

Hermeneutic Shakespeare

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2 Literary and Cultural Hermeneutics

After Theory

The period between the late 1960s and the late 1990s is referred to as “The Moment of Theory” in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (5th Edition) and is described as a historically and culturally specific phenomenon associated with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and materialist politics. However, it now appears that this period has been replaced by one known as “post-Theory” (Selden, 3). There are disparate reflections and mediations on the post-Theory epoch: should literary criticism shift its emphasis from general problems (theories and methods) to more particular problems (texts)? Does literature primarily reflect reality, or is it capable of producing reality? Then there are also the debates over the “essentialism” or “constructionism” of literary texts and canons, the nature of literature, the dispute over the historicity or universality of literariness, as well as the disagreement between literary realists and nominalists. The goals or objectives of literature are also contested: does literary criticism serve primarily to shed light on the author? Or the text? Or the historical context?

Literary researchers and scholars such as J. Hillis Miller, Terry Eagleton, and Fredric Jameson, to name a few, have all struggled with these issues and have come up with novel methodologies of literary criticism. Terry Eagleton believes that he is more certain now than he was in *After Theory* that “nominalism is not the only alternative to essentialism” (Eagleton, 19), and thinks that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblances “is one of the most suggestive solutions to the problem of difference and identity, between the essentialist and the arbitrary that philosophy has yet come up with” (Eagleton, 20). Further, Eagleton believes that reality as it pertains to humans is a dual blend of objectivity and subjectivity, nature and culture, world and word, fact and act, structure and practice, the material and the semantic. Individuality and universality are therefore not mutually exclusive. He therefore suggests “strategy” as the keyword for literary research to mediate the interaction between the world and word, structure and event, as well as that of text-author-reader: “Strategies are loose-jointed, internally differentiated affairs, powered by a set of general purposes but with

semi-autonomous parts, between which there can be frictions and conflicts” (Eagleton, 224). Eagleton’s “strategies” clearly have their philosophical premise situated in neither the realm of subjectivity nor objectivity, rather an interconnectedness is emphasized.

Then, Fredric Jameson examines the historical ramifications of literary forms via a Marxist hermeneutics lens, believing that the best literary interpretation must be connected to formalist research at one end and the historical mode of production at the other. Literariness is the union of politics and aesthetics, both of which have an impact on how works are interpreted. Reading should begin with a focus on aesthetic and formal issues, and then incorporate social, political, and historical perspectives. The key, according to Jameson, is to give form a historical dimension.¹ Jameson’s attempts to balance the formalistic and the social and historical demonstrate his attempt to strike a balance between form and history, between structure and culture. J. Hillis Miller criticises the separation of literary activities from human reality and sees them as acts of fabrication, producing unrealistic perceptions. He turns to speech-act theory which views literature as a practical act of doing things in words, to provide fresh perspectives on the nature, function, and form of literature.²

Critic attempts to confront the contentions in literary interpretations, as represented by those of Eagleton, Jameson, and Millers, contribute significantly to the literary discourse. Their efforts to resolve the artificial dichotomies between words and world, materialism and spirituality, subjectivity and objectivity, essentialism and constructivism, imitative or productive functions of literature, as well as between literary formalism and aestheticism, should be acknowledged. However, it is also to be admitted that their tactics are still limited in scope, resembling mediations more than encompassing principles. As a result, the goal of this research is to develop more encompassing principles for literary interpretations. It should be noted that Millers and Eagleton later came to see literary activities as an integral part of human reality, not merely a device for imitating human reality, but an act of producing reality, which provide innovative ideas for literary research in the post-theoretical era, and potentially pointing to a new direction for literary research.

Why Hermeneutics

The diagram of linguistic communication devised by Roman Jakobson is adopted by Raman Selden to illustrate the focus of different literary theories:

CONTEXT
WRITER > WRITING > READER
CODE

As demonstrated, distinct literary theories tend to emphasise different functions of literature. In some literary theories, the focus is on the writer’s

“emotive” or “expressive” use of language; in some others, the focus is on the “context”, the historical dimension at the time of the work’s production; and still others, a different historical context, that is, the reception context, the moment of a text’s reproduction rather than its production, is emphasised (Selden, 5). Selden further categorises the various literary theories to illustrate their foci of interest, respectively:

Romantic-humanist theories emphasize the writer’s life and mind as expressed in his or her work; “reader” theories (phenomenological criticism) centre themselves on the reader’s, or “affective”, experience; formalist theories concentrate on the nature of the writing itself; Marxist criticism regards the social and historical context as fundamental; and structuralist poetics draws attention to the codes we use to construct meaning. (5)

The following is used to represent the categorisation diagrammatically:

MARXIST
ROMANTIC > FORMALIST > READER-ORIENTED
HUMANIST STRUCTURALIST

The categorization illuminates the different aspects of attention of various theories, allowing for a coherent account of the historical development of literary theories. This categorization is considered comprehensive by many, though it also exposes the flaws of the literary theories that predominated literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century. For one thing, it is to be noted that the more modern theoretical subfields of feminism, post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism and gay, lesbian, or queer theory, for example, are not classified. More crucially, the literary theories put forth, even in Selden’s eyes, are all limited in that they only cover one or two facets of literary interpretation, and occasionally they even contradict one another. No wonder Fredric Jameson states that the “theoretical discourse in literature has marked ‘the end of philosophy as such’” and is “to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism” (Jameson “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, 14–15). In Jameson’s understanding, “the effacement of the older categories of genre and discourse” (14) is one of the characteristics of postmodernism.

As the foregoing has demonstrated, eminent critics believe that the current dominance of literary theories is only transitory and represents a phase in the development of literary criticism. More encompassing principles for literary interpretations are demanded. Philosophical hermeneutics opposes binary oppositions, the separation of self from the world, and appeals for a better understanding of the human world via life experiences and interactions. It attempts to perceive the hermeneutical problem within the scope of a general account of interpretation rather than being a collection of devices and procedures for text explication. Philosophical hermeneutics, as previously argued, radically alter the premise of human cognition. As literature interpretations

constitute significant portions of human understanding, it's only logical that philosophical hermeneutics principles can be applied to literary interpretations. One of the essential elements for an adequate hermeneutical theory, and by extension an adequate theory of literary interpretation, is a sufficiently broad conception of interpretation itself.³ Therefore, it is believed that in philosophical hermeneutics can be found the foundation for a radically more comprehensive understanding of the problems in literary interpretation.

Rather than focusing on the boundaries or limitations of understanding, the current research is more concerned with developing some general principles of literary interpretation to aid in the explanation and interpretation of literary works, and in the process, cultivate better self-understanding, or rather, a dialectic of two. As pointed out by David Couzens Hoy in *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, and Philosophical Hermeneutics*, "The need is no longer the more restricted one of providing rules for proper interpretation; rather, a more encompassing necessity arises of explaining the conditions for the very possibility of understanding" (Hoy, 8). In other words, philosophical hermeneutics is applied to the interpretation of literary works in a provocative way, rather than as a restraint or boundary. On the other hand, this research also seeks to find out what conditions our understanding, and what constraints our understanding. If we take Heidegger's fisherman and frying pan example as an example, the present study seeks more to extend the size or scope of the pan. The possibility of enlarging the size or scope of the pan is upheld by Gadamer's idea of the finitude of our understanding. For Gadamer,

Meanings represent a fluid multiplicity of possibilities (in comparison to the agreement presented by a language and a vocabulary). But within this multiplicity of what can be thought—i.e., of what a reader can find meaningful and hence expect to find—not everything is possible; and if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning. Thus there is a criterion here also. The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things and is always in part so defined.

(Gadamer, 281)

The implications are fourfold. For one thing, there are many possible meanings; second, not every interpretation is possible; and then, the most important criterion for judging the legitimacy of interpretations is whether a person can truly fit the understanding into the range of his own various expectations of meaning, or to put it another way, whether the person can understand. And finally, each comprehension is only partial, understanding is the act of constant inquiry.

