The Economy of Literary Interpretation[*]

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The Logic of Economical Interpretation

The economy of literary interpretation can be described as the ratio between textual details from various phonetic, syntactic and semantic levels, and explicit or implicit assumptions that we use in order to explain these details. An economical interpretation is one that succeeds in explaining many textual details while using only a few, simple assumptions.[1] An uneconomical (or strange or cumbersome) interpretation, on the other hand, develops a complicated set of assumptions to explain only a few textual details. As Eco suggested, there is an interesting and close affinity between uneconomical interpretations and paranoid thinking.[2] If paranoid thinking can be described, using Thomas Pynchon's formulation, as "the leading edge of the awareness that *everything is connected*,"[3] Eco shows how certain interpretations follow that logic and offer extra strong connections between textual details in places where weaker connections would be quite sufficient.[4] I would like to call attention to another dimension of paranoid thinking that is directly pertinent to the concept of uneconomical thinking: namely, to hold fast to an "axiomatic" assumption (e.g. "they stole my kitchenware") that inevitably leads to the complication of assumptions designed to explain certain details ("OK, it *seems* that my kitchenware is in place, but in fact it was stolen and then replaced by the thieves who put in its stead cheap replicas").[5]

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[*]For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <http://www.connotations.de/debfishelov0221.htm>.

Note that we can meticulously compare and grade the economy of two competing interpretations only when the principle of *ceteris paribus* applies: either the same number of textual details are accounted for by the two sets of assumptions but one of these sets is more complicated and hence less economical; or else, one set of assumptions explains more textual details than a competing set of assumptions of the same degree of complexity, and hence is more economical.[6]

In theory, the above distinction between economical and uneconomical interpretation sounds quite simple, but applying it to specific cases may become quite complicated. The reason for possible complications lies with the provision of *ceteris paribus*, i.e., the difficulty of providing two competing interpretations with either the exact same number of explained textual details or the same degree of complexity of their explanatory assumptions. Needless to say, it is not easy to determine whether two competing interpretations actually cover the exact same number of textual details or have the same degree of complexity. In the analyses of specific texts in the following sections I shall focus on only a very few dimensions of these texts in order to maintain as far as possible the *ceteris paribus* principle.

The economy of interpretation can also be described as an offshoot of a general principle of rational activity whereby we use minimal means to achieve maximal goals (cf. Kasher), or to a general rule of energy saving which applies to physical and cognitive activities alike. A simple formulation of this rule can be stated in the following rhetorical question: If you can get it done by using only a small amount of (physical or mental) force, why bother to develop complicated machinery to achieve the same goal? By arguing that economical interpretation is derived from a general principle of rational behavior and/or energy saving, we do not necessarily commit ourselves to the statement that all human activity in fact complies with this principle. As our everyday experience can remind us, for better or for worse, all too often we do not follow rational principles; in fact, recent studies in cognitive and social psychology point out the

recurrent biases involved in our thinking (cf. Kahneman). To acknowledge the existence of such biases, however, does not invalidate the logic of economical interpretation: it is reasonable to assume that the more our cognitive activity is made conscious, and the more this activity is detached from practical goals or interests, then the more these rational, economic principles will be operative. There is a difference between the factors involved in our deliberations over whether to buy a specific brand of cheese or to choose an investment plan, and those that guide us when we are asked to choose between two competing interpretations of a poem and to justify our decision. Some biases may come into play in the former, but not necessarily in the latter, because the interpretation of literary texts is relatively conscious and relatively detached from practical goals, and hence the logic of economic principles is (or at least should be) operative.

Let me conclude this introductory section by making another clarification regarding two related but not identical concepts: the application of economical principles and the application of probability judgments. Whereas we judge certain interpretations to be more economical than others because they demonstrate a better ratio between assumptions and explained textual details, we apply probability judgments when we formulate (consciously or unconsciously) these assumptions. While forming the latter we rely on our world knowledge: "folk theories," linguistic knowledge, acquaintance with social, cultural and literary conventions, etc. We assume, for example, almost automatically that this article has been written by a human being rather than, say, by an alien; whereas the latter assumption is logically possible, it is patently improbable and we need to change our knowledge of the world or add a very specific context and circumstances in order to make it probable (e.g. an elaborated sci-fi story of how aliens have decided to take over the field of literary scholarship). Thus, probability judgments refer to a relationship between assumptions and world knowledge. When we characterize an assumption as simple, it would usually mean that,

based on our knowledge, it is a probable one. Interpretation is thus a complex process, involving both considerations of economy and of probability. Furthermore, it is a dynamic and bi-directional process: we approach the text with certain probable (hence simple) assumptions, but certain textual details may encourage or even compel us to review our initial assumptions and, through the activation of additional pertinent knowledge, to come up with alternative, more probable (and hence simpler) assumptions. The article focuses on economical principles of interpretation and will refer to issues of probability only occasionally.

