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Reviewed Work: Interpreting Interpreting: Interpreting Dickens's *Dombey* by Susan R. Horton

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Romantic Pierrot. Compared to Alceste by Janin in 1932, and given deep symbolic significance by Gautier's review of *Le Marchand d'habits* (the mime performed by Jean-Louis Barrault in *Les Enfants du Paradis*) in 1842, he became an embodiment of the Romantic imagination, acquiring toward the end of the century overtones of *ennui*, decadence, and even sadism. Storey provides some valuable texts, including Gautier's review, Margueritte's horrifying pantomime *La Peur*, and Verlaine's "Pierrot."

Thus far the book is indeed a history. Relying largely on previous historians, it lucidly sets out what can be seen as an evolution from Pedrolino to Verlaine. Storey's explanations are clear and sensible, and he quotes in full some fascinating material. The last two chapters, which I am less qualified to judge, are criticism rather than history. We follow the subsequent career of our hero in the work of Jules Laforgue, who thought of himself as Pierrot; T. S. Eliot, who was much influenced by Laforgue; and Wallace Stevens, who used a Pierrot persona in his poetry and letters.

These discussions are stimulating, but not all equally convincing. Laforgue saw himself as both Pierrot and Hamlet, and Storey bases his whole history on a fundamental opposition between Hamlet and Harlequin (p. 7). But if there is no basic difference between Harlequin and Pierrot, and if Prufrock, who is not Hamlet, must therefore be Pierrot (p. 166), why was a specific history of Pierrot necessary? Most of the book emphasizes what we already knew; there are many, many different kinds of fool and clown. To end with brief references to Charlot and the characters of Beckett is to read more universality into Pierrot than the character can support.

Indeed, despite its author's contention that Pierrot does have a continuous identity (p. 68), the most valuable point made in the book, I think, is the astonishing diversity in Pierrots through the ages. There is simply no link, except in name, between the ingenious plotter of *Li Duo finti Zingari*, the "lazy booby" of *Arlequin Orphée le cadet* (p. 49), the "honest, loyal valet" of Lesage and Dorneval (p. 55), the pathetic or melodramatic character played by Deburau, and the sinister "fallen angel" of Henri Rivière (p. 112).

As a history of Pierrot's successive transformations, this book is interesting and helpful. I learned a great deal about actors and theaters, especially in the eighteenth century, and enjoyed reading texts not readily available elsewhere. The second part of the book may well be equally valuable to specialists in modern poetry, despite what seem to me its rather artificial premises.

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INTERPRETING INTERPRETING: INTERPRETING DICKENS'S *Dombey*. By Susan R. Horton. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. xiii, 162 p.

At first, the task of interpreting *Interpreting Interpreting* stammers almost as much as naming that task does. Horton's Preface encourages such hermeneutic stuttering when she warns her reader that the main text will repeatedly hesitate in its critical claims as it comments on its comments. These hesitations enter into the reader's own interpretation of the book's argument as he continually pauses to

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wonder whether the contradictions he finds are intentional or not. But since the argument itself calls into question successful discoveries of authorial intent, the reviewer's interpretive task is made even more problematic. I will return to some of these complications after I have summarized the theory of interpretation Horton skillfully presents.

Throughout *Interpreting Interpreting*, Horton examines the act of interpretation by focusing on the varied ways critics make sense of Dickens' *Dombey and Son*. Though she does present her own interpretation of the novel, her primary goal is to analyze the critical premises and strategies which generate different meanings for *Dombey* and by extension for all texts. Horton argues that meanings are strictly a function of *interpretive systems*, systems containing notions of the proper interpretive unit, the relevant whole, the author's intention, the reader, and meaning itself. Instead of proposing a definitive interpretation for *Dombey*, she demonstrates that a critic working within one set of interpretive assumptions will produce a textual meaning quite different from a critic working within a contrasting set. Horton further argues that there is no neutral position beyond interpretation from which to judge the relative correctness of the two opposed meanings. Any such judgment must always be made from within some interpretive system. However, Horton's is not a relativist argument for infinite interpretations that are unconstrained and unpredictable. Rather, she claims that the actual interpretations of any one text are in fact finite and that the variables responsible for generating the different meanings are identifiable. These variables consist of the interpretive assumptions Horton describes in great detail using numerous examples from *Dombey* criticism. Though differing assumptions about textual parts, wholes, intention, etc. generate different meanings and though these assumptions are always in motion over time, they are stable enough at any one moment to allow specific interpretations to be made. For Horton, then, interpretive constraints exist but they are "valid only for one reader doing one reading of one text at one instant in time, reading with one stable set of assumptions."