To better clarify the preceding ideas, the hermeneutic concepts of preunderstanding, the hermeneutic circle and the fusion of horizons are

considered conducive to the explication of the dialectics of text and understanding. The sections that follow provide an account of the historical development of the above conceptions in connection to five principal hermeneutic thinkers. The quest is far from complete, still the goal is to initiate a broader conception of literary interpretation.

Preunderstanding and Hermeneutic Circle

One of hermeneutics' central principles is the hermeneutic circle. Though formulated variously by different hermeneutic philosophers, it generally depicts "the dialectical interaction between the whole and the part, each gives the other meaning; As understanding is circular, and within this "circle" the meaning comes to stand, which is called the 'hermeneutical circle'" (qtd. in Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 87). In other words, parts and whole are related in a circular way in the process of understanding and interpretation: in order to comprehend the whole, it is essential to understand the parts; while to understand the part, it is necessary to have some grasp of the whole.

Initially, the hermeneutic circle operated primarily on a linguistic/grammatical level. For instance, we understand the meaning of a word by seeing it in a sentence; conversely, the meaning of the sentence is dependent on the meaning of individual words. In a broader sense, the meanings of sentences constitute that of a text, whereas a sentence is comprehended as part of a text. Schleiermacher's major contribution to the concept of the hermeneutic circle is his expansion of the dialectic of the whole and part. For one thing, he extends both the concepts of preknowledge and the hermeneutic cycle from the realm of purely linguistic to the thematic realm: "Both the speaker and the hearer must share the language and the subject of their discourse. Both on the level of the medium of discourse (language) and the material of discourse (the subject)" (qtd. in Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 88). Gadamer also acknowledges Schleiermacher's elaboration of the hermeneutic circle of part and whole in both its objective and its subjective aspects, and his expansion of the concept of the whole to the total context of a writer's work, even to "the whole of the literary genre or of literature" (Gadamer, 303).

Schleiermacher also brings the psychological dimension of the speaker/author into the cycle – text, as a creative movement, is part of the author's inner activities and mentality:

Just as every speech has a twofold relationship, both to the whole of the language and to the collected thinking of the speaker, so also there exists in all understanding of the speech two moments: understanding it as something drawn out of language and as a "fact" in the thinking of the speaker.

(qtd. in Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 88)

Dilthey further extends this concept of the hermeneutic circle to incorporate life experiences: “An event or experience can so alter our lives that what was formerly meaningful becomes meaningless, and an apparently unimportant past experience may take on meaning in retrospect” (qtd. in Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 119). Also, Dilthey begins to realize that individuals have always been part of history. As a result, Dilthey’s hermeneutic cycle is integrated with his philosophy of human experience, becoming more subjective and including a deeper historicalism, preparing for a transition from an epistemological to an ontological cycle.

Heidegger is credited with laying the theoretical foundation for the philosophical hermeneutic circle, bringing it definitively into the realm of ontology:

This circle of understanding is not a circle in which any random kind of knowledge operates, but it is rather the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasein itself. [...] the “circle” in understanding belongs to the structure of meaning, and this phenomenon is rooted in the existential constitution of Dasein, that is, in interpretive understanding. Beings which, as being in-the-world, are concerned about their being itself* have an ontological structure of the circle.

(Heidegger *Being and Time*, 143–4)

Heidegger’s existential hermeneutic circle is ontological in nature, as the structure of meaning is rooted in the existential constitution of Dasein. Our being in the world renders us impossible to jump out of it to interpret history. One can only understand history in history and in the history of texts.

The ownmost possibility of be-ing itself which Dasein (facticity) is, and indeed without this possibility being “there” for it may be designated as existence. It is with respect to this authentic be-ing itself that facticity is placed into our forehaving when initially engaging it and bringing it into play in our hermeneutical questioning. It is from out of it, on the basis of it, and with a view to it that facticity will be interpretively explicated. The conceptual explicata which grow out of this interpretation are to be designated as existentials.

(Heidegger *Ontology*, 12)

For Palmer, Heidegger explores into the implications of the hermeneutical circle for the ontological structure of all human existential understanding and interpretation (132). As a result, neither the domain of pure subjectivity nor the realm of pure objectivity can be fully attributed to the hermeneutic circle; instead, the emphasis is on the internal interactions inside the circle of interpretation. Our anticipations in text interpretation are not purely subjective, rather, they are based on the commonalities

that bond us to the text. For Heidegger, we understand a given text, matter, or situation, not with an empty consciousness temporarily filled with the present situation, but rather because we hold in mind and bring into play an initial intention with regard to the circumstance, a predetermined way of seeing, and certain ideational “preconceptions” (Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 176).

Gadamer’s hermeneutics is likewise framed by the concepts of preunderstanding and the hermeneutic circle. For Gadamer, “ideas are formed through tradition, especially through the hermeneutic circle of whole and part, which is the starting point of my attempt to lay the foundations of hermeneutics” (Gadamer, xxxii). Moreover, he points out that understanding involves constant projection:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there.

(Gadamer, 279)

Gadamer, like Heidegger, considers fore-projections indispensable and in perpetual flux in connection to what arises for understanding, and that understanding is the process of working out the fore-projections involved: “Understanding is always moving from the whole understanding (preunderstanding of interpretation) to the part (part of tradition) and back to the whole understanding” (Gadamer, 302). Hoy affirms the significance of preunderstanding for Gadamer, as well as the two dimensions of Gadamer’s preunderstanding, namely, preunderstanding on the part of the participants and preunderstanding on the subject matter:

This preunderstanding extends not only to the participants’ expectations in regard to each other’s standpoint but also to an understanding of and concern with the subject matter (*Sache*) of the discourse. [...] If the preunderstanding is shown to be inadequate, then the one-sidedness it introduces into the interpretation can be exposed, and the path will be opened for further interpretation.

(Hoy, 77–8)

For Gadamer, understanding entails constant revisions of fore-projections, in the process, new meanings project itself in the process. Meanwhile, conflicting projections can coexist, and preconceived notions can be replaced by more appropriate ones. “The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is

envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole” (Gadamer, 302). The mobility of understanding and interpretation is defined by this continuous process.

Both Heidegger and Gadamer see prestructures and hermeneutic circles as ontological and fundamental for understanding. Understanding, for them, is the harmonious unification of part and whole:

Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.

(Gadamer, 302)

This leads to another important concept developed by Gadamer, the fusion of horizons.

Fusion of Horizons

For Gadamer, understanding is essentially a fusion of horizons. What exactly is a horizon? According to Gadamer, the concept has its origin from Nietzsche and Husserl, who both used it to describe the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one’s range of vision is gradually expanded. Gadamer further explicates the concept of horizon in relation to the concepts of situation, standpoint, and vision.

Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “horizon”. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.

(Gadamer, 313)

Coordination or integration was once thought to be necessary only during times of conflict or misunderstanding. However, for Gadamer, understanding is essentially an integration of strange and familiar things, bringing in new and broader perspectives. This fusion of horizons is essential for empirical understanding. Gadamer speaks of narrowness of horizons, the possible expansion of horizons, the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. “A person who has no horizon does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him” (313). “To have a horizon,” on the

other hand, means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it.

A person who has a horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition.

(Gadamer, 313)

Then, to acquire a horizon means that “one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion” (Gadamer, 316). Therefore, just as there can be no understanding without preknowledge, there can be no understanding without bringing forth a change of vision or horizons.