Economical Principles in Action I: "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"

Before discussing more general issues in the economy of literary interpretation, let us first examine a relatively simple case of two competing interpretations (or "readings") of a popular children's song, "Old MacDonald Had a Farm":

> Old MacDonald had a farm, EE-I-EE-I-O,
> And on that farm he had a [the name of an animal], EE-I-EE-I-O,
> With a [animal noise twice] here and a [animal noise twice] there
> Here a [animal noise], there a [animal noise], everywhere a [animal noise twice]
> Old MacDonald had a farm, EE-I-EE-I-O.[7]

> **Interpretation #1 (**hereafter OMD1**)** can be formulated as a series of assumptions about the song's specific details which are then integrated into a "higher" assumption about the song's presumed goals: (a) The song is about a farmer named MacDonald, the various animals he keeps on his farm, and their respective noises; (b) The specific identity of Mr MacDonald and his psychological state are irrelevant for understanding and enjoying the song; (c) The song's goal is to offer an opportunity to cheerfully imitate voices of different animals, to teach children and to practice such voices with them.

Every interpretation is built on such statements, some of which refer to more basic textual details (e.g. the above first assumption), and

hence have a more "descriptive" nature; whereas other assumptions are of a more general nature (e.g. the above third assumption), focusing on the organizing principle or the function and "goal" of the text, and hence have a more "interpretative" nature. Note, however, that no assumption is intrinsically descriptive or interpretative; what is considered as a "descriptive" statement in one context may become "interpretative" in another, depending on the specific series of statements in which it appears. Consider, for example, the following sequence of statements: (a*) "The phrase 'Old MacDonald' is repeated in the song as the subject of a sentence," followed by the opening statement of our original interpretation, namely: (a) "The song is about a farmer named MacDonald, the various animals he keeps in his farm and their respective noises." In such a new sequence, (a*) could be labeled more basic and "descriptive" than (a) in our OMD1, which now holds a higher position on the descriptive-interpretative axis and thus can be described as more "interpretative"—relative to (a*). In a complementary manner, if the third statement of this reading—(c) "The song offers an opportunity to cheerfully imitate voices of different animals, to teach children and to practice such voices with them"—would precede the statement (d) "The song's function is to develop children's musical, mental and social skills," (c) would be perceived as more "descriptive" relative to the new, more "interpretative" (d).[8]

Before offering an alternative interpretation, I would like to make another preliminary clarification: whereas some interpretative statements offered in this article may appear basic, they are not part of a strictly philological discussion. Philology is responsible for the establishment of a reliable version (or versions) of a text (cf. Maas); whereas literary interpretation assumes that such a text has been established and moves to a "second tier" of interpreting of this text. Although some of the following assumptions about the meaning of an expression may therefore look like a philological discussion—and sometimes they follow the same logic—they are in fact part of (sometimes basic) interpretative activity, because they take the text as a given.

After these brief preliminary clarifications concerning the relative nature of the descriptive-interpretative opposition and the distinction between philological and interpretative activities, it is time to offer another interpretation of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm":

> **Interpretation #2 (**hereafter OMD2**)** makes different assumptions about the song's textual details and consequently reaches other conclusions regarding its goals or function: (a) The song's main character is the founding father of the MacDonald fast food chain[9]; (b) Mr MacDonald is on the brink of a psychological breakdown: he suffers from a delusion that causes him to hear noises of animals "here [...] there [...] everywhere"; (c) The song's goal is to express a longing for simple farm life, to protest globalization and to empower animals, especially cows, which are the major victims of the MacDonald fast-food chain.

I believe most readers would agree that OMD2 sounds strange or would even label it a parody of an interpretation (and, as far as my intentions are concerned, they would be right). Note that its strangeness does not stem from the fact that it directly contradicts any specific textual detail of the song. If this was the case, we could easily dismiss it. OMD2 is consistent with all the details of the song; in fact, it even takes into account quite seriously one textual detail that OMD1 almost ignores, namely the textual detail that describes how Old MacDonald hears animal voices "everywhere." Nonetheless, OMD1 is capable of explaining this detail without assigning to it any specific semantic significance, but rather as just another opportunity to repeat the animals' voices.[10] We may raise some factual objections against OMD2 (e.g. the fact that the song dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, whereas the McDonald fast food chain took its first steps in the late 1930s and early 1940s)[11] and hence argue that some of its assumptions are highly improbable; but assuming that such facts are not necessarily common knowledge, we can ignore them in a discussion that focuses on the logic of interpretation.

