than. Ambiguity of the text, just as the ambiguity of the State, allows for liberation through the act of interpretation.

Interpretation, as we have seen, is necessary because the Author is dead. And, even if the Author (or author) were still alive and present to prescribe meaning in the interests of removing the necessity of interpretation, our task would not change. The task is always the same: to discern beyond the façade of order and open the gaps of the State, the Text, and the subtexts which arise as the oppressed poke holes in veneer. Interpretation is that conscious act of resistance to the prescription of order, not for the sake of nihilistic abandonment, but for the sake of justice.

The text has a history. As does the State. All universals are constructs of actually-existing individuals, groups, or institutions. The question becomes: how will we interpret these universals to reveal the façade of order? Order is the enemy, and thankfully, our enemy is not impervious to the radical act of *reading differently*.