Hermeneutic philosophers seek to find out how we approach and perceive strange things as well as what conditions contribute to this integration of horizons. The capacity of humans to see similarities in disparate things is most likely the cause. When you encounter something unfamiliar, you get involved by connecting it to something you already know. Integrating strange things into familiar ones not only absorbs new elements into the original cognitive frame of reference but also alters our psychological perception. Thus, the emphasis after Gadamer is not only on unexpected encounters with unforeseeable things but also on encounters that transform us. Jacques Derrida, convinced of the unsettled and fragmented nature of truth, is concerned that the interpretation process drives truth to conform to the interpreter’s psychological picture in an attempt to render truth less fragmented, whereas Gadamer’s conviction is that we must constantly expand our horizon in order to attain new ones: “Every experience has implicit horizons of before and after, and finally fuses with the continuum of the experiences present in the before and after to form a unified flow of experience” (Gadamer, 246). For Gadamer, it is perhaps true that understanding is always partial and fragmentary, only we become less partial and fragmentary in our comprehensions through this fusion of horizons, as “the horizon of the present is conceived in constant formation insofar as we must all constantly test our prejudices”, and “the horizon of the present does not take shape at all without the past” (Gadamer, 246). The significance of Gadamer’s concept of fusion of horizons lies in its acknowledgement of our own partiality while still striving for a more comprehensive understanding, ultimately achieving a better understanding of the self and world.

Literary/Cultural Hermeneutics

Preunderstanding, the hermeneutic circle, and fusion of horizons are the key ideas we’ve covered thus far in our discussions of hermeneutics. What

are the implications of these ideas for literary hermeneutics? To begin, it should be emphasised that literary interpretation, like all other understandings, is ontological and precedes every act of existence. Thus, “the fundamental ontological task of Interpreting Being as such includes working out the *Temporality of Being*” (Heidegger *Being and Time*, 40); Heidegger argues that it is the interpreter’s task to render the meaning structures pertaining to the interpreter’s world transparent, and these meaning structures shape how we understand the world at the deepest ontological level. Therefore, crucial for understanding is not simply grasping one’s situation but in the disclosure of the concrete potentialities for being within the horizon of one’s placement in the world. “Concrete ontological research must begin with an investigative inquiry which keeps within the horizon we have laid bare” (Heidegger *Being and Time*, 40). For this aspect of understanding, Heidegger uses the term “existentiality” (*Existenzialität*) (qtd. in Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 131).

Furthermore, understanding should be viewed as a process of participation in events, a process of ongoing coordination and interaction of past and present, rather than a subjective, isolated act of consciousness. We are already living in history and actively conversing with it and have been engaged in a conscious dialogue with the past; hence, the past and present are intertwined in our existence and the past informs the present. Consequently, modern readers also bring cultural assumptions about topics of interest into their interpretations of texts. These preconceived ideas are usually unconscious, but they arouse our interests of the text in a certain way.

Ideally, according to Gadamer, readers should start reading a text with the fullest understanding of its content and context. Here again, we come across the classic hermeneutic circle, where the movement between part and whole connects the past and present horizons. The effect of this fusion of past and present horizons is a change in the reader’s horizon. However, are we already heading toward subjectivism if interpretations are mostly motivated by personal interests? And Gadamer’s argument that “each interpreter has a different understanding of the work” seems to exacerbate this anxiety. Isn’t that a recognition that personal fantasies can be imposed on a text arbitrarily? This, however, is a misunderstanding of Gadamer. In his view, any understanding, whether of a text or a speech, necessitates the incorporation of other people’s horizons into the interpreter’s individual circumstances.

On the other hand, each circumstance is unique, interpretations cannot be solely dependent on templates or rules; text relevance is also required. Even if the same interpreter reads the same great literary or philosophical work, the message of the text will change as one’s thought evolves. This is not to say that only certain parts of the text are passed on at a given time, while the other parts of the text remain silent (although this may also occur), but rather that as horizons shift, the questions raised about the text will shift as well, and thus the entire text illuminates our lives in different ways. To state

that there is no final accurate reading of the text is to admit the dynamic nature of understanding, not to rule out the possibility of misinterpretation.

Since understanding is the process of making the meaning structures pertaining to human life transparent; then, what meaning structures constitute the world we live in? Historical tradition, philosophical meanings (the way we experience existence and the world), and cultural structures (the way we experience each other), according to Gadamer, constitute a hermeneutic universe that is accessible to interpretation (Gadamer, xxiii). These categories, namely, the historical, philosophical, and cultural dimensions, should not be regarded as constraints to literary interpretation, but rather as illuminations. They do not constitute an exclusive list, but rather are open for more potentials of understanding. The dimensions and perspectives of literary interpretation include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. As a significant dimension in literary interpretation, the historical examines not only the “historical consciousness” but also the “historically-effected consciousness” of a literary work.
2. The philosophical dimension and its significance lie in providing both an explication of the philosophical ideas manifested in a text and an examination of the philosophical premise or underpinning of a text.
3. The cultural dimension, as an important dimension of literary interpretation, adheres to the principles of the heterogeneity and plurality of cultural identities, emphasising the historical and contextual aspects of identity, while also devoting itself to the revelations of the oppressiveness of false or hegemonic identities.

Historical Dimension of Literary Interpretations: Historical Horizon and Historically Effected Consciousness

Dilthey was one of the first to point out the historical nature of human consciousness, marking a historic turn in hermeneutics. Understanding, for Dilthey, is the regaining of a consciousness of the “historicality” of our own existence, which has been lost in the static categories of science. It is “not through introspection but only through history do we come to know ourselves” (qtd. in Palmer *Hermeneutics*, 101). Understanding is essentially a self-transposition or imaginative projection whereby the knower negates the temporal distance that separates him from his object of interpretation and becomes contemporaneous with it.

Dilthey seeks to understand human nature by attempting to enter the collective or “objective” cultural spirit of a specific historical era. The task of understanding is to recapture the original life world that texts represent and to understand the other person (the author or the historical agent) through the texts, documents, artefacts, etc., that serve as the medium of the historical world. To recapture the collective or “objective” cultural spirit of a particular historical period is better referred to as “historical consciousness”.

This historical consciousness, as well as the relevance of history and tradition in our knowledge, is affirmed by Gadamer.

In the sphere of historical understanding, too, we speak of horizons, especially when referring to the claim of historical consciousness to see the past in its own terms, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices but within its own historical horizon. The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions. If we fail to transpose ourselves into the historical horizon from which the traditionary text speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us. To that extent this seems a legitimate hermeneutical requirement: we must place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it.

(Gadamer, 313)

Gadamer uses the term “historical horizon” to refer to this historical consciousness – to see the past in its own terms. He further stresses the multifarious nature of the historical horizon, namely, different aspects of the subject matter can be presented at different times or for different standpoints.

We accept the fact that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and combine only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multifariousness of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part.

(Gadamer, 296)

However, Gadamer believes that we should not only talk about “historical consciousness” or “historical horizon” in this sense, but a “historically effected consciousness” as well. Thinking only in terms of historical horizons, that is, merely transposing oneself into the historical situation of the past, in reality, suspends the claim to truth:

We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint—i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves. Acknowledging the otherness of the other in this way, making him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth.

(Gadamer, 314)

According to Gadamer, history is not the object outside human observation: are we just focusing on a certain period of history as a subject matter that is not influenced by the views of our own situation or our expectations of a future ahead of us? Instead, Gadamer contends that transposing our historical consciousness into historical horizons does not entail entering alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; rather, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness (Gadamer, 315).

The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding. A hermeneutics adequate to the subject matter would have to demonstrate the reality and efficacy of history within understanding itself. I shall refer to this as “history of effect.” Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event.

(Gadamer, 310)

For Gadamer, history shapes our perceptions of things and forms the perspectives and horizons through which we understand the world. History determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation (Gadamer, 311). To be more precise, history or prejudgements determine not only our subject of inquiry but also our object of investigation. Understanding necessitates the constant recovery and appropriation of the cultural heritage as a conduit for communication between the past and the present. Thus, as Gadamer points out, tradition is not an impediment to understanding, but rather what renders understanding possible.

Thus, crucial to our understanding is a moving horizon, which integrates the historical moment, the heritage and tradition, and the hermeneutic moment: “Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition” (Gadamer, 315). Furthermore, the formation of this moving horizon requires no subordination of one individual to another, but rather integration that leads to a higher universality (312). Specifically, how does this historically effected consciousness operate? Finding the right questions to ask, according to Gadamer, is already a step in the right direction: “Rather, historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*) is an element in the act of understanding itself and, as we shall see, is already effectual in *finding the right questions to ask*” (Gadamer, 312).

