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## The Dialectic of Questionability: Towards a Hermeneutic Praxis of Reading Literature

Hicham Ellass

Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Ibn-Zohr University, Agadir-Morocco

✉ **Corresponding Author:** Hicham Ellass, **E-mail:** [hicham.ellass@edu.uiz.ac.ma](mailto:hicham.ellass@edu.uiz.ac.ma)

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt towards applied hermeneutics, seeking to experiment with a hermeneutic praxis of reading that runs counter the prevalent approaches to literary interpretation. Instead of engaging oneself in a pointless exercise of deciphering the meaning of a certain literary work, often based on formal and thematic analysis, the study takes as its focal point the Gadamerian view of reading and interpretation as not a mere process of extracting meaning by means of an interpreter who mostly deals with the text as an object of investigation, but rather as an ever-ending act of dialogue set on equal footing with both the reader and the text—being co-subjects or partners in dialogue. This hermeneutic approach to literary interpretation essentially entails that any act of reading and interpretation presupposes the dialectic of question and answer that goes beyond thematic analysis to a much broader perspective wherein a literary text is allowed to draw the reader into a hermeneutic circle of understanding, especially by the answers it opens up and, by the same token, the questions it awakens. Such dialectic of questionability allows an exciting kind of reading that focuses on applying the texts to what is humanly relevant in such a way that interpretation comes to serve the purpose of letting texts address the current reality anew, opening up new venues for texts to be alive, to express humanly significant matters beyond what have already been exhausted in a particular era, notably the era which has witnessed the production of a literary work. To fulfill such a hermeneutic praxis of reading, this paper draws on two genuine works of art written by two great poets of the twentieth century, namely T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium".

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### 1. Introduction

Great works of art are always characterized by an inherent capacity of significantly informing the present reality in a relevant way, drawing the reader's attention to some universal experiences that human beings might have in common in a shared world. To let such works unravel their significant bearings to posterity, H.G. Gadamer (2004) affirms that the literary interpreter has a moral obligation to consider the text as a co-subject or partner in dialogue; a matter which prevents the interpreter (often taken as an all-knowing subject) from imposing any kind of meaning on the text (as an object of study) and thereby allows meaning to unravel naturally, especially through a serious fusion between the interpreter and the text who both necessarily involve in an act of interrogation by reciprocally receiving answers and responding to questions about a common subject-matter. In fact, Palmer (1969) is right when he exposes to view the perils of traditional approaches to reading and interpreting literature, which in turn can contribute to the *death of literature*, provided that interpreters or even literature teachers do not stop the practice of dwelling too much on their pointless "elaborate exercises in imagistic, formal, or thematic analysis", and instead start to concentrate on "the question of how a great work is to be made humanly relevant through interpretation" (Palmer 1969: 29).

Both W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot are somehow aware that literature and more particularly great poems are not meant only for specific readers in a particular era, but also to all sort of readers in different historical periods. For this reason, they have produced genuine poems that constantly call for interpretation as long as there are readers and interpreters. Among these great poems are "Sailing to Byzantium" (1989) and "The Waste Land" (1963), which are in turn written in the manner—to use Eliot's statement—to be communicated before they are understood. In other words, they are ready to engage in a dialogic play of

understanding with the reader to uncover what is humanly significant. Again, they are in such a manner because both Eliot and Yeats want their poetry to be read differently. This is exactly the interesting quality that motivates this study to involve in a hermeneutic praxis with specifically the aforementioned poets and their works respectively, using Gadamer's (2004) *dialectic of questionability* as an attempt towards a meaningful hermeneutic reading that notably goes against traditional approaches to reading literature.

## 2. Methodology and Theoretical Background

Since this study is couched within the Gadamerian framework of doing hermeneutics, the *dialectic of questionability* invokes with it other interrelated terms which are prerequisite for the fulfillment of a dialogic act of reading the selected poems. Applying poetry to one's own *situation* is seen by Gadamer (2004) as a necessary step that the reader should consider before embarking on any process of reading. Gadamer states that "one must not try to disregard himself and his particular *hermeneutical situation*. He must relate the text to this *situation* if he wants to understand at all" (2004: 321 emphasis added). This implies that readers understand differently; a poem might disclose more than one level of meaning to a reader than to another, simply because the readers who share common experiences with a poem can sensitively sense its main concerns and thereby get informed about the way the poem addresses meaningfully their current *situation*.

