

INTERPRETATION (THE NEOPRAGMATIST TRADITION)

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It. *Interpretazione (la tradizione neopragmatista)*; Fr. *Interprétation (la tradition néopragmatiste)*; Germ. *Interpretation (die Tradition des Neopragmatismus)*; Span. *Interpretación (la tradición neopragmatista)*. The question of interpretation, which has a centuries-long history in the field of hermeneutics, has been investigated by several authors belonging to the pragmatist tradition, beginning with Peirce, who laid the foundations for the development of a theory of interpretation, although he ultimately turned to semiotics. This entry will be limited to the theories of interpretation developed by the so-called “neopragmatists”, also known as “post-analytic pragmatists” – as distinguished from “analytic pragmatists” such as Brandom, Putnam and Davidson (see Kremer 2018). Although inspired by different approaches, the generation of neopragmatist thinkers has been generally characterized by a difference from classical pragmatism (Peirce, James, Dewey) since it rejected the systematization of knowledge as well as the notion of truth, but also took its distance from the analytic tradition. In particular, starting with Rorty, neopragmatists took the subject of interpretation through their contacts with German and French hermeneutics, deconstruction, and American literary criticism. Moreover, they distanced themselves from Peirce and followed, instead, Dewey’s pragmatist line (and his development of the interpretation of artworks in aesthetics). For Rorty, the rejection of the idea of an ultimate truth and the emphasis on human fallibility go hand in hand with the recovery of the concept of interpretation borrowed from Nietzsche, Gadamer and Derrida: Rorty discarded the concept of experience in order to introduce the “linguistic turn”. The centrality of the concept of interpretation was then further developed, although from different perspectives, in the philosophies of Margolis and Shusterman, to the point of speaking of an “interpretive turn” also in the pragmatist tradition (see Hiley *et al.* 1991; Margolis, Rockmore 2001). The debate on interpretation in the neopragmatist tradition revolves around four main issues: 1) intentionalism/anti-intentionalism, which is closely related to 2) the identity of the work, 3) the role of specialized criticism and the community of interpreters, and 4) the relationship between interpretation and understanding.

INTENTIONALISM/ANTI-INTENTIONALISM

Inheriting a theme central to the continental tradition and developed also in analytic debates (Danto, Carrol, Davidson), neopragmatists addressed the role of the author's intention in determining the meaning of a work. Schematically, there are two opposite positions: on the one hand, the defence of the author's intention as the cornerstone of interpretation (a strong version of this position was upheld by Hirsch 1967); on the other hand, a theory that reappraised the centrality of the text itself (a conception represented by Beardsley 1970). An example of intentionalist reading (in open contrast with Beardsley) in the pragmatist tradition is represented by Knapp and Michaels (1985), who attempted to avoid the dissolution of the text by proposing an identification between what a text means and what its author intends it to mean, therefore ultimately grounding the work in its author, in explicit disagreement with deconstruction.

The neopragmatist tradition which started with Rorty is characterized by a form of anti-intentionalism that is related to the rejection of foundationalism. In this aspect, neopragmatists are influenced by hermeneutics and deconstruction. Indeed, one of the merits of Rorty's philosophy lies in opening the dialogue between "continental philosophy" and pragmatism, although he ultimately referred to hermeneutics as a "polemical term" (Rorty 1979, 315 ff.). Such dialogue has been later developed by Bernstein (2010) and Michel (2019), among others – for a reflection on the role of interpretation, see also Perissinotto (2002). Rorty defined pragmatism "as the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism" (Rorty 1991, 153), thus linking linguisticism with a clear rejection of intentionalism and rather promoting the idea that every text is continuously recreated by the plurality of its interpretations (for a recent challenge of Rorty's anti-intentionalism from inside, see Poullaka 2011). Drawing on Nietzsche and Derrida, Rorty dissolved the idea itself of an objecthood: "you don't find out anything about objects at all – you just find out about how your web of beliefs and desires can be rewoven so as to accommodate new beliefs and desires" (Rorty 1982, 125).