We prefer OMD1 over OMD2 primarily for reasons of economy: the assumptions made by OMD2 are much more complicated and convoluted than those offered by OMD1. The assumption, for

example, that Mr MacDonald experiences a psychological collapse is based on only one textual detail (the word "everywhere"), and thus seems disproportionate and ungrounded: in order to assume that a person is psychologically instable, we need additional and stronger evidence, especially when that specific detail can also be explained in simpler terms. We would seriously consider the assumption if there were additional relevant details in the song ("here … there … everywhere, day and night, sometimes waking him up covered with cold sweat"). With such additional details, the assumption that Old MacDonald "had lost it" would suddenly make sense and would be considered economical; without them—it would appear quite uneconomical. As for the assumption about Mr MacDonald's specific lineage (presumed to be the founder of the MacDonald fast food chain), nothing seems to support it. Had the song included additional details (e.g. "Old MacDonald had a farm and he used to barbeque tasty hamburgers in his backyard"), this assumption would gain credibility, but since there are no such details in the song, the assumption seems baseless and uneconomical. Hypothetically, if the name MacDonald was special or unique, the assumption that connects the song to the fast food chain would gain more credibility (imagine, for example, a song whose title reads "Old Häagen-Dazs Had a Dairy"[12]). Since this is not the case, however, the assumption seems suspicious and superfluous. If the assumptions about Old MacDonald's lineage and about his mental state were to be accepted, the road to the concluding assumption regarding the song's political goal would be paved; although, even under these circumstances, we might feel that the assumption about the presumed political message of the song (c) is an uneconomical "leap" made to satisfy the contemporary ideological preoccupations of environmentalism.

So far, I have offered a relatively detailed analysis of what might seem to be a trivial, obvious case. The point in describing here in detail the logic behind an interpretation of a popular song is to show that, what might seem to be an automatic activity ("there is the only way to read/interpret the song") is in fact grounded in the economic

principles of interpretation. Furthermore, the small alterations introduced into the original text (e.g. elaborating on Old MacDonald's hearing voices; substituting Häagen-Dazs for his name) demonstrate the intimate and intricate relations between textual details and the assumptions that are made to explain them. A set of assumptions deemed uneconomical vis-à-vis certain details would be more economical—and hence would gain credibility—in relation to different textual details. The assumption that Old MacDonald is the founding father of a fast food chain seems superfluous and ridiculous, whereas in a hypothetical "Old Häagen-Dazs Had a Dairy" such an assumption would suddenly seem quite acceptable. In short, when we judge certain assumptions as acceptable and reasonable on the one hand, and as strange, superfluous and ridiculous on the other, this is due to the logic of economical interpretation, based on a rule that says: try to account for maximum textual details while using minimum, simple assumptions.

I believe that this logic applies to the interpretation of various facts, actions and artifacts in general, as well as to the interpretation of different kinds of verbal utterances and texts of different lengths and complexity (casual conversation, newspaper items, songs, stories, novels, and poems).[13] One may argue, however, that, while the principles of economical interpretation apply to everyday texts or popular songs (such as "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"), this is not necessarily so for complicated literary texts, in which the "rules of the game" change. Instead of answering this objection in theoretical terms, it may be useful now to turn to analyze different interpretations of a few lines of a genuinely complex poetic text.

Economical Principles in Action II: "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"

As a "test-case" I will use the first two stanzas of John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," a poem that definitely qualifies

for poetical complexity, as is indirectly testified by the numerous interpretations it has acquired throughout the years[14]:

> As virtuous men pass mildly away,
> And whisper to their souls to go,
> Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
> The breath goes now, and some say, No:
>
> So let us melt, and make no noise,
> No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
> ʹTwere profanation of our joys
> To tell the laity our love.[15]

The interpretations that I would like to discuss in this section differ among themselves in one important assumption: the identity of speaker and addressee in these two stanzas, and thus also with respect to certain implications of their alleged identity. By focusing on only one dimension, we gain methodological clarity; namely, it enables us to better weigh the ratio between the simplicity of the offered assumptions and the number of textual details accounted for by these assumptions. This methodological advantage, however, comes at a price: whereas forming a heuristic notion about the speaker is part of an interpretation, it is only a part. Thus, the following interpretations in this section do not intend to offer comprehensive or deep readings of these two stanzas.

