

# The Interpretive Approach: Term and Foundation

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## Abstract:

Interpretive criticism aims to uncover the intentions and purposes of the creator by delving into the depths of the text and its obscure corners. Thus, interpretation emerges as a reading practice that establishes its position within semiotic and deconstructive reading approaches, among others.

We will attempt, relying on description and analysis, to trace the concept of interpretive criticism, its main theoretical and procedural foundations, through the issues posed by the concept of terminology and its translation, the boundaries of its subject, and its prominent advocates.

**Keywords:** Interpretation, interpretive criticism, interpretive theory, Schleiermacher, Gadamer.

## 1. Introduction:

The literary text transitions from the mind of its author to that of its recipient, initiating processes of understanding, interpretation, and meaning-making. This shift confirms the movement of focus from the author and the text to the recipient. This interest has been reinforced by various theories and strategies, among which interpretation is the most prominent. With it, texts open up in ways that know no limits, seeking to explore implied, suppressed, or absent meanings.

In this lecture, we will trace the meanings of the term "interpretation" and its concept within the critical field, reaching the essential foundations and pillars through the views and positions of its pioneers.

## 2. The Issue of the Term "Interpretation":

The term "Hermeneutik," translated into French as "Herméneutique," presents a challenge in its translation into Arabic. It has been translated as "التأويلية" (interpretation), "فن التأويل" (art of interpretation), and "عالم التأويل" (world of interpretation). The use of the term "هيرمينوطيقا" is closer to the spirit of the word itself, as there are always foreign words that are difficult to translate<sup>1</sup>. The author of the "Encyclopedia of Literary Theories" refers to the term "التفسيرية" (interpretive), stating that this theory is called interpretive or hermeneutic because its main issue is the interpretation of texts in general, regardless of whether their content is social, historical, political, or literary. It does not limit itself to interpreting literary and artistic texts but extends to the interpretation of all texts across various fields of human knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

The author of "Modern Literary Criticism from Imitation to Deconstruction" draws on heritage studies and examines the views of Al-Sharif Al-Jurjani to clarify the difference between interpretation and explanation. He notes that many mistakenly use the term "interpretation" when they mean "explanation," or vice versa. The best clarification of the difference between the two terms comes from Al-Sharif Al-Jurjani in his book "Definitions," where he states that interpretation is the diversion of a verse from its apparent meaning to a possible meaning, provided that the interpretation aligns with the Quran and the Sunnah, while explanation is revealing and manifesting<sup>3</sup>.

The authors of “Guide for Literary Critics” differentiate between the terms “interpretation” and “hermeneutics,” explaining that interpretation involves explaining the characteristics and features of a work, such as its literary genre, elements, structure, purpose, and influences. In contrast, the term “hermeneutics” is succinctly defined as the theory and practice of interpretation; therefore, there are no limits to the scope of this term other than the search for meaning and the need to clarify and interpret it<sup>4</sup>.

Robert Holub traces the term “hermeneutics” back to the god Hermes, the inventor of language and writing, whose name intertwines with “hermeneutics.” As the messenger of the gods, his task was to convey the divine word to humanity<sup>5</sup>, serving as an intermediary between the realm of Olympus and the world of human toil. The Greek verb “hermeneuein,” meaning “to say,” “to interpret,” or “to translate,” along with the noun “hermeneia” (interpretation), delineates the scope of meaning that hermeneutics would later adopt. This was affirmed by the pioneer of interpretive criticism, Gadamer, in his book “Philosophy of Interpretation,” where he traces the term to its Greek roots, stating that “hermeneutics” (the art of interpretation) encompasses various levels of thought<sup>6</sup>.

