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What is a Text?

The quotation above by Haraway discusses the idea of a reading of a text. Specifically, it notes that the text is "never simply there." Metaphysically speaking, the "text" is a peculiar concept. Its transcendent existence - or lack thereof - is crucial to many discussions, including the possible objectivity of historical analysis, the criteria for a good literary analysis - even the question of whether or not a "good" literary analysis exists. A plausible suggestion would be that a text is an idea or a conglomerate of ideas. This suggestion assumes a rationalist perspective, placing weight on the transcendent. In this essay I would prefer, however, to examine the subject from a different perspective: an empiricist one, to be precise. To accomplish this, let us consider the following: that a text is nothing more than the symbols or sounds it is composed of. This will be argued in favor of from three different perspectives: first I shall discuss the metaphysical theory behind this hypothesis, following the ideas of David Yuhm. I shall then proceed to examine the subject through the perspective of literary analysis in general, relating to some of the ideas of Michel Foucault. Lastly, I will examine this hypothesis from a theological perspective; following an idea from the Babylonian Talmud, I will argue why this hypothesis is actually reasonable from a religious point of view. Throughout this essay, I will attempt to synthesize the logical, the artistic and the spiritual, following the interdisciplinary spirit of this IPO competition and that of Leonardo Da Vinci.

Metaphysical Similarity

The metaphysical discussion in this essay relates to a concept discussed by Yuhm in his *Metaphysics*: similarity. Certain concepts or objects are, in essence, identical. This idea is crucial when discussing the metaphysical existence of a text, since it may be printed many times, in different languages or eras. If there is a transcendent idea of a specific text then it follows that all editions of this text share something in their essence. If, on the other hand, it seems that in essence these different editions are greatly diverse, then this might lead us to believe that they are not participial to a common idea. Here I will assume two texts to share an idea if under the same circumstances they would be interpreted in the same way by the same person.

Let us take the best example of a text that has been reprinted many times: the Old Testament, appearing first as the Jewish Tanach and then being edited into the Christian Bible. Over thousands of years, many different editions of this text were created. The obvious differences are those of different languages; there are some beautiful examples of great differences between the Hebrew and Latin versions of the Old Testament. Without delving too much into the subject, I will note that the story of Pharaoh's order to kill all Hebrew male babies is very different between those versions because of one simple Latin word: *haebraeorum*. Instead of writing "The Hebrew nurses", it is written "The nurses of the Hebrews", turning the story into a story of inter-national altruism. This is caused only because of translations.

But there are deeper differences. In ancient times there were different versions of the Old Testament that varied greatly. The Issai cult of the Judah desert used a version of the Tanach that included whole books that are not included in other Jewish versions. The Christian Old Testament, in turn, also includes some books - The Makkabim book, for instance - that never became canonical in the Jewish editions. All of this begs the question: is there a common idea which all of these versions are participial to? I would like to suggest that there is not. A counterargument to this would be that although all of these versions do not share an idea, some of them that are closer to each other do share one. Perhaps there are several transcendent ideas of the same text: the Old Testament, the Tanach, The Issai Tanach etc. The problem with this is that it is hard to draw the line between different versions. A Jewish Tanach is obviously different from the Old Testament and obviously

shares with another copy of the Jewish Tanach, but what about a Jewish Tanach in a different languages? What about an Old Testament with intertextual annotations? What texts can we put in the same category, and what texts can we not?

We might now suggest that only texts completely identical in their words share an idea. However, even this is problematic. In Jewish tradition for example, even the shape of the letters can be enough basis for a completely different interpretation of the text. As long as there is a difference, even the slightest - it can be the basis for a completely new understanding, even under the same circumstances and in the same social context. This is obviously an extreme example, but it still stresses my point: there are always metaphysical differences to be found between two copies of the same text.

Arguments as this are one of the main reasons in Yuhm's work leading to the conclusion that true, metaphysical similarity - sharing of essence - does not exist. According to his theory, which this essay draws inspiration from, there are no ideal concepts, and two objects can bear resemblance - but never be of the same essence. That is because, on a certain level, "essence" simply does not exist. According to this hypothesis, there is no transcendent text. A text is ink upon paper, light from a screen, sounds in the air and nothing more. It may bear resemblance to other copies of it - but they are not one and the same.

I have examined this issue through a metaphysical perspective. Drawing inspiration from Yuhm's argument, I have attempted to show why this hypothesis makes metaphysical sense. After exploring this metaphysical lens, I would like to take a different look at this hypothesis through other lenses. The remainder of my hypothesis relates to a different idea put forth in the above quotation, the idea that "all readings are mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings and imagined readings". This idea completes the one presented above, together creating my hypothesis (which is essentially a rephrasing and a different perspective on Haraway's) - that the text does not exist beyond the physical, and that all interpretations are by nature partial. The remainder of the essay will deal mainly with the second half of the hypothesis, although it will relate also to the first.

Literary Analysis

Quite unsurprisingly, this discussion of analysis of text relates to the subject of literary analysis. The orthodox method of literary analysis assumes that there is a hidden truth within the text that is to be uncovered by analytical means. The correct analysis is the one that guesses most accurately the intentions of the author. Nowadays there exists, however, a different approach. Rather than assuming that there is a true objective interpretation of the text - an ideal text - we may look at the text as a physical phenomenon, splashes of ink on paper. We interact with this phenomenon, and through our own characteristics - ranging from our understanding of the shapes of ink as abstract ideas up to our own social background - we create new concepts and ideas. Instead of examining the text as a riddle that must be solved, what happens if we examine it as a catalyst for our own ideas?