Like *situation*, *prejudice* and *fusion of horizons* are equally important for the realization of the logic of questionability. Gadamer (2004) does not conceive prejudice in its negative sense as a false judgment that has no rational basis, but he rather sees it as a pivotal condition for dialogue and questioning to happen. Prejudice is positive insofar as it is responsible for allowing the reader to make pre-judgments and predictions about the poem; pre-judgments that can help the reader start the act of interrogation, asking questions and simultaneously receiving questions and answers from the poem. The ongoing questioning between the reader and the poem permits the possibility of testing and modifying prejudices, making the reader aware of his evaluative and reflective judgments about the meaning of the poem. As regards *fusion of horizons*, Gadamer (2004) points out that both the poem and the reader have a horizon of their own. So to speak, with openness to the *alterity* of the poem, the reader can *fuse* his present horizon with the past horizon of the poem in the act of dialogue taking the form of question and answer. This entails that this fusion of horizons assures a balanced way of reading, permitting the poem to say what it has to say with full attention and listening on the part of a reader who does not *impose* any kind of meaning on the poem, more particularly by abandoning the traditional view of conceiving the poem as an object of study, and therefore embraces it as a partner or co-subject in dialogue.

## 3. Discussion and Analysis

### 3.1 Preliminaries

Yeats writes in one of his last letters to Lady Elizabeth Pelham (1939): "When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it'". Taking into account the above-listed words, one may get the impression that Yeats is constantly aware of the hermeneutic nature of truth. Yeats reveals that truth is not something that can be intended or controlled, but rather it is made possible through an all-encompassing poetic language that pre-exists the poet. It is because of the tyranny of linguistically and historicity to use Gadamer's terms, that absolute truth cannot be known. Due to this subjectivistic limitation, Yeats confesses that the poet cannot master the poem's meaning since the poem itself can mean more than the poet intends to say or write. Given this view, it is relevant to say that Yeats is one of the leading modern poets who start exploring the intricacies of interpretation, even before Eliot's intervention. So to speak, Yeats is a proleptic modernist who has paved the ground for Eliot, Ezra Pound and other modern poets to develop systematic theories (which pervade their poetry) about the nature of history and interpretation. In this context, Yeats is a preeminent representative of modern poetry. His twentieth-century poetics is par excellence modernist despite the fact that some scholars consider his link to modernism problematic<sup>2</sup>. Even Eliot (1975) himself claims in his essay, "Yeats", that he associates Yeats's works with the aesthetic of modernism. He writes: "I find myself regarding [Yeats], from one point of view, as a contemporary and not a predecessor; and from another point of view, I can share the feelings of younger men, who came to know and admire him by that work from 1919 on, which was produced while they were adolescent" (1975: 248).

Like Eliot's poetry, Yeats's modern poems, with their inherent dialogic aspect, are genuine works of art that are capable of informing the present situation. So to speak, his poetry permits a meaningful understanding to take place since it is principally related to the context of our life. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1989) is a poem that brings to the open universal and existential questions which call for the reader's participation. This poem is a unique experience which tells more about life and about what we, as human beings, have in common in a shared world to which we are all bound. Accordingly, the abovementioned poem is

<sup>2</sup> See Armstrong's (2013) *Reframing Yeats: Genre, Allusion and History*, 7-8 and Fogarty's (2007) "Yeats, Ireland and Modernism", 126-28. Note also that the literary movement of the modern period, which we call 'modernism' cannot be pinned down to the twentieth century. One may find that the aesthetics of modernism started very early with nineteenth century French symbolism or even before.

essentially a 'Thou' that carries with it a *world* of its own, an independent horizon. And this world is existential; that is, it is existential because the poem is like a full human being who lives unique experiences in his own world. With readiness to hear something relevant about the present situation and with openness to their existential world, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1989) speaks about its experience as a fellow partner; it informs the present situation in a new and relevant way. As Gadamer puts it,

the important thing is ... to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us. Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine human bond" (2004: 355).

Having mentioned that, the main concern here is to look at Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium (1989)" from my own situation. I bring, as a reader, my experiences and prejudices with a certain openness and willingness to negotiate and participate in truths that are brought to the open by the horizons of Yeats's poem. In this regard, the prejudice that would allow me to negotiate between my present situation and the situation of Yeats's selected poem assumes that this poem is an expression of the dilemma of the modern Man in a meaningless modern world, in which its speakers question fundamental issues that are intrinsically human such as time, death and the very meaning of life.