The way philosophical hermeneutics deals with the tension between the text and the present is another important aspect; since, according to Gadamer,

every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. However, “the hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two, but in consciously bringing it out” (Gadamer, 317). On the one hand, it is crucial for hermeneutic interpretation to project a historical horizon distinct from the current horizon, thus separating the past’s horizon from its own. On the other hand, an awareness that this historical horizon is only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, hence should be recombined with what has foregrounded itself (the hermeneutic situation) (Gadamer, 317). In this sense, understanding is not at all a matter of securing ourselves against the tradition that speaks out of the text, but, on the contrary, of excluding everything that could hinder us from understanding in terms of the subject matter. (Gadamer, 282–3).

Take the interpretations of Shakespeare’s plays as an example. It is through them that we encounter a world different from our own, which is the historical horizon as defined by Gadamer. Even while readers will encounter many unfamiliar premodern horizons, there is still much we are familiar with in the texts which appeal to us today. What connects these two horizons? To begin with, the extrospective universe shared by mankind is full of artistic and literary works reflecting on similar themes. Furthermore, readers recognise Shakespeare’s works as part of our cultural heritage. As modern readers of classical texts, we interpret in a cultural-linguistic context and a cultural tradition that links the past with the present. Finally, it must be understood that an individual’s prejudgements are more than just his judgments; they are the historical reality of his being.

The intertwining of historical layers is typically exemplified in adapting Shakespeare’s plays for a modern audience, particularly in the adaptation of Shakespeare’s history plays, in which different dimensions of history are contested, namely, the historical time when events actually take place, Shakespeare’s own time, and the time of the current adaptation. To make matters more complicated, Shakespeare has a lengthy history of reception and intervention as a result of critical analysis and performances. Contentions do arise as to which aspect of history should be respected and why.

Shakespeare as a historical identity is contested, as Monique L. Pittman reminds in “Shakespeare and Cultural Olympiad”. This historical identity, he claims, is sculpted and formed by the technologies and ideological cravings of the “now”, which craft and fictionalize the very “then” that is sought (Pittman, 21). Jonathan Bate argues in a similar vein that “Shakespeare” is a body of work that is refashioned by each subsequent age in the image of itself, rather than a man who lived from 1564 to 1616 (1). Douglas Lanier also affirms this aspect of contemporary relevancy:

Shakespeare offers a symbolic alternative to—and thus potentially a critique of—the alienation and fragmentation characteristic of modern life, while at the same time his image and work are drawn into the very

processes of reproduction, mediate action, and commodification from which Shakespeare seems to promise escape.

(Lanier, 145)

These critics, to diverse degrees and from various perspectives, highlight the current relevance of Shakespeare, while the past appears to play a minor role in their critiques of Shakespeare's plays.

Henderson, on the other hand, opposes this overemphasis on current relevance by stating that Shakespeare's plays strive to portray the past as well as shadow the present through the past (201). The danger of highlighting its present relevancy is that "the tension created by a gap of two hundred years between Henry's day and Shakespeare's can be effaced by this more univocal modern reading of the political as contemporary allegory" (201). Nevertheless, the present moment of performance still plays a role:

Recontextualizing Shakespeare's play for the modern stage or screen involves another layer of awareness of time and history: in addition to the historical era represented within the Shakespearean text, and the Elizabethan moment of its composition, one must add (at least) the present moment of performance – as well as, in most cases, some awareness of the theatrical and screen history of productions intervening.

(Henderson, 253)

Henderson identifies four historical dimensions in adapting/performing Shakespeare: the historical age depicted in the Shakespearean texts, the Elizabethan period, and the current time of performance, as well as the theatrical and screen history of production. Perhaps a history of the plays' critical reception, in addition to their performance history, should also be included. Hawley adds another historical layer to interpretation by arguing that "the histories speak 'from', 'towards', as well as 'about' distinct historical or historiographical places" (Hawley, 5). By using "towards", he points to the fact that our interpretations are future-projected as well.

To summarize, for interpreting and adapting Shakespeare's plays one has to be aware of at least the "now", the "then", and the "tradition", i.e., a history of reception, and even a "future". The ensuing questions will be how to cope with the various historical dimensions in our interpretations and adaptations. In film adaptations, probably, the present constitutes a larger proportion as the two critics both maintain appropriating Shakespeare to address our imminent problems, with Lanier concerns much about our post-modern alienation and fragmentation, and Pittman points to the technical and ideological crafting and fictionalizing of Shakespeare.

Laurence Olivier's use of spatial signals to signify the three levels of time, as conceived by Anthony Davis in Olivier's *Henry V*: Renaissance time, mediaeval time, and what one may term "universal time" (Davies, 29), is worth considering. In the film adaptation of *Henry V*, Renaissance time is

signalled by the model of London and the occasion of performance filmed in the Globe playhouse. Then, “the estrangement, and reconciliation through marriage, of the realms of France and England, together with the campaign, major battle and the personal affinities and differences”, according to Davis, signal the time of the central historical event (29). The universal time, however, presents a challenge for cinematography since, due to its historical objectivity, it is more difficult to relate to specific features of the film:

Universal time is a convenient term here for that imaginative reconstruction of time stimulated and reinforced by myth – in this case, the Agincourt myth. It is in essence romanticized, fluid and peopled with archetypes, for it is a removed epoch conceived of as unambiguous by the contemporary imagination. For all its elusiveness of definition, this level of universal time is artistically crucial, for the power of myth on the imagination makes possible the liberation of time from history (a phenomenon which surfaces, too, as a political manifestation in the emergence of nationalism). (29)

The resort to myth to cope with the challenges to signal a universal time bears a strong resemblance to T.S. Eliot’s “objective correlative”. However, anti-essentialists, on the other hand, are increasingly attacking the link between myth and universality: the assumption that there exists an unchanging myth is itself a myth, as pointed out by Warner, “Every telling of a myth is a part of that myth; there is no Ur-version, no authentic prototype, no true account” (Warner, 8). For Warner, “myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed” (8). In this sense, Olivier’s universal time refers to the hermeneutic position in which he is working on a cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*, relating more to a “now” of the historical dimension.

By far, we have at least seen an agreement among critics in their admittance of the various historical dimensions in interpreting/adapting Shakespeare, and various interpreting or adapting strategies have been attempted, though with varying degrees of defections. The interaction of multiple historical dimensions, such as “now”, “then”, “tradition”, and even “future”, necessitates the use of hermeneutics. As theatre is the preeminent historiographical medium, Hawley attempts a theatrical hermeneutic study to investigate the context of a performance in its interaction with history (28). For Hawley, the focus of research should be on the dynamics of histories and historiographies rather than merely on the presentism aspect. Hawley’s idea is echoed in Landa, who proposes a poststructuralist hermeneutics adaptation approach informed by symbolic interactionism:

The intertextual relationship between a cultural product (e.g. a play) and its screen adaptation(s) is analysed as a performative intervention

on an existing discourse formation which includes both the original product or text and the discourses using it, originating it, deriving from it or surrounding it. [...] Like other intertextual modes (translations, critical readings), adaptations produce a retroactive transformation of the original, not in se, but rather as it is used and understood in specific contexts and instances of communicative interaction.

(Landa, 181)

The original product or text, according to Landa's poststructuralism hermeneutics, refers to the historical moment of its creation; the discourses that use, derive from, or surround it are referred to as a history of reception; and the specific contexts and instances of communicative interaction correspond to the hermeneutic situation. Furthermore, interpretive retroaction constitutes the core of this poststructural hermeneutics of discourse, bringing to light elements that had previously been subdued or subordinated:

An adaptation, or a critical reading, may be valued for the way it brings out valuable elements in the original, retroactively generating a hitherto invisible virtual dimension of the text, of which the original may come to appear as only one possible expression—and an imperfect one at that.