Michel Foucault brings up an idea that can be relevant to this discussion. In his lecture *The Order of Discourse* he mentions the methods that restrict our discourse from properly evolving and expanding. Quite surprisingly, one of these restrictions is knowledge. In a sense, this seems very true actually. If for instance analysis of a text is a quest for its true meaning, then once this meaning is achieved the text becomes pointless and useless - all that was to be gathered from it has been exhausted. Once you know the answer, there can be no discussion. If on the other hand we observe texts as catalysts for human thought, then the text is never truly exhausted. Each person has their own unique perspective towards its analysis. Since the analysis is a merging of horizons between the author and reader, each new reader brings a different horizon - and creates a new analysis.

The Religious Text

There are two main differences between religious and literary analysis in this discussion. One is that orthodox religious analysis does not necessarily assume we are capable of reaching a true reading of the text. The idea that we are incapable of grasping the complete truths of the scriptures is common and bides well with the opposite of the first half of the hypothesis: that the text is transcendent, to the extent that its true idea is unreachable. However, this assumes that there is a true interpretation, a true reading, only that we are incapable of achieving it. My hypothesis is different; I explore the notion that there exists no true reading, reachable by humans or otherwise. On first glance, this does not go well with religious thought; and to many religious schools, this idea indeed is mistaken. Religious thought tends to assume that there is one true interpretation and that we should always strive towards it, even if grasping it completely is impossible. Yet, I would like to examine a different perspective on this subject, and to illustrate a method by which religious thought actually benefits from this hypothesis.

In the Babylonian Talmud, a Jewish religious text, there is a story named "A Snake-Shaped Oven". The specifics in the story are irrelevant; however, because of one idea presented in it, this is one of the most well-known stories in Jewish thought. Through the story there is a theological debate between the majority of the sages and one Rabbi Elazar Ben Horcanus. Rabbinic law dictates that the majority has the upper hand, meaning that their opinion should be used; however, through a series of miracles R. Elazar proves that God himself is on his side in this debate. In the end, God speaks to the sages, saying that R. Elazar is right and they should listen to him. Then, something remarkable happens: one of the sages stands up and says: "it (this theological decision) is not in the sky." By this he argues that the decision is not in God's hands anymore, and that we humans are free to interpret the texts however we see fit. This radical notion is surprisingly accepted by God, who retreats and allows the sages to win the debate against R. Elazar.

This perspective is radical and unrepresentative of Jewish Orthodoxy as a whole, but does go back to the previous observation I have suggested regarding literary analysis. The idea that the text is not to be "solved" but is actually a catalyst for our own ideas can actually be found many times in different religions. Augustine opened a random page of the New Testament and through the words reached enlightenment - not because he analysed the text but because it triggered something within him. The Sufi Muslims used their holy scriptures to enter trances. Every mysticist school of thought assumes exactly this: that the holy texts trigger something deep within us and in that method bring us closer to god. This actually makes a lot of sense. If the text is a riddle that we must solve, then why give us the text and not the solution to the riddle? Even if we can't achieve the solution, God could still give us the closest understanding of it possible. It is reasonable to assume that the analysis itself is more important than the result. In the christian medieval *disputatio*, for instance, the students debated even over questions with obvious answers such as "does God exist?" In the Babylonian Talmud, many debates are left unsettled, the argumentation being superior to the conclusion.

The second main difference between literary and religious analyses is that religious analyses usually assume that the analysed text is perfect. Assuming this hypothesis does not clash with the notion that the scriptures are perfect texts; it simply assumes that a perfect text is perfect not because of its hidden meaning, but because of its capability to trigger new ideas. This allows us for two important religious notions. The first is that religion is dynamic. If the holy scriptures do not hold one true meaning but are supposed to trigger our own ideas, then it is acceptable to interpret them differently during different eras, allowing for the religion to adapt overtime. Moreover, in order to truly fulfill the entire potential of these texts, they *must* be interpreted and re-

interperated overtime. The second notion is that two different religions with different ideas can coexist. If perfection lies in the capability to trigger new thoughts and ideas and not in the ideas themselves, then both the Quran, the Bible, the Tanach, the book of Tao - they can all be perfect simultaneously.

To conclude this theological analysis, this hypothesis does not require us to abandon the absolute value of the sacred texts, only to re-observe our definition of a perfect text. Once we do so, a new world of possibilities is opened, including within it the ability to adapt our beliefs and coexist with people of other faiths.

This notion is very relevant to our multi-cultural world. Instead of assuming that there is a true understanding, which usually means only those with the right background can reach it, we can assume that every reading is partial. this does not only work nicely with Yuhm's metaphysical theory; it has crucial implications on the lives of us all. If each reading is partial, none of us hold all the pieces of the puzzle. If analysing the text is interacting with it, then different perspectives hold not incompatable beliefs, but different parts of the puzzle that complete eachother. My social background allows me to analyse the quote above via the Talmudic perspective, and people with other backgrounds can analyse the quote through other perspectives. If the quote is a riddle that is to be solved, then one of us is correct and the others mistaken; we are rivals. But if the text is a catalyst to many different interpretations, then each of us holds a different puzzle piece - and only because we are different, both in our readings as well as in our cultures, we can complete the puzzle together.