By the same token, Eliot spends a great deal of time of his life investigating the nature of understanding and interpretation. He believes that understanding is never finite since the text's meaning is endless and is always capable of being renegotiated. It appears that both Gadamer and Eliot would argue that the text is able to unfold endless meanings to different situations, either past, present or future. And this endless process of unfolding emerges each time in new ways whenever there are new readers. Interestingly, Eliot explains this as follow:

A poem may appear to mean very different things to different readers, and all of these meanings may be different from what the author thought he meant ... [F]or the reader [,] the poem may become the expression of a general situation, as well as of some private experience of his own.... There may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of. The different interpretations may all be partial formulations of one thing. (1975: 111)

Through this hermeneutic engagement, Eliot produces poetry that demands a different kind of reading and interpretation. To put it in Kenner's words, "Eliot's poems ... differ from reader to reader to an unusual degree, posed between meaning nothing and meaning everything, associating themselves with what the reader thinks of, and inclines to wonder whether Eliot was thinking of" (1959: 58). With Eliot's poetry, the reader cannot help but feel the presence of conversational poetic words that draw him or her into a back-and-forth dialogic interaction. To put it otherwise, Eliot drives the reader to play the game of dialogue with the speaking voices of his poems, almost as if he were anticipating Gadamer's *hermeneutic circle* as the movement of play between an 'I' (the reader) and a 'Thou' (the poem).

It follows from this that this game of dialogue becomes possible through Eliot's poetic voices that call for our attention as present readers. This particular aspect of Eliot's poetry is quite helpful for the realization of a humanly relevant reading because the event of "understanding begins ... when something addresses us" (Gadamer 2004: 298). In "The Waste Land" (1963), Eliot presents the reader with different voices and personas that invite some sort of responsive-listening so as to reveal a state of *being* of their experiences to a particular situation. Clearly, it is through this responsive-listening or reciprocal questioning that the speaking voices and speakers of the abovementioned poem open up possibilities of meaning to the present situation. As Gadamer puts it, "[t]he voice that speaks to us from the past ... itself poses a question and places our meaning in openness. In order to answer the question put to us, we the interrogated must ourselves begin to ask questions" (2004: 367). Like in the case of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1989), I attempt to engage in a dialogic play of interaction with the voices of Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1963) in order to let new meanings speak to my present situation. To do so, I bring the possibility that the two poems are a melancholic outcry of a modern subject who seeks an antidote to alienation, fragmentation, disillusionment and isolation in a chaotic modern world. Also, I openly put my own prejudices and cultural realities into test during the play-process of fusion that happens between my present horizon and the horizon of the "The Waste Land".

### **3.2 A Hermeneutic Openness to W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium"**

"Sailing to Byzantium" (1989) is the opening poem in Yeats's famous collection, *The Tower (1928)*. It is, in many critics' minds, the greatest poem that Yeats ever wrote. As far as listening and openness are concerned, "Sailing to Byzantium" prepares the ground for a dialogical engagement with the reader through its inherent *dramatic monologue* (a method that is associated particularly with the Victorian poet, Robert Browning). Gadamer argues that "the poem speaks better and more authentically through the listener, the hearer" (2007: 144). Given this, the poem's speaker in a dramatic monologue surpasses authorial guidance and speaks directly to a reader who cannot help but listens seriously to what the speaker has to say to him. As Brooker and Perril put it, "the dramatic monologue is distinguished by the 'objective' position of the poet...set apart from the speaker who unravels

his/her own emotional life to a silent listener" (2003: 27). In this sense, the speaker of this dramatic monologue, "Sailing to Byzantium" (1989), is seemingly an old man, leaving the shore of his country. While he is on boat, he looks back at the shore and starts:

That is no country for old men. The young  
 In one another's arms, birds in the trees,  
 —Those dying generations—at their song,  
 The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
 Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
 Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
 Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
 Monuments of unageing intellect. (Lines 1-8).

By way of this dramatic monologue, the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" draws the reader to a constant listening to a common human concern. As it is mentioned, "Sailing to Byzantium" is capable of disclosing new meanings to the present situation because it is basically related to our life. According to Gadamer (1994), meaningful understanding happens when the text is

related to the con-text of our own life as a possible answer to an existential question. We say *existential*, because the kind of question we are talking about is one rooted deeply in the fears and desires of our own fundamental uncertainty. Only as an answer to such a question can a literary text of the past open up its deepest "personal" dimension. When we speak of fears, desires, and uncertainty, we are, of course, not referring to any kind of psychological situation that could be "solved" by a few visits to the psychiatrist. We are speaking rather of a universal anxiety that is a direct result of our mortality. (1994: xii emphasis in original)

By bringing my experience, the horizon of "Sailing to Byzantium" opens up a fundamental question that calls for my participation: Is life really worth living despite its shortness? It is worth noting that the poem claims truth through this question it awakens. The speaker, the old man, starts the poem by informing us that the world to which all living creatures belong is not what we deserve. This world is constantly changing because "whatever is begotten, born, and dies" (Line 6). It seems that this is all that the world is about. Neither "Fish, flesh, [n]or fowl" (Line 5) can last forever.