(Landa, 189)

Although the use of “virtual dimension of the text” is flawed, the hermeneutic perspective proposed by Landa, along with Hawley's ideas, are particularly illuminating for this research, which seek to further explicate the hermeneutic approach in relation to Gadamer's concept of “historical consciousness” and “historically-effected consciousness”.

Lastly, before moving on to a study of the philosophical dimension of literary interpretations, some additional reflections on the question: what are we talking about when we talk about Shakespeare? If a reader wishes to comprehend Shakespeare, he or she must view him not only as a genius, but also as a product of England's premodern capitalist era, in order to comprehend how Shakespeare was created and how he altered our collective vision of the world. Our relationship with the Shakespearean tradition and its interpretation is not “Shakespeare is at the head of the Yangtze River, we, at the end of the Yangtze River”, but rather in the convergence – we participate in the various interpretations of Shakespeare's works. We are more inclined to participate in one flow of the current due to some of the imminent problems we confront today. In other words, the interpretations are not only determined by the past, the Shakespearean tradition, but also by the perspective and stance with which we engage the past.

As a result, studying Shakespeare is important not only for understanding the “historical horizon” as expressed in his works, revealing the social

and cultural vision of Shakespeare's time, but also for revealing the influence of his works on history and tradition, on the current situation and its guiding significance for the future, while gaining a better understanding of the meaning structures which constitute our own situation. In this sense, Hermeneutics might be a viable option for enhancing our understanding of literature. Nonetheless, there are concerns regarding whether history is considered continuous (paradigm shifts) or discontinuous (radical ruptures). As Hoy notes, is it contradictory to emphasize the possibility of historical discontinuity while insisting that the interpreter must maintain continuity with his own historical tradition (Hoy, 7)?

Philosophical Dimension of Literary Interpretation

The relationship between literature and philosophy may seem distinct, but we frequently depict it as follows: a poem is philosophical, or the subject matter of a novel inspires a distinct life philosophy. The extent to which literature is equivalent to or embodies philosophical ideas has always been controversial – is a literary work more valuable if it is more philosophical? It is undeniable that groundbreaking literary works profoundly reflect human existence and circumstance. As a result, how a work of literature views existence and the world formulate a crucial dimension of literary interpretation.

Philosophy: The Power of Ideas outlines six ways in which literature views existence and life: the first is based on the idea of absence – the world cannot provide human beings with something that truly satisfies them, so the world is fundamentally flawed; writers like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre are thus categorized. The second focused on fullness, which sees life as immeasurably rich and bountiful, like the Romantics such as Goethe, Nietzsche, Whitman, and Emerson, life is meant to be lived fully, with each moment amplified and savoured. The third is the tragic one, in which life is tragic at its best and pathetic at its worst, as demonstrated by Shakespeare's four tragedies. The fourth literary approach to life views existence as a comedy, a cosmic joke, and it is preferable to laugh at life than to grieve. Erasmus, for example, believed that the highest form of bliss is living with a certain degree of folly. Stoicism also echoes this life philosophy. The fifth is developed by Heidegger in his interpretations of poets like Holderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Georg Trakl. Literature is the search for the unknown, unthought, and unspoken. The aim of the poetic thinker is to experience human predicaments to the fullest extent. The sixth approach regards literature as a medium through which the morals and ethics of life are conveyed, rules, maxims, and suggestions as to how life ought to be lived are communicated, as exemplified in the genre of *Bildungsroman*, or novels of initiation (Moore, 154).

These classifications are mostly based on the different life philosophies as revealed in literary works. They are certainly conducive to our understanding of the philosophy that literary works convey, yet they bring up

an ontological dilemma about literature that perplexes literary critics like Stanley Cavell. The question posed by Cavell is: "Is the issue of communication between philosophy and literature itself a philosophical or a literary issue" (Cavell, 3)? In a faint defence of the legitimacy of his research into the scepticism manifested in Shakespeare, Cavell thus states: "I am hoping they will provide help to those who themselves welcome, or are prepared to welcome, the company of philosophy in reading works of, let us say, literature; and vice versa" (Cavell, 2). Cavell's uneasiness and bewilderment towards his own approach, which tries to incorporate philosophy into the reading of literature, are further revealed in his "trying to determine whether it is to addicts of philosophy or to adepts of literature that I address myself" (Cavell, 2). He defends his own approach by saying that he in effect insists that "Shakespeare could not be who he is [...] unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture" (Cavell, 2). As evidenced by the aforementioned categorisations, philosophy is frequently associated into the interpretations of literature. So, why does Cavell have such apprehensions about his own approach? The primary reason is that he is more interested in decoding Shakespeare's inherent philosophical cognition than in the philosophical ideas that can be disclosed through reading Shakespeare's plays.

The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance.

(Cavell, 1)

Cavell clearly distinguishes between two approaches to engaging philosophy in literature interpretation, one of which involves applying philosophical problems to the reading of Shakespearean texts, and the other, which he has been doing, involves delving into the text's and author's philosophical underpinnings or premises. The first one operates on a more conscious level, whereas the latter, by definition, operates on a subconscious or unconscious level.

The significance of the latter approach, in which the philosophical underpinning of a literary work is addressed, can be further illuminated by the development of the discipline of history. Walter D. Mignolo in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization*, though with some reservation, points out that "literature is based on a logico-philosophical conception of discourse" (Mignolo, 125). In his view, "It is not just the conceptual reframing of history as narrative, literature, or fiction that matters but, rather, the ways in which understanding the past could impinge on speaking the present as political and epistemological intervention" (Mignolo, 126). Though his reframing of history is largely guided

by a postcolonial stance of anti-imperial writing, of relinquishing history from being the instruments of colonization, in particular, a colonization of memory, yet his approaches to history studies are rather illuminating for our conception of literary interpretation.

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), a classical historian of the Arab world at the end of the fourteenth century, is singled out by Mignolo for his landmark book, *Muqaddimah*, in which the concept of “Kitab al-Ibar” is outlined. Franz Rosenthal translates “Kitab al-Ibar” as “World history”. The translation is disputed, as the meaning of the word for Roman historians was closer to “a narrative account of past events” than “report on witnessed occurrences” (Mignolo, 136). What should be underlined, however, is Ibn Khaldun’s emphasis on the philosophical dimension of history:

The inner meaning of history [kitab], on the other hand, involves speculation and an attempt to get at the truth, subtle explanation of the causes and origins of existing things, and deep knowledge of the how and why of events. [History (kitab),] therefore, is firmly rooted in philosophy. It deserves to be accounted a branch of [philosophy].

(qtd. in Mignolo, 126)

Thus, for Mignolo, Khaldun countered the western tendency to link history with rhetoric, and associates it more with philosophy, which is the very reason that distinguishes Khaldun from other historians. According to Mignolo, the Greek origin of the word *historia* meant inquiry or learning by inquiry as well as the narrative by means of which what was learned by inquiry was also reported. The writer of *historia* could himself have been the eyewitness, or he could have used the report of direct informants who had witnessed the events themselves. During the European Renaissance, Cicero’s definition of history became the standard definition and was often repeated by historians of the New World: “Witness of time, model of life, life of memory, light of truth, and messenger of antiquity” (Mignolo, 135–6). By this definition, history becomes closer to “a narrative account of past events” which describes what one sees, remembers of past events, and provides reference or guidance for the present life.

By contrast, Khaldun has history firmly rooted on philosophy through his examination of the philosophical underpinning in histories, and for this reason, he distinguishes himself from other historians. Khaldun’s emphasis on the philosophical dimension of history counters the western tradition which emphasizes the facticity of history. With the prevalence of Hayden White’s idea, “the textuality of history”, the rhetoric dimension of history is further emphasized. However, if we examine history through the lens of hermeneutics, in particular, Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, it is natural that the philosophical dimension of history must be stressed, as evidenced in Mignolo’s research. According to Gadamer, “the foundation for the study of history is hermeneutics”, “For

history is not only not at its end, but we its interpreters are situated within it, as a conditioned and finite link in a continuing chain” (Gadamer, 204). “The ontological structure of history itself, then, is teleological, although without a telos” (Gadamer, 208). It is such if it makes history—i.e., if it has an effect (*Wirkung*) that lends it a continuing historical significance. “Hence the elements of historical coherence, in fact, are determined by an unconscious teleology that connects them and excludes the insignificant from this coherence” (Gadamer, 208). To this extent, Khaldun’s emphasis on the philosophical premise of history is the crude model of Gadamer’s model of all understanding, and he, perhaps, is the foremost practitioner of hermeneutic history.