From this point of view, the object of interpretation is always a matter of choice that each time is constituted anew, according to the interpreters' work of recontextualization. What thus guarantees the possibility of interpreting a work is not rooted in any form of textual "essence", but rather in the common agreement among the interpreters, which changes every time according to the linguistic practices that re-circulate and invent new languages (Rorty 1982, 142 ff.). A development of the theme of intentionalism in response to Rorty, beyond a strictly pragmatist context, emerges in Eco (close to Peirce and semiotics), who rejects the relativism resulting from this focus on the interpreters and calls, instead, for the "intention of the work". Also on a different position, Culler set against Rorty the limits imposed by the interpreter's context, defending the instances of "overinterpretation" that underpin structuralism – for this debate, see Eco (1992).

A different position on the debate about intentionalism is represented by Shusterman, who approached hermeneutics and the question of interpretation through Rorty, but worked out a different reading of it (see Shusterman 2000; 2002). Shusterman strongly rejected the "linguistic turn", while emphasizing the value of practical and embodied experiences. Influenced by hermeneutics (and Gadamer's thought, in particular) in the phase of his transition from analytic philosophy to the development of pragmatist aesthetics (see Kremer 2018; Romagnoli 2023), Shusterman attempted to position himself between two

different approaches, i.e. the search for the meaning of the text (Beardsley), on the one side, and the dissolution of interpretation in favour of “misinterpretation” (Rorty), on the other. Shusterman’s proposal draws on Dewey’s conception of knowledge as interaction to extend it to interpretation as “sense-making” (Shusterman 2000, 92).

THE IDENTITY OF THE WORK

A closely related question is how to safeguard the identity of a work in an anti-intentionalist and anti-objectivist framework, i.e., without falling back on the author’s intention or on the objective meaning of the text itself. Neopragmatists strove for a unity of meaning which refers to the same work, despite the plurality of its interpretations.

Margolis significantly contributed to the theory of interpretation after his departure from the analytical tradition. His idea is based on the notion of “radical interpretation”, i.e., a form of pluralistic relativism that rejects the traditional objectivist theories of interpretation and allows for the validity of conflicting interpretations. Indeed, Margolis provided for some gradation between true and false, based on the notions of “acceptability” and “plausibility”, showing the epistemic foundations of his relativism (Margolis 1980, 150 ff.). Margolis’s position is a decisive rejection of Beardsley’s objectivism. The possibility of detecting reference, which is required for the possibility of interpretation, does not require a permanent agreement based on a definite essence of the work, but needs instead a merely temporary agreement. In Margolis’s terminology, all we need is simply “provisional unicity” rather than “essential unity” (Margolis 1995, 34-35). Along these lines, Margolis distinguished interpretation from description as the “hard fact” which grounds interpretation itself. The latter deals with criteria of truth and falsity, while the former has to do with plausibility (Margolis 1980, 111).

Despite their many points of convergence, Shusterman (2022, 99 ff.) criticized Margolis’s reading, showing how descriptions themselves could be subject to interpretation and historical change. Shusterman introduced instead a difference between “referential” and “substantive” identity, that is, a distinction between a difference *in the* interpreted object (i.e. different interpretations referring to one and the same work) or *of the* interpreted object (i.e. a change of the work itself) (Shusterman 2012, 94 ff.). The answer therefore lies in the socio-linguistic practices and traditions when referring to a particular work, which changes (a change in the object) because of the interaction between the interpreters and the work itself.

SPECIALIZED CRITICISM AND THE COMMUNITY OF INTERPRETERS

The anti-intentionalist conception sparked off a debate on the centrality of the interpreters, i.e. thematising whether the primacy of interpretation belongs to a community of experts or whether all interpretations, including non-specialist ones, are on an equal footing. This is a touchstone of an internal distinction within pragmatism: namely, the distinction between Rorty’s reading, who advocated the figure of the “strong poet” as an ideal figure who is capable to make things anew and always creates himself/herself (Rorty 1982, 157 ff.) and the anti-elitist outcomes proposed by Shusterman.