The speaker wakes me up and draws me into a hermeneutic circle by his questioning. He alludes to the fact that many people obliviate that the real enemy in life is death. By nature, I admit that human beings forget about their existence and try to enjoy life with love like "The young / In one another's arms" (Lines 1-2). The speaker asks: what is the meaning of love in a life that ends soon? I find myself responding that it is better to forget about our mortality and accept life as it is than to pass what remains of it in solicitude. The speaker responds to this by throwing another question: do not we deserve a stable world where we can live eternally like these "monuments of unageing intellect"? (Line 8). Through this personal involvement and different encounters with "Sailing to Byzantium", the speaker continues to unfold new meanings to my situation. It appears that the word *Byzantium* refers to paradise because the speaker, the old man, is about to die (sail). Since this world is neither for old nor young, the old man waits for death with all hope that he can get rid of his dead body somewhere in the afterlife. In a state of confusion on the part of the speaker, pondering on the possibilities of an afterlife, the poem responds that one must not lose hope. Perhaps there is a better world where body takes the form of an unageing soul. And this world is possible only when one dies (out of nature). The poem confirms:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (Lines 25-32)

Given this interpretation, it seems clear that "Sailing to Byzantium" is a universal experience that is not limited to the past situation. It is an experience that constantly informs our present situation through its existential questions that concern us all. Furthermore, the questions put to me by the poem challenge my prejudices and lead me to ponder upon my own *being* in the

world. In other words, the poem draws me to openly raise questions about my own cultural realities, in which what is taken for granted is redefined.

### 3.3. A Dialogic Play with the Historical Voices of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land"

Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1963) is deemed to be the poem that defines the aesthetics of high modern poetry. On its publication in 1922, "The Waste Land" surprised a great deal of readers who were not accustomed to such a different kind of poetry. "The Waste Land" is par excellence a genuine work of art that speaks to the present as if it were made specifically for it. David Chinitz (2006) indicates that "The Waste Land" continues to speak to us. He writes: "it may be said fairly enough that many of the large problems with which ["The Waste Land"] concerns itself remain live issues" (2006: 324). This view will be made clear through a hermeneutic conversation with the speakers and voices of "The Waste Land". As the latter poem consists of five major parts, I limit my reading only to the 172 lines of the first two parts ('The Burial of the Dead' and 'A Game of Chess').

As a reader of English Literary studies, my horizon is constituted by some prevailing prejudices about the "The Waste Land" (1963). I can easily apply the poem to my own prejudices and say that it is a portrayal of the miserable situation of the modern world that was destroyed by the First World War. Yet this is not how interpretation works since the poem is totally an independent entity. Neither poet nor critic can determine the sense of the poem. The poetic words, for Gadamer, are "not something that belong to man, but to the situation" (Palmer 1969: 203). "The Waste Land" is a work of art that has its truth in its own poetic words.

Being from a totally different tradition than "The Waste Land", I openly put my prejudices into test and I confront the questions that are disclosed by the poem's voices and speakers who directly address us with their claim to truth. From the very first lines of "The Waste Land", one experiences a kind of a conversational relationship with the poem's voices that speak from the past. Initially, 'The Burial of the Dead' consists of six speakers who have different experiences to tell. The first unnamed speaker starts the poem with a melancholic tone:

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and Desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers. (Lines 1-7)

The speaker of the above lines puts to us questions. As a partner, I listen to these questions and start asking questions too. One may ask: why April as a month of love, rebirth and fertility is cruel while winter as a season of painful snow and cold seems second best? Through this dialogical questionability, the speaker unravels a harsh reality about our existence. By April, the speaker means spring. Although spring is a season of growth and joy, it is cruel because it brings with it our true nature. That is, spring reminds the speaker about human finitude in a barren world. Humans are like *lilacs* that grow in a world (dead land) that will not accept them eternally. Only after a short period of time, everything beautiful will fade away. Spring (life) is futile since it gives birth to what will vanish. While looking at plants that are destined to vanish, the speaker cannot enjoy the beautiful nature of spring, but rather remember human mortality. It is in this way that April is cruel. The speaker continues to speak to us of what we have in common as human beings. He suggests that no one can understand the mystery of life. Thanks to winter's snow that humans can forget their finitude and live a little joy before the next spring.

It is important to note that "The Waste Land" frequently shifts into different speakers and scenes that have nothing to do with one another. However, one may get the impression that what is common about the speakers is that they all belong to an unpleasant world. *Marie* is another speaker who has something meaningful to say about our reality. Marie seems nostalgic about her innocent past. She informs us that childhood is an important stage, where one feels free from all constraints and anxieties of life. Indeed, "there [in childhood] you feel free" (Line 17). On the contrary, when one gets old, he/she cannot help but get caught in the net of everydayness and wear the mask of nationalism and patriotism which turn to be the cause of wars. This becomes especially clear in the way the speaker says: "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch" (Line 12)<sup>3</sup>. It appears that *night* awakens fears and the uncertainty of life. That's why Marie cannot sleep and, instead, she "read[s] much of the night" (Line 18).

<sup>3</sup> "I am not Russian at all; I come from Lithuania, I am a real German. (Eliot's translation)"

When Marie ceases talking, another unnamed voice appears that throws more questions about the human condition and, therefore, engages us in the play of dialogue. This speaker continues the same melancholic tone with which the poem starts:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
 There is shadow under this red rock,  
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
 And I will show you something different from either  
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (Lines 19-30)

The barren world to which all the voices belong has become manifest through this scene. This world is a real waste land. But aren't we all part of this world? Aren't we affected by it? The speaker draws us to live his experience and question all what we take at face value, as if he said: "Thou must alter thy life!" (Gadamer 1976: 104). The speaker suggests that nothing is certain in this world. No one can get hold of truth, and instead one "know[s] only / A heap of broken images" (Lines 21-22). It seems that death, as an inseparable "shadow at morning striding behind you / Or ... at evening rising to meet you" (Lines 28-29), is the only absolute truth that one can be certain of.

*Madame Sosostris*, 'famous clairvoyante', is a fundamental speaker who "Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe" (Line 45). Madame Sosostris puts before us "a series of fragmented images or condensed narratives that singly are meaningless, but juxtaposed suggest an interpretation of the present, if not the future" (Beasley 2007: 91). Through these fragmented images, the speaker tells us about the relevancy of myth to the present world. She suggests that one must learn from the past ('Fear death by water') because the problems of humanity are unchangeable. There is an interconnection between the past and the present. In the last section of the first part of "The Waste Land", the voice which speaks to us from the past is an alienated man who ends up this part with a deep grief about the situation of the world:

Unreal city,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.  
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (Lines 60-65)

The speaker suggests that human beings do not belong to this world. Because of the materialistic and capitalistic greed, the world becomes worse than hell. The speaker tells us that all humanity shares the same responsibility for this world's damage. That is why he says: 'You! Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable—mon frère! (Line 76). Human beings appear as both victims and enemies of the world.

The second part, 'A Game of Chess', of "The Waste Land" consists of a central voice. This voice or speaker is a woman who engages us into the experience of different characters. She wants to show us the effects of the wasteland on human beings. With this speaker, one may notice that wars and violence are what alienate people and drive them to question the meaning of life. This idea becomes clear with the following instances: "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale" (Lines 99-100); "I think we are in rats' alley / Where the dead men lost their bones. (Lines 115-116); "think of poor Albert, / He's been in the army four years" (Lines 147-148). The woman, speaker, in 'A Game of Chess' unravels the way violence and brutality deepen human uncertainty. This uncertainty makes people more anxious and lonely. The speaker shows this by saying:

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?'  
 'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street  
 'With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?  
 'What shall we ever do?' (131-134)

The speaker goes on to suggest that being human in such a sterile world means to be devoid from any spirituality or feeling. This is because people are transformed into machines by the savage exploitation of capitalism and commercialism. The speaker alludes to this in one of her conversations: "What you get married for if you don't want children? (Line 164). With this new reality of the world, no one can avoid alienation, frustration and isolation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Applying the dialectic of questionability to reading poetry appears to be worth undertaking since it changes the way literature is read, especially by shifting the focus to what literary works can significantly say about our current world. In other words, the logic of questionability has made reading more exciting compared to prevalent literature approaches that only impose specific readings on the work. Therefore, both W.B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1989) and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1963) are two great works of art written by two masters of the twentieth century poetics. The two poets know that reflective and true reading can properly be achieved by setting a communicative interaction between the reader and the poem. This matter has made it easier for readers to engage in an act of questioning with their poems, including "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Waste Land". Indeed, the latter poems are communicative insofar as they have new relevance to the present situation; they are universal experiences related to our current issues. To put it simply, they powerfully speak to us again and again, calling for our listening as well as our questioning in order to open up new dimensions of meanings and possibilities about our *being* in the world. In this sense, my partial/subjective hermeneutic understanding of the two poems is achieved through openness to their horizons. This openness is what leads to a serious listening to what the poems have to say to my present situation. Indeed, as agreement, understanding happens through our personal encounters and interactions with the work.

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