The author of the study “Interpretive Strategies” proposes translating the term “Herméneutique” as “الهرموسية” (hermousia), aligning it with previous studies, suggesting that “interpretation” represents the procedural aspect contained within “hermousia.” He states, “From this perspective, we can refer to the entire heritage of hermousia, which has spanned many centuries. Hermousia believes in its constant quest for ‘truths’ that interpretation can empower to breathe life into a time that has long since passed, leaving behind only what has been embedded in texts.”<sup>7</sup>

Critic Abdel Malek Mortad has his own views on translating the Western term into Arabic while preserving its linguistic origin. He objects to some scholars’ translations, stating, “Some Arab critics have translated this term into Arabic in its foreign form, crudely calling it ‘الهيرمينوطيقا,’ which is one of the most unpleasant terms for an Arabic speaker. We do not accept this heavy hybrid translation, especially since Arabs have known this concept and dealt with it under the term ‘التأويل.’ Thus, we should use ‘التأويلية’ as a counterpart to the ancient Western term, and we do not see the need for this term’s multiplicity in relation to the two uses: the philosophical term (L’herméneutique) and the critical term (L’interprétation).”<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, the term “التأويلية” effectively expresses the “art of interpretation” and serves as a translation for the foreign term “Herméneutique.” The term “الهرموسية” has been used by some Moroccan critics, perhaps limited to them (which requires detailed and thorough study). The term “هيرمونيطيقا” remains in a state of contention, much like other terms that have been transferred in their foreign forms.

### **3. The Concept of Interpretive Criticism:**

Hermeneutics is associated with the art or science of interpretation and text analysis. One scholar views it as “a process through which the interpreter infiltrates areas not visible to the naked eye to grasp what Schleiermacher calls the ‘internal form,’ akin to the magical spirit from which creativity emanates.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the interpreter moves from the external representation of the text to the intention that conceals the intoxicating essence, the moment of creativity that produces an original meaning known only to the author and the interpreter. This scholar emphasizes that the interpreter must adopt the author’s perspective during interpretation, which requires knowledge of the language used in the text and an understanding of the inner and outer life associated with it. The former represents an objective stance, while the latter achieves a subjective position.

Another scholar clarifies the goal of interpretive reading, stating: “Based on this, the interpreting subject does not merely seek meaning; they embody their own horizon by fully immersing themselves in the text’s purposes, both explicit and implicit. Just as creativity moves from the inside out, a reverse movement occurs in which the interpreter moves from the outside in. The interpreter

does not merely approach the text from the outside; rather, they inhabit it, coaxing it to reveal all its secrets.<sup>10</sup>” This creates a reader that the text is presumed to address, surpassing mere interpretation to uncover the author’s intentions and purposes.

Another scholar explains that interpretive reading employs “a highly sensitive and effective sense to touch the underlying depths of the text’s layers, which seep far from the surface into the folds of the text’s womb. This makes interpretation a ‘friendly reading of the text, a prolonged contemplation of its folds and richness.’<sup>11</sup>” Conversely, one scholar asserts that the theory of interpretation views the literary text as multifaceted, lacking a singular essence. The meanings of literary works, with their variety and changes over time, embody a particular logic leading to an organized shift in aesthetic appreciation, depending on the interpretations and meanings derived from the texts, including those texts that allow for multiple significations. It is undeniable that interpreters differ from others in that they do not exclude historical understanding but rather affirm that aesthetic observation itself is subject to historical change<sup>12</sup>.

The author of the “Encyclopedia of Literary Theories” traces the historical development of the term “hermeneutics,” which he translates as “التفسيرية.” He notes that the term’s origins date back to the mid-17th century, initially linked to religious studies, and it later evolved to encompass literary and artistic criticism. “It became a theory that raises many complex and intertwined questions about the nature of the literary text and its relationship to heritage and tradition on one hand, its relationship to its author on another, and its relationship to its interpreter or critic on a third. This last relationship has been the primary concern highlighted in the writings and interpretations of hermeneutic theorists and critics. Despite the long history of literary criticism, no one has given due attention to this relationship, even though these interpreters and critics have served as the channels connecting literary works to their audiences.<sup>13</sup>”