Horton leaves the relation between unique and communal interpretive assumptions unclear, but her general hermeneutic position is sharply defined: "The structure of the text (its particular contours, shape, and the structure of relationships that is seen to hold between its parts) is determined by the structure of an interpreter's inquiry (the sequence and nature of the questions he asks of the text)." For Horton, structures and meanings are never in a text prior to interpretation; rather they exist only after an interpretation has been posited. Thus, *Interpreting Interpreting* presents what I call a *constitutive hermeneutics*—a theory of interpretation that sees textual "facts" as results not causes of specific interpretive acts. Complementary versions of this hermeneutic position can be found in Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in this Class?*, Susan Stewart's *Nonsense*, Walter Michaels' forthcoming *American Epistemologies*, and in a politicized form in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. *Interpreting Interpreting* joins these studies in placing the determinants of meaning not in the objects of interpretation but in the interpreter's belief systems, hermeneutic procedures, value hierarchies, and ideological interests. As Horton puts it at one point, "I need to insist once more that the meaning I have just described is no more 'in' Dickens's text than is any other meaning that other interpreters have 'discovered' there . . . Here, as always, interpretive strategies bring into being the interpretations they describe."

Texts, then, do not control interpretations, interpretations control texts. Horton again and again defends this absolute power of interpretation over texts: "That interpretation consists in the retrieval of what was 'really there' or what 'really

happened' is one of the fragile fictions upon which the whole enterprise of interpretation depends." Horton rejects "the belief that there is in the text an 'isness' that is retrievable by careful study and sensitive reading." A critic's interpretive system, not an independent text, determines the meaning the critic produces. This aggressive stand on interpretation's constitutive power makes quite puzzling Horton's occasional references to a text's "conflicting signals" (p. 72), its "formal clues" (p. 110), and the "complexities inherent" in Dickens' novel (p. 141). Also confusing are her references to "misreading" (p. 126) and "the fullest possible interpretation" (p. 89). These references tend to undermine Horton's hermeneutic theory because they suggest textual elements prior to interpretation that guide or resist interpretive acts, pre-existent elements that can be misunderstood or overlooked by interpreters. Such uninterpreted givens have no place in a constitutive hermeneutics, and thus *Interpreting Interpreting* often appears to contradict itself.

But this is a cagey book. Horton disarms her critics by making two admissions in her Preface. First, she points out that she has deliberately left remnants of earlier drafts in her final version "to testify to the fact that even the interpreter who tries hard to be neutral inevitably slides over into prescriptives and evaluatives, talking about things like 'best' or 'fullest' interpretations." Secondly, she underlines the difficulty of her metacritical project when she asserts that "once firmly inside an interpretive system . . . the commentator necessarily will find it impossible to see any but his own interpretation." Both of these remarks function as explanations for the apparent slips I have noted: the contradictions are simply remnants of previous drafts or inevitable failures of the final draft to escape the dominant fiction that one's own interpretation is more correct than others in some absolute sense.