Fish has contributed to this debate with his concept of "interpretive community" (Fish 1980). He supported a sort of intentionalist reading that was not limited to the author, but included the interpreters too, who, in building their interpretation, bring about a "new" work, here in line with Rorty. Unlike the latter, however, Fish tried to tie this view in with a social construct, going beyond the "private interpreter" of Rorty's conception. Besides the authors' and readers' intentions, there are institutional intentions which pre-structure every interpretation. So, the identity of the work is made possible not by the text but by the common nature of the community of interpreters who refer to the same work.

Shusterman criticized Fish's reading for falling back on a professionalization, whereby the community of interpreters coincides with the community of experts. The same critique is raised by Shusterman to Rorty, who, for him, had ended up creating a distance based on personal interpretations that only focuses on specialist readers. According to Shusterman, all pragmatist theories failed to recognize the value of non-professional responses. In this respect, Shusterman goes back to Dewey's anti-dualism and anti-elitism by emphasizing the relationship of interaction between the author and the audience, that is, between the author and the community of interpreters, placed on an equal footing.

INTERPRETATION AND UNDERSTANDING

Another widely debated issue concerns the pervasiveness of interpretation and the difference between the latter and the concept of understanding. Prompted by Rorty's focus on the tradition that ranged from Nietzsche ("facts are precisely what there is not, only interpretations") to Gadamer ("all understanding is interpretation"), neopragmatists inherited the debate between the centrality of interpretation and anti-foundationalism – a different path has been followed by Dreyfus and Brandom, who focused on the debate on Heidegger's concept of understanding.

According to Rorty, it must be maintained that "all inquiry is interpretation", since any reference to a pre-linguistic moment would imply a relapse into an ultimate foundation. For this reason, he claimed an "anti-dualistic" concept of interpretation, where anti-foundationalism is strictly intertwined with linguisticism (see Rorty in Hiley *et al.* 1991). In contrast with this reading – accused of relapsing into a "hermeneutic universalism" (see Shusterman 2000, 115) – Shusterman conceptualized understanding as being "beneath" the logic of interpretation, with the aim of preserving forms of immediate and "pre-conscious" experience. Since most of our everyday experiences are pre-reflexive, interpretation is not always needed and only emerges in some complex cases (it involves a problem-situation). These topics were at the centre of a direct confrontation between Rorty's linguisticism and Shusterman's elaboration of his somaesthetics, as emerged in Festenstein, Thompson (2001, 134-157). Shusterman stressed that the dismissal of the pre-interpretative moment is strictly connected with the primacy of professionalism and elitism. Contrary to this, he aims to rehabilitate the ordinary (including the embodied aspects). Ultimately, Rorty responds by reaffirming the value of language and dismissing the role of the body, thus emphasizing the existence of different paths within neopragmatism.

A further discussion on the distinction between understanding and interpretation was provided by Stroud (2002), who claimed that the Gadamerian approach is actually compatible with Shusterman's conception. For Stroud, Shusterman's misleading came down to holding that, according to Gadamer, interpretation must be conscious and reflective. On the contrary, Gadamer held interpretation to be pre-reflective, since interpretation is always historically situated and unconsciously influenced by its spatial-temporal context (Stroud 2002, 155 ff.).

Dreon also contributed to this topic by standing on Shusterman's side in emphasizing the role of the non-interpretive and non-linguistic dimensions of our experience, which are not aimed at knowing but rather at acting (e.g., reading a train schedule to take the right train, see Dreon 2012, 262). Dreon stressed the functional character of interpretation and knowledge since they can take each other's place according to the situation: thus, she reassessed the hermeneutic circle in a pragmatist direction.

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