This scholar emphasizes that the most significant issue facing interpretive theory in the field of criticism is what he terms the problem of “relativity.” This refers to the idea that the interpretations offered by various critics of a literary work are influenced by their schools of thought and orientations. Each critic, through their interpretive procedures, seeks to assert that their interpretation is the correct one, while others are deemed incorrect. This underscores the principle of interpretive relativity. “The danger in interpretive theory lies in the fact that the critic considers their interpretation as the sole legitimate entry point to the text, making the text and its interpretation two sides of the same coin. Consequently, what the interpretation intends becomes synonymous with what the text intends, both in terms of form and content, resulting in an arbitrary unification of the trio: author, text, and critic—an unification that reaches the point of impossibility.<sup>14</sup>”

This issue has prompted theorists of interpretation to move beyond a singular channel that leads to one interpretation and instead propose the adoption of multiple channels reflecting the number of interpretations and readings of a literary work, thereby affirming the relativity of the interpretive process.

The author of the study “The Issue of Reading and the Mechanisms of Interpretation,” while tracing the changes in the term “hermeneutics,” notes its transition from the field of theological studies to the broader domains of the humanities, particularly literary criticism. He succinctly states that “the fundamental issue addressed by hermeneutics is the dilemma of text interpretation in general, whether the text is historical or religious. The questions we attempt to answer are many, complex, and intertwined, concerning the nature of the text, its relationship to heritage and tradition on one hand, and its relationship to its author on the other. Most importantly, it notably focuses on the interpreter (or critic in the case of literary texts).<sup>15</sup>”

Interpretation manifests as a reading practice that finds its place among semiotic, deconstructive, and other reading approaches. It is distinguished by the need for interpretation arising from “the

difficulty of discerning the author's intent in writing the text, due to the distance separating the reader from the writer or the recipient from the sender. This makes the use of interpretive methods beneficial for understanding the text and exploring its meanings to the furthest possible implications.<sup>16</sup> This exploration follows two paths: the first is characterized by limited understanding when it relates to attempts to discern the sender's intent. The second arises "when a recipient of a complex text wishes to transform themselves into a sender, adopting a set of interpretive procedures to convey what they have understood from the disseminated text. This level of understanding is higher and more significant, as it does not remain concealed within the self but manifests as a new product rooted in intertextuality, broadcasting it to many recipients."<sup>17</sup>

Abdel Malek Mortad emphasizes his pioneering role in addressing the relationship between text and interpretation, as well as the connection between interpretation and the precise understanding of the text, asserting that no scholar had tackled this issue before him—at least to his knowledge. He clarifies the link between hermeneutics and two aims: "One aim is simple and involves a binary relationship, while the other is complex and extends to the creation of a network of relationships that exists between the original text as a sender and its first reader as a recipient. This second relationship leads to a third one when it produces another text that disseminates within a network of recipients, spreading across time and space without limits."<sup>18</sup>

This scholar points out a problem that has troubled literary text analysts: defining the scope of interpretation and the intended goal. The issue of scope opens up three possibilities in the study of hermeneutics: one is the exploration of the intent behind the authorship, the second is the search for the author's intent, and the last is the examination of the intent of reading or receiving the text. These possibilities can be summarized into two programs: "the search within the text for what the author intended to convey. Do we investigate the text—as we interpret it—independently from the author's intentions?"<sup>19</sup>

#### **4. Pioneers of Interpretive Criticism in Western Studies**

We have observed that interpretation in Western thought intersects with various theories and critical methodologies, transitioning from theological studies to the analysis of literary texts through the efforts of a group of critics and philosophers, particularly from the German school. Among the prominent figures in interpretive criticism are German thinkers such as Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and others. Our focus will be on the most notable figures, particularly Schleiermacher and Gadamer.