But these unmarked contradictions are not merely "explained away" by the Preface commentary. They are also juxtaposed throughout the main text to self-conscious moments when Horton explicitly marks her own inconsistencies. For example: "I am well aware, of course, that I have been offering structures with one hand and taking them away with the other," presenting a biographical explanation for *Dombey*, and "then casting doubt on my own interpretations." In related gestures, Horton observes that she has fallen back into her own interpretive system for making sense of *Dombey*, that she has moved from neutral description to explicit prescription. At one point, after describing the interpretive basis for all meanings given *Dombey*, she remarks, "Finally, however, I cannot resist being at least a bit prescriptive," and then goes on to insist that Dickens critics should include certain elements in their interpretations. And in her conclusion Horton remarks, "What we must do, however (and here I am aware that I have hopelessly toppled over into the prescriptive), is temper the authority with which we offer our interpretations."

All this self-demystifying in her Preface and throughout her text serves not only to disarm Horton's critics. More importantly, her strategies appropriate that criticism to support her own theory; that is, she transforms inconsistencies and contradictions in her text into evidence *for* her arguments. Her text proves exactly what her theory claims—that description always slips into prescription and that the most neutral observation is always already a positioned interpretation. She demonstrates that even the most self-aware commentator cannot help but make use of the fictions that all interpreters use, fictions of uninterpreted givens and of absolutely correct interpretations. *Interpreting Interpreting* is thus both the statement and the performance of a theory; and, paradoxically, the failures in performance establish rather than undermine the persuasive success of the statement.

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As a volume of criticism and theory, *Interpreting Interpreting* has implications for literary study that go beyond its significance for Dickens scholarship. In fact, the book suggests a solution to the recent conflict between traditional advocates of explication and those literary theorists (like Jonathan Culler) who argue for going "beyond interpretation" of individual texts. Horton's study implies that the demands of both sides can be met: she offers her own biographical explanation for *Dombey* while she simultaneously examines the "preunderstandings and preassumptions" that have determined her interpretation and those of others. In this way she enlarges the interpreted "text" from Dickens' novel alone to the novel plus the criticism surrounding (and constituting) it. Horton's hermeneutic self-consciousness and her expanded subject matter provide one welcome alternative to the narrow limitations of traditional exegesis. *Interpreting Interpreting* is another hopeful sign of a much needed change in direction for contemporary literary study.

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GEORGE ELIOT AND THE VISUAL ARTS. By Hugh Witemeyer. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979. xiii, 238 p.

In a letter written while she was at work on *Middlemarch*, George Eliot observes that "one must not be unreasonable about portraits. How can a thing which is always the same, be an adequate representation of a living being who is always varying?" Her remark suggests the possibilities as well as the limits of any study of her fiction in terms of the visual arts. She was, clearly, a reader of Lessing, for whom the provinces of visual and literary portraiture were separate but still related, deserving definition in terms of one another. Indeed, as Hugh Witemeyer's book impressively demonstrates, Eliot's knowledge of and interest in the visual arts was extensive enough to shape the treatment of many aspects of her fiction. Portraiture is one of four major modes in which Witemeyer explores this indebtedness. For Eliot, he explains, "the process of knowing another person begins in pictorial first impressions," a method with significant literary consequences. The "characteristic George Eliot chapter begins with description, setting a scene in static, visual, often pictorial terms." Then it takes the inevitable Lessingite step and "modulates into drama." But not before we have witnessed a presentation of details and persons that draws upon pictorial conventions in order to supply visual clues to impending events, class relationships, moral problems, and character. She was, after all, a novelist of personality who often referred to her own art as portraiture; sometimes her use of that term seems more conventional than Witemeyer would like us to believe, but nevertheless it is a significant token of the importance of pictorial aesthetics in her literary-critical vocabulary.

In the three other main sections of *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, Witemeyer documents his subject's literary debts to history painting, genre, and landscape. All three modes were undergoing a process of redefinition by Victorian painters and art critics, and Witemeyer shows convincingly that Eliot paid close attention to these new formulations. A great portion of the contemporary revolution in the visual arts concerned a new conception of typological symbolism. Eliot's reading in Feuerbach had prepared her to sympathize with this: "Feuerbach himself suggested a didactic and affective rationale for literary pictorialism