> **Interpretation #1 (**hereafter JD1**)** states that: (a) The first stanza describes a scene of virtuous men on their deathbed, departing gracefully from their soul; (b) The speaker in these two stanzas (and in the poem as a whole) is a man departing from his beloved woman; (c) The addressee is the beloved woman; (d) In the second stanza the speaker encourages the beloved to adopt the model of a peaceful departure as described in the first stanza: with no tears or other outward, noticeable signs.

Critics may debate the reading of specific expressions in these two stanzas and the question of whether we should locate the farewell situation of the poem in a specific historical situation: John Donne's addressing Anne, his wife, on the eve of his departure for the Conti-

nent in the year 1611 (cf. Donne: 261-62). We can anchor the poem in this historical context, which gives the lines a strong personal color, or opt for a more general, de-contextualized reading (the speaker is a man parting from his beloved wife). Both cases can be accommodated by JD1. Furthermore, the assumptions of JD1 still enable a diversity of more nuanced readings that would address the question of the speaker's tone (serious, sincere, ironic, tongue-in-cheek), and issues related to the overall significance of the poem (an advocacy of mystical union; a mocking of Petrarchan imagery; an exercise in rhetoric; a combination of all of these).

JD1 is not only a relatively economical interpretation of the first two stanzas but can also be described as the "standard" reading of them, especially from the perspective of the poem as a whole. This fact, however, does not mean that this is the only (logically) possible interpretation, as the following interpretation illustrates:

> **Interpretation #2** (hereafter JD2) states that: (a) The first stanza describes a scene of virtuous men on their deathbed, departing gracefully from their soul; (b) The speaker in the poem is a celestial creature, probably Jupiter, the god in charge of bringing forth rain and tempests; (c) The addressee is Juno, his wife; (d) In the second stanza Jupiter expresses his contempt for ordinary, sublunary men and encourages Juno to adopt a behavior suitable for celestial creatures.

Before explaining the economical principles that make us prefer JD1 over JD2, let us first spell out the difference between these two. Note, first, that both these interpretations share the assumption that the first stanza describes the scene of virtuous dying men and the peaceful way of departing from this world. The major difference lies with the identity of the speaker and the addressee: in JD1 they are a man and a woman; in JD2 they are celestial, mythological creatures. Note also that, despite the fact that JD2 may seem a bit strange, it does not contradict any specific detail of the language of the poem (in that respect, it is similar to the case of OMD2). In other words, we can imagine a situation in which Jupiter is addressing these words to Juno without creating any direct contradiction. Suppose, for example, that another

competing interpretation (JD*) makes the assumption that the speaker does not love the addressee; such a reading would directly contradict the expression "our love" in line 8.[16] JD2, however, does not have to deal with a direct contradiction, simply because there is none.

As with the case of OMD2, JD2 takes certain textual details more seriously than the "standard" OMD1 and JD1. JD2 treats line 6 ("No tear-*floods*, nor sigh-*tempests* move"; my emphasis) quite seriously and literally: if a speaker is capable of producing sigh-tempests, Jupiter, the god responsible for storms, is quite a reasonable candidate for uttering these lines.

Thus, the reason for preferring JD1 to JD2 is rooted not in any direct contradiction performed by JD2 but in the logic of economical interpretation: JD1 uses a probable and hence simpler assumption about the identity of speaker and addressee: namely, that they are human beings just like most speakers and addressees in most utterances and texts.[17] This example also shows how economical and probability considerations interact: in order to abandon the probable and simpler assumption that speaker and addressee are humans, we need to have a good reason; i.e., either a specific textual detail that would make this assumption untenable, or else added textual details that cannot be explained by this assumption but can be explained by the assumptions that the speaker is Jupiter and the addressee is Juno. If, for example, the title of Donne's poem had been "Jupiter Forbidding Juno to Mourn" (or "Jupiter to Juno: A Valediction, Forbidding Mourning"), it would make JD2 (b) almost unavoidable. A similar corroboration of such an assumption would be if the second stanza had read: "So let us melt on Olympus and make no noise" (assuming, of course, that this does not violate the poem's meter, as unfortunately my alteration does).