##### **A. Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher**

Schleiermacher transferred the term hermeneutics from theological studies to text analysis, establishing it as a science of understanding. He founded modern interpretive theory on the premise that the text serves as a linguistic medium conveying the author's thoughts to the reader. Thus, it pertains—linguistically—to the entirety of language and—psychologically—to the creator's subjective thought. In Schleiermacher's view, the relationship between these two aspects is dialectical. As time progresses, the text becomes more obscure to us, leading to a greater likelihood of misunderstanding rather than understanding. The interpreter relies on linguistic capability<sup>20</sup>, supported by the ability to penetrate human nature, recognizing that the text is influenced by both an objective aspect represented by language and a subjective aspect represented by the author's thought, neither of which follow a strict order in achieving understanding.

Schleiermacher introduced the concept of the "hermeneutic circle," meaning that "the process of interpreting a text... operates in a circle, and it must rely on complete knowledge of language on one side and the characteristics of the text on the other." This concept can equally apply to the subjective psychological level. The interpreter may begin at any point, but they must be willing to adjust their understanding according to the insights gained from exploring the text's details and multiple facets<sup>21</sup>.

Schleiermacher emphasizes that the interpreter's objective understanding of the text requires them to align with the author and to recreate the author's experience while shedding their own subjectivity and historical perspective.

### **B. Hans-Georg Gadamer**

The German thinker and critic Gadamer emphasized the necessity of connecting literary works with their audiences. He adds that the aesthetic enjoyment derived from artistic works is complemented by a comprehensive and profound understanding of meaning. Gadamer rejects the "referential function of language that points to things," asserting instead that things reveal themselves through the literary text, which serves as a stable medium between the creator and the audience. The process of understanding—and consequently of interpretation—is variable, dependent on shifting horizons, experiences, and perspectives. Nonetheless, the stability of the text as a distinguished artistic form and its recognition simultaneously serve as the fundamental factors that make understanding and interpretation possible<sup>22</sup>.

Gadamer is regarded as one of the theorists of reception theory and a key reference in the aesthetics of reception. A significant historical and epistemological turning point he marked in the history of interpretation was the publication of his book *\*Truth and Method\**, which presented a critical historical perspective on hermeneutics. He aimed to emphasize two essential procedures: the necessity of freeing the understanding process from the psychological character imposed by the ideas of Dilthey and Schleiermacher, thus separating the text from the author's mindset and the spirit of the age it belongs to. Moreover, he called for a focus on the understanding process itself, particularly its hidden aspects in the historical dimension<sup>23</sup>.

Gadamer introduced the concept of "historical horizon," which, in its simplest terms, means that the recipient, in understanding a literary work, relies on their own horizon of convergence while avoiding the circumstances in which the text was produced. In other words, the recipient draws upon their prior knowledge, which represents horizons. "We cannot engage with past texts except through the horizon that shapes our vision and the other horizon posed by the texts in their historical period."<sup>24</sup> He asserted that even though the text is concluded by its author, it requires a recipient to complete its meaning through interpretation, relying on a historical stance by returning to the exploration of the past.

Gadamer emphasizes the relationship between the recipient of texts and history in terms of understanding and comprehension. He believes that our understanding must transcend mere passive listening; it must involve dialogue<sup>25</sup>. The reception of an artistic work is a dialectical process based on the questions posed by the text. Distancing from the necessity of understanding the creator's experience, what matters is the experience that the textual signs reveal in themselves.

Abdel Malek Mortad responds to these inquiries by clearly defining his stance after posing a rhetorical question that denies the ability to achieve precise understanding. He asks: "How can one arrive at the author's intentions or their text with complete accuracy, given the ambiguous connotations and subtle linguistic shifts the text carries?"<sup>26</sup> He concludes that the interpreter's efforts should be directed toward reading the text within its social and historical context or through its linguistic system to provide an interpretive reading based on its language. This results in an open reading that does not claim a definitive stance, and understanding the author's intentions remains relative, lacking precision and certainty.

What distinguishes interpretive reading from other types of readings is its belief in openness and relativity, while other readings claim singularity in understanding and assert the closure of interpretation.

## 5. Conclusion

From our exploration of the concept of interpretive criticism and its theoretical and practical foundations through the perspectives of its notable pioneers, we conclude the following:

- The term “التأويلية” (interpretive) effectively conveys the idea of “the art of interpretation” and serves as a translation of the foreign term “Herméneutique.” The term “الهرموسية” has also been used by some Moroccan critics.
- Interpretive theory manifests as a reading practice necessitated by the challenge of understanding the creator’s intentions. It finds its place among various reading approaches, including semiotic and deconstructive readings, among others.
- Schleiermacher, the founder of interpretive criticism, introduced the concept of the “hermeneutic circle,” indicating that the interpretation process operates in a circular manner. He emphasizes that for the interpreter to understand the text objectively, they must align themselves with the author and recreate the author’s experience.
- Gadamer contributed the notion of “historical horizon,” which, in its simplest terms, means that the recipient, in understanding a literary work, relies on their own horizon of convergence while avoiding the circumstances in which the text was produced.

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<sup>2-</sup> Nabil Ragab, *Encyclopedia of Literary Theories*, Egyptian International Publishing Company – Longman, Cairo, 1st ed., 2003, p. 212.

<sup>3-</sup> Meghan Al-Ruwaili, Saad Al-Bazai, *Guide to Literary Criticism (Illuminating More than Seventy Contemporary Critical Movements and Terms)*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca – Beirut, 3rd ed., 2003, p. 286.

<sup>4-</sup> Ibrahim Mahmoud Khalil, *Literary Criticism: From Imitation to Deconstruction*, Dar Al-Masira for Publishing and Distribution, Amman, 5th ed., 2015, p. 127.

<sup>5-</sup> Robert Holub, *Hermeneutics*. In Raman Seldon, *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Literary Criticism (From Formalism to Post-Structuralism)*, trans. Jaber Asfour et al., Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, 1st ed., 2006, p. 399.

<sup>6-</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophy of Interpretation (Origins, Principles, Goals)* p. 63.

<sup>7-</sup> Said Benkrad, *Strategies of Interpretation*, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Rabat, 1st ed., 2011, p. 9.

<sup>8-</sup> Abdul Malik Murtad, *Hermeneutics between the Sacred*, *World of Thought Journal*, Kuwait, vol. 23, no. 1, 2000, p. 263.

<sup>9-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>10-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>11-</sup> Habib Mounsi, *Philosophy of Reading and the Problem of Meaning (From Critical Normativity to Multiple Reading Openness)*, Dar Al-Gharb for Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 1st ed., 2001, p. 217.

<sup>12-</sup> Ibrahim Mahmoud Khalil, *Literary Criticism: From Imitation to Deconstruction*, p. 129-130.

<sup>13-</sup> Nabil Ragab, *Encyclopedia of Literary Theories*, p. 212.

<sup>14-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>15-</sup> Nasser Hamid Abu Zaid, *Reading Problems and Hermeneutic Mechanisms*, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut – Casablanca, 1st ed., 2014, p. 13.

<sup>16-</sup> Abdul Malik Murtad, *Hermeneutics between the Sacred*, p. 266.

<sup>17-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>18-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>19-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>20-</sup> Nasser Hamid Abu Zaid, *Reading Problems and Hermeneutic Mechanisms*, p. 20.

<sup>21-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>22-</sup> Nabil Ragab, *Encyclopedia of Literary Theories*, p. 222.

<sup>23-</sup> Al-Masoud Qasim, *Aesthetics of Reception (Cognitive References and Procedural Mechanisms)*, Modern Books World, Irbid, Jordan, 1st ed., 2019, p. 34.

<sup>24-</sup> Sami Ismail, *Aesthetics of Reception*, Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo, 1st ed., 2002, p. 85.

<sup>25-</sup> Bouhnik Marzaka, *Aesthetics of Reception (A Textual Study in the Poetry of Ezzedine Mihoubi)* New Books World, Irbid, Jordan, 1st ed., 2019, p. 53.

<sup>26-</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 269.