Heidegger uses the innovation of science as an example to expand the philosophical dimension to the realm of scientific research, considering it of ultimate significance for scientific breakthrough.

The real “movement” of the sciences takes place in the revision of these basic concepts, a revision which is more or less radical and lucid with regard to itself. A science’s level of development is determined by the extent to which it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts. In these immanent crises of the sciences the relation of positive questioning to the matter in question becomes unstable.

(Heidegger *Being and Time*, 8)

The “basic concepts” used by Heidegger are somewhat similar to the idea of basic assumption of science. Innovation comes when the basic concepts begin to totter. This applies not only to the discipline of science, according to Heidegger, “Today tendencies to place research on new foundations have cropped up on all sides in the various disciplines” (Heidegger *Being and Time*, 8).

In a similar vein, Gadamer illustrates this idea: “All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought” (Gadamer, 279). He justifies this conclusion by the adoption of fore-meanings, or fore-structure as illustrated previously, that is, understanding involves the working out of the fore-meanings, freeing oneself from the distraction of fore-meanings, examining the origin and validity of the fore-meanings.

A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed “by the things” themselves, is the constant task of understanding. The only “objectivity” here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. Indeed, what characterizes the arbitrariness of inappropriate fore-meanings if not that they come to nothing in being worked out? But understanding realizes its full potential only when the

fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary. Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy—i.e., the origin and validity—of the fore-meanings dwelling within him.

(Gadamer, 280)

Even more, Gadamer amounts this disclosure or replacement of fore-conception to be indispensable for understanding. “Interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones” (Gadamer, 280). He further clarifies this through a comparison of the fundamental schema shared by Romanticism and Enlightenment, that is, that schema of the conquest of *mythos* by *logos* (Gadamer, 286). According to Gadamer, what gives this schema its validity is the presupposition of the progressive retreat of magic in the world (Gadamer, 286). The conscious return to the unconscious, or the reconstruction of the old culminates in the recognition of the superior wisdom of the primeval age of myth, “But the romantic reversal of the Enlightenment’s criteria of value actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason” (Gadamer, 286). And “In fact the presupposition of a mysterious darkness in which there was a mythical collective consciousness that preceded all thought is just as dogmatic and abstract as that of a state of perfect enlightenment or of absolute knowledge” (Gadamer, 286). The case comparison of Romanticism and Enlightenment demonstrates what is fundamental to understanding in Gadamer’s view, or what true understanding is, that is, understanding requires the disclosure of the foundation of our preconceptions, of our prejudgements. This gives momentum to literary interpretations, especially in its intersection with philosophy. The quest for the logico-philosophical underpinning/premise of literary texts takes on a new dimension, namely, the philosophical dimension, which engages in the search for the logico-philosophical underpinning/premise of an author or a literary text under discussion.

This approach is to be distinguished from the theoretical or technical methodologies that literature criticism had been engaged in. Gadamer tries to distinguish the theoretic from the philosophical, or to be more exact, how the philosophical understanding in the past is disguised by the use of the term such as theory or technique:

It is no longer a set of techniques guiding the practice of philologist or theologian. Schleiermacher, it is true, calls his hermeneutics a technique, but in a quite different, systematic sense. He seeks the theoretical foundation of the procedure common to theologians and philologists by reaching back beyond the concerns of each to the more fundamental relation—the understanding of thoughts.

(Gadamer, 185)

The supremacy that Gadamer gives to the understanding of thought gives legitimacy to the philosophical dimension of literature, which, apart from exploring into the philosophical views reflected in literary works, delves into the fundamental philosophical assumptions embedded in literary works, which, more often than not, remain hidden even to its author. The distinction between the two aspects of the proposed philosophical dimensions of a literary work could be characterized as the conscious (philosophical reflections) vs. the unconscious (philosophical assumptions). The reading of Shakespeare by Stanley Cavell and David Schalkwyk will be utilised to further explicate the latter approach.

Cavell's reading of *King Lear* discloses a scepticism of the external world, and he further ascribes the genesis and structure of the tragedy genre to a response and working out of scepticism. Furthermore, he considers that "the study of tragedy can and should entail reconceptions of what drives skepticism – of what its emotion is, of what becomes of the world in its grip, its stranglehold, of what knowing has come to mean to us" (Cavell, 6). He had seen in the Lear story the velocity of the banishments and of the consequences of the banishments, figured the precipitousness of scepticism's banishment of the world, and surmised that not only was tragedy obedient to a sceptical structure but contrariwise, that scepticism already bore its own marks of a tragic structure. Tragedy is a working out of a response to scepticism, to the degree that tragedy is an interpretation of what scepticism is itself an interpretation of (Cavell, 5). Moreover, he places Lear's "avoidance" of Cordelia as an instance of the annihilation inherent in the sceptical problematic, that scepticism's "doubt" is motivated not by a misguided intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge (Cavell, 6).

Cavell's reading of *Othello* identifies a parallel structure between jealousy and doubt, but jealousy makes the object of suspicion uncomfortably animate. (Cavell, 7) He relates Othello's jealousy to his seeking a possession not in opposition to another's claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself, "as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him. It is against the (fantasied) possibility of overcoming this hyperbolic separateness that the skeptic's (disappointed, intellectualized, impossible, imperative, hyperbolic) demand makes sense" (Cavell, 9). Cavell further correlates this desire to possess to the violence in human knowing, which gains momentum in the age of technology, that "conceives knowledge under the aegis of dominion, of the concept of a concept as a matter, say, of grasping a thing" (Cavell, 9). This

metaphysically desperate degree of private bonding, of the wish to become undispossessable, would seem to be an effort to overcome the sense of the individual human being not only as now doubtful in his possessions, as though unconvinced that anything really belongs to him,

but doubtful at the same time whether there is any place to which he really belongs.

(Cavell, 10)

Finally, this linking of the desire for knowledge to possession, to intimacy, links this epistemological problematic as a whole with that of the problematic of property, of ownership as the owning or ratifying of one's identity (Cavell, 11).

David Schalkwyk, acknowledges Cavell's view that

the tragic in Shakespeare is the consequence of the refusal to accept the finitude of the human, which is grounded in the finitude of human beings' knowledge of each other and their incapacity to transcend such limitations by acknowledging each other as human beings;

Shakespeare's tragic characters are thus incapable not only of acknowledging others but also of acknowledging their own need of acknowledgment by others (Schalkwyk, 602). However, he contests Cavell in the following aspects:

One is Cavell's defected correlation between scepticism and tragedy which, in his opinion, needs further refining. Schalkwyk's readings of *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, *The Winter's Tale* take him to believe that Shakespeare's relation to scepticism takes different generic forms. In a romantic comedy like *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare has chosen not to think hard, that questions of suspicion, uncertainty, or disbelief are no more than our ordinary concepts as they work themselves out in the vagaries and vicissitudes of ordinary human life; Shakespeare's comedy precludes scepticism by dealing in the ordinary concepts of social life when concerning doubt and knowledge. Tragedy, however, is philosophical insofar as it takes as its fundamental issue not merely the problem of scepticism but also its lived nightmare. Shakespearean romance begins with the sceptical nightmare but shows how it may be avoided or overcome by the suspension of the natural laws that go hand in hand with epistemology. Romance would, following the Wittgensteinian paradox, be thoroughly philosophical: it would pit philosophy against itself; it would be a kind of antiphilosophy; it would bring language back from its destructive wanderings to its proper home; it would put the search for proof in its proper place by awakening faith (616).

Second is his disapproval of Cavell's introduction of a difference of gender into the putatively general, human problem of scepticism, which, in his view, undermines the philosophical purity of scepticism as something applicable to all human beings (617). He also discerns an over-reading of the metaphysical and philosophical, substituting what is in reality social and ideological. Finally, in his view, Cavell fails to include the prevalent master-servant relationships in the Shakespeare plays into the critical

examination of scepticism. Instead, Schalkwyk's reading of *Othello* incorporates relations of service to the movement of eros and discovers that the uncertainties of reciprocity in eros are inoculated by the mutuality and the transferable nature of service. Each person in a loving relationship becomes a servant, where the corrosive uncertainties and anxieties of eros are replaced by the realities of reciprocity. The transferability of the latter enables the loving relationship to be restored, newly informed by a secure sense of mutuality (628).

The readings of Shakespeare by Cavell and Schalkwyk exemplify a more fundamental philosophical interpretation, seeking to reveal the character or author's hidden cognition, eventually leading to a profound understanding of the shifting philosophical paradigm, as well as how this shift or transition affects the characters and author. Their readings illustrate that philosophical reading is not only beneficial but also necessary for literary comprehension. Regrettably, the author of this book is still unable to produce a satisfactory interpretation of Shakespeare's plays from this philosophical standpoint. However, Cavell and Schalkwyk's readings are excellent examples of the type of philosophical approach that one is looking for.

Cultural Dimension of Literary Interpretation

For Gadamer, not only historical traditions, but also the natural order of life, make up the whole world of human life:

It is not only that historical tradition and the natural order of life constitute the unity of the world in which we live as men; the way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened.

(Gadamer, xxiii)

The meaning structures in which we live, according to Gadamer, encompass at the very least historical traditions, philosophical meanings (how we experience existence and the world), and cultural structures (the way we experience one another). This section aims to contribute to the cultural dimension of literary interpretations, as earlier sections have focused on the historical and philosophical dimensions of literary interpretations. To discuss the cultural dimension of literary interpretation, we need to define what is culture first. Culture is broadly defined to include beliefs, behaviours, meanings, and so on. Taking the definition which defines culture as "the customary beliefs, social forms and material characteristics of racial, religious or social groups", (qtd. in Caesar, 2) this section examines cultural identity and structure via the lens of hermeneutics.

The nature of social identities has been the subject of a long-running debate between essentialism and constructivism in the late twentieth century. In gender studies, the debate is whether to maintain the social and political significance of gender identities or to minimise, if not eliminate them entirely. Feminism has frequently been split into two camps: those who emphasise the biological foundation of gender identity, reinforcing women's uniqueness, and those who emphasise the social construction of gender identity, arguing that traditional definitions of essentialist identity make women a second sex.

On the one hand, some feminists, although rejecting traditional essentialist definitions of identity, defend gender neo-realism. A neo-realist approach to identities, they argue, is the only path to providing a critical or evaluative approach to identities and hence the only way to forge a viable political response to oppression. On the other hand, some feminists warn that emphasizing identity simply reinforces a conception of the subject that, in Simone de Beauvoir's words, keeps women in their place as the "second sex." In order to finally overcome the belief that women are other than, and derivative to, men, feminists endorsing this view argue that we must reject the very concept of identity.

(Barthold, 1)

This holds true for queer studies as well. Is sexual orientation a biological trait or socially produced? Is it to emphasize gay or lesbian identity to fight for rights, or is it to downplay the differences between homosexuality and heterosexuality? Some critics think that highlighting the difference leads to prejudice and discrimination, arguing that heterosexuals do not need to advertise their heterosexual identity. Similarly, maternal identity is complicated, exhibiting a conflict between innate characteristics and societal construction. On the one hand, a woman's mothering power is undeniable; on the other hand, mother identity is more often than not being manipulated to rationalize the sacrifice of mother, rendering motherhood an oppressive structure to women.⁴

The debate also extends to ethnic studies. Dismissing ethnic identification is considered racial discrimination in most cases. However, ethnic identity is becoming more fluid and pluralistic as a result of globalisation. Should we stick to conventional ethnic identities or accept identity fluidity? What constitutes the core and substance of ethnic fight for equality and rights if ethnic identity is dismissed? Toni Morrison manifests her puzzles in "Home":

How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling? [...] It is therefore more urgent than ever to develop non-messianic language to refigure the raced community, to decipher the deracing of the world. It is more urgent than ever to develop an

epistemology that is neither intellectual slumming nor self-serving reification.⁵

Morrison is enraged on the one hand by the discrimination directed at the racial group, and on the other, by the world's deracination. It appears that a home which features race prominently, yet refrains from racism, is not that likely to be realised. Furthermore, the interplay of gender, sexuality, and ethnic identities, as well as their intersections with class and other identities, creates even more intricate scenarios of the social and cultural systems in which we live. Why is a hermeneutic approach to social identities vital? Gadamer's hermeneutics is defined by his rejection of a subject-object dichotomy and subsequent articulation of the event-like nature of understanding – an event is something we are caught up in, actively participate in, and yet over which we never have full control. The event nature of understanding, while discarding subjectivism, emphasises the importance of the moment of practice to achieve true understanding. Understanding does not imply acquiring permanent, self-forming objective knowledge, but rather forges links to the world in which oneself and others exist. Individuals connect with the world and others primarily via understanding.

Gadamer's hermeneutics also acknowledges the finite nature of understanding, and believes that language and praxis are co-constituted in relation to human experience. As a result, understanding necessitates humility, openness, and an ongoing dialogic inquiry with others. Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons adds to the open and finite nature of understanding. A horizon is the essential framework of understanding as it is the framework of vision. The boundaries of the horizon, according to Gadamer, are constructive rather than restrictive, as they determine the possibility of human cognition and are a necessity for human knowledge. In a similar vein, identity is both a requirement for and an essential component of human comprehension. However, identity should be conceived as more of an advantage point for understanding than a fixed label. Unlike the essentialist concept of identity, the hermeneutic approach sees identity as the site where meaning is created. As a result, identity is similar to our horizon, which is constantly changing and negotiating while also being contextual.

Alcoff is credited with being one of the first to apply Gadamer's hermeneutics to the study of social identity. According to her, the reality with identity is that,

The political critics worry that differences will be emphasized at the expense of commonalities, divisiveness will increase, and an irrational tribalism will grow. The philosophical critics worry that movements "in the name of" social identities reinscribe their importance and reinforce the harmful illusion of their substantial reality.

(Alcoff, 80)

She argues, instead, that the categories of social identity are fundamental, even while they are contextual and relational: “Whether or not they are essential to the self, they are certainly essential to the way that oneself experiences the world” (Alcoff, 92). Meanwhile, she criticizes the Cartesian and, later, Kantian traditions, in which complete disengagement, or autonomy, is an essential condition of rationality. She also criticises Butler and Foucault, who, despite following Hegel’s break with this tradition to scoff at the very possibility of a total disengagement from culture or history,⁶ end up with just as much of a suspicion against identity as the Cartesians, portraying it as alienating, oppressive, and counterposed to freedom (Alcoff, 56–7).

Identity for Alcoff, on the one hand, is a prerequisite for understanding, indispensable to human understanding. On the other hand, it is less like a fixed label, but more a vantage point from which we can perceive the world. Unlike the essentialist view of identity, identity under the hermeneutic approach, instead of being restrictive and oppressive, is the sites where meaning is produced. “Time, place, and individual experience give rise to what Gadamer calls prejudgments through which the self deliberates, and as such are contributions rather than mere obstacles to the knowing process” (Alcoff, 95). As a result, she opposes identity totalitarianism and emphasises the contextualization and dynamicality of identities, as well as their epistemic and social relevance: “The hermeneutic insight is that the self operates in a situated plane, always culturally located with great specificity even as it is open onto an indeterminate future and a reinterpretable past not of its own creation” (Alcoff, 43). Alcoff uses Gadamer’s idea of horizons to argue for the mediated nature of identity. Knowledge, according to Gadamer, necessitates a horizon that frames our understanding. Our identities, according to Alcoff, are similar to horizons: “when I am identified, it is the horizon itself which is identified. No ‘internal’ movement, judgment, choice, or act by an individual can be made intelligible except within this specific horizon which is constituted by Others” (Alcoff, 82).

In the process, she redefines the function of the Other in the forging of self-identity or subjectivity, and it is her argument that the Other is internal to the self, is a part of oneself.

Thus, the Other is not here the mere prompt for subjectivating processes that are essentially performed by the self; rather, the Other is internal to the self’s substantive content, a part of its own horizon, and thus a part of its own identity. The mediations performed by individuals in processes of self-interpretation, the mediations by which individual experience comes to have specific meanings, are produced through a foreknowledge or historical a priori that is cultural, historical, politically situated, and collective. In this sense, it is less true to say that I am dependent on the Other—as if we are clearly distinguishable—than that the Other is a part of myself.

(Alcoff, 82)

Consequently, one's relation (to foreknowledge) is more properly described as "absorption, generation, and expansion" (Alcoff, 45). One's identity, in a similar vein, is characterized as absorption, generation, and expansion.

Georgia Warnke also resorts to Gadamer to formulate a hermeneutic account of identity. While Gadamer emphasises the contextual, purposive, and partial nature of textual interpretation, Warnke argues for an analogy between identity and texts: identities of persons are like interpretations of texts: "Just like texts, people have different meanings in different contexts and the meanings they have depend upon the relations, situations, and frameworks in terms of which we are trying to understand them" (Warnke *After Identity*, 7). She extends Gadamer's concepts to identity interpretations, arguing that just as a text can have multiple interpretations, and the legitimacy of text interpretation can only be established through context, then the interpretation of individual identities can also be diverse, but in different contexts, certain identities are emphasized: "An identity is never either the whole of who we are or who we always are. Rather, who we are depends upon the context in which the question arises and the purposes for which it is asked" (Warnke *After Identity*, 7). The interpretation of identity is to recognize pluralistic social identities without falling into identity imperialism (leading to one identity dominating all other identities) or identity nihilism (leading to a bunch of identities that cannot be integrated). The multiplicity of our identity means rejecting essentialism and identity hegemonies.

Then, how do we integrate our multiple identities? She proposes an interpretive approach to identity, which "allows for a flexibility in our identities that bypasses the question of what or who we are most fundamentally" (Warnke "Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities", 75). And if we conceive of gender identity less as a construction than an interpretation, we can see the way in which an interpretive approach allows us to examine our preknowledge and assumptions, and to inquire into the horizons and frameworks of particular interpretations (Warnke "Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities", 75).

For Warnke, the criteria for legitimate interpretation are part-whole coherence:

just as different interpreters can conceive of Shakespeare's work in different legitimate ways, all of which maintain the hermeneutic standards of the coherence of whole and part and even the point of the whole, we can emphasize different aspects of identity and show the intelligibility and point of different wholes.

(Warnke "Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities", 77)

This interpretive approach would allow "a democratic society that is committed to free and open discussions of its purposes and ideals an interpretive flexibility in determining which interpretation is most compelling or necessary at which time" (Warnke "Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities",

78). In contrast to essentialist definitions that fit different individuals into normed categories, an interpretive approach allows for “public discussions of what we might take both cultural identities in general and our sex/gender identities in particular to be and with regard to which purposes” (Warnke “Hermeneutics and Constructed Identities”, 78).

Barthold advances this hermeneutic perspective of social and cultural identities and responds to the debate between “essentialism” and “constructivism” in cultural research by resorting to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. She defends hermeneutics against charges of both political irrelevance and anti-feminism and argues for philosophical hermeneutics’ compatibility with feminist theory of social critique on identity:

a hermeneutic approach to social identities proves useful for avoiding both the metaphysically dubious efforts to defend the real or essential nature of identities and the politically problematic attempt to deflate any notion of identity at all. A hermeneutic approach thus esteems the relevance of social identities while at the same time offering a positive feminist social critique.

(Barthold, 2)

Gadamer’s theory, in Barthold’s view, stresses the event-like nature of understanding which renounces subjectivism, yet at the same time insists on the creative moment of application that defines all true understanding (Barthold, 3). For Barthold, social identities are a form of intersubjective interpretation, that is, a means of understanding and forging meaningful connections with others, creating a bond, a connection with, another, oneself, and one’s environment (Barthold, 3). She agrees with Warnke’s emphasis on the analogy between the interpretation of identity and that of a text, arguing that it highlights the importance of the third person aspect of identity (that is, the way others perceive us). For Barthold, identities are intersubjective interpretations that serve as a means of connection of oneself to others in order to create meaningful and vital communities (Barthold, 9). Therefore, interpreting another is neither to dominate the other with one’s preconceived ideas, nor to submit entirely to that which is allegedly “given” by nature or society (Barthold, 4).

In conclusion, a hermeneutic account of identities affirms the contextual and dynamic, rather than essentialist and given, nature of our identities, emphasizing both the epistemic and social relevance of identities. An interpretive approach instead of a constructive approach is adopted to distinguish against the artificial dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity, of constructivism and essentialism. The interpretive approach deems identities as horizons, which are fluid, mediated, and contextual in nature. Since the boundaries fixing our horizon are not constrictive but productive, so are our identities. In this sense, identities bespeak intersubjective interpretations, and are ways to forge meaningful connections with others. Also, a hermeneutic account of identities stresses the plurality of identities:

there is never one single identity that is true for all times and for all places and therefore none of our identities ought to gain “imperial” status. What serves to legitimate a given identity is its ability to cohere within a situation.

(Barthold, 5)

This plurality of identities is against identity hierarchy on the one hand and identity nihilism on the other hand. Chapter 5 will further explore identity issues. However, instead of a focus on gender, ethnicity identities, it looks into one’s place identity, cultural identity, and economic identity, and their intertwining relationships as revealed in the play *The Comedy of Errors*.

Notes

- 1 Jameson, Fredric. “Preface” to the Chinese Translation *Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Trans. by Chen Qing, et al.). Beijing: Sanlian Publication House. 1997. p.7. This preface is an interview of Fredric Jameson by Zhang, Xudong at the 1995 MLA annual conference in Chicago. The interview is conducted in English, but only the Chinese translation is accessible to the author of this book.
- 2 Miller, J. Hillis. *Speech Acts in Literature*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001.
- 3 Palmer, Richard, “Toward a Broader Concept of Interpretation”, *ISN* (November 1967), 3–14, and review of VII, in *JAAR*, XXXVI (September J c>68)5 243–6.
- 4 For more discussions about motherhood, see Min, Jiao. “Mothering and Motherhood: Experience, Ideology and Agency”. *Comparative Literature Studies*. 56(3), 2018.
- 5 Morrison, Toni. “Home.” In *The House That Race Built*, edited by Wahneema Lubiano. New York: Random House, 1998.
- 6 According to Alcoff, early Hegel provides an early formulation of the critique of the ideal of disengagement, essentially on the grounds that it cannot operate as a norm for a self that is necessarily dependent on the Other, whether that Other is understood individually, collectively, or structurally. For Hegel, even the most well-developed self has this dependence. Self-knowledge, in fact, requires confirmation from the Other, in Hegel’s view, from which it follows that both epistemic and moral forms of agency require a certain structure of possible inter-subjective relationships. Another shift that Hegel initiated in our thinking about the self is the shift toward becoming over being, toward understanding the self as a kind of process rather than as a substance in the early modern sense of an unchangeable essence. However, later Hegel in *The Philosophy of Right*, different from his position in the *Phenomenology*, stated that the otherness of the Other is to be neither negated nor feared. It is my relations with specific others that constitute my social identity as mother, citizen, worker; these are objective and not merely the product of internal narrativizing or meaning-making. Within collective institutions in which my social identity is manifest. Qtd. in Alcoff, 2006: p.57, p.62.

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