Had the poem included such textual details we would have been willing to seriously consider JD2. This, however, is not the case. Line 6 ("No tear-flood, no sigh-tempests move") can be explained by interpretation JD1 as conventional, trite hyperbole, referring to an exaggerated, loud and visible emotional outburst. Yet we cannot deny

the fact that this line creates the impression that the speaker and addressee are capable of producing highly intense, almost "super-human" manifestations of emotion. Let us now examine another interpretation that, again, offers different assumptions regarding the identity of the speaker and addressee.

> **Interpretation #3** (hereafter JD3) states that: (a) The first stanza describes a scene of virtuous men on their deathbed, departing gracefully from their soul; (b) The speaker in the poem is a dying person or at least someone who senses that his end is approaching[18]; (c) The addressee is probably another dying person; (d) In the second stanza the dying person expresses his wish to emulate (together with the addressee) the conduct of the dying virtuous men described in the first stanza.

JD3 shares with JD1 and JD2 the reading of the first stanza, but differs from JD1 in the way it understands the general topic of the second stanza: here it is understood to be closely related to that of the first stanza, namely the right way to face death; as if the topic of the first stanza is "spilling" into the second stanza, exemplified first with regard to "virtuous men" and is then applied to the situation of the speaker and his addressee (in JD1 the topics of the first and the second stanza are different). One can argue that the construction of the two stanzas as an extended simile ("as … so") supports JD1 because it has two distinct topics: the vehicle or source introduced in the first stanza (virtuous men facing their death); and the tenor or target domain of the second stanza (a parting of two lovers).[19] The "as … so" construction, however, can be used also in simple comparisons.[20] Thus, it could not be considered a decisive argument in favor of JD1 that makes the assumption of JD3 more complicated. By the way, the assumption that the speaker is a dying man (JD3b) was actually raised by a few readers: according to Hirsch (73-74), some of his students adamantly clung to this assumption in their interpretation, despite his efforts to dissuade them, and adhered to it in their overall reading of the poem.

Another possible interpretation, related to reading the two stanzas as addressing the issue of the right way to approach death, would be the following:

> **Interpretation #4** (hereafter JD4) states that: (a) The first stanza describes a scene of virtuous men on their deathbed, departing gracefully from their soul; (b) The speaker is a person's soul; (c) The addressee is a person's body[21]; (d) The soul encourages the body to leave this world according to the example presented by the "virtuous men" of the first stanza.[22]

According to JD4, the first two stanzas share the same general topic: the appropriate way to face death. As with JD3, this general, abstract topic is not explicitly present in the second stanza (which contains only a recommendation to avoid noise and tears) but is "dragged" from the first stanza. One may argue that, as with JD3, this interpretation takes the word "Mourning" of the poem's title quite seriously and literally. And, as with JD3, one big advantage of JD4 is that it offers a strong connection between the first and second stanzas: the fact that the two stanzas are syntactically connected ("As […] so […]") and cannot be read as completely autonomous units encourages us to look for possible connections between the two stanzas, and the sharing of a general topic can be one such possibility. In other words, this possibility increases textual cohesiveness: as if the soul referred to in the first stanza has decided to open its mouth and apply the "lesson" taught in the scene described in the first stanza; whereas the first stanza describes how undefined "virtuous men" face death, the second stanza creates a mini dramatic-monologue that illustrates the right attitude towards death in the here and now of the speaker and the addressee.

Despite this apparent advantage, the assumption that the speaker is a man's soul could lead to some difficulties and would result in more complicated assumptions than those presented in both JD1 and JD2. When the soul (supposedly) exhorts the body to stop its corporeal manifestations of grief, it is implied that a man's soul is capable of producing noise, tears and sighs ("So let *us* melt, and *make no noise* /

No *tear-floods*, nor *sigh-tempests* move"; my emphases). The body, of course, produces noises, tears and sighs; the soul, however, can do no such things, unless these expressions are understood metaphorically.[23] The fact that certain phrases require metaphorical interpretation does not in and of itself disqualify an interpretation; metaphorical readings are a common phenomenon in everyday language and are very common in poetry. Nonetheless, a metaphorical reading is more complex than a straightforward one.

Another complication of the assumption regarding the speaker as a man's soul is related to the fact that the speaker refers to its relationship with the body as consisting in love and joy ("our joys … our love"). If the soul loves the body (and vice versa), and if they enjoy the company of one another, it is not clear why the soul would advocate the breaking of such a joyous love-story. And while this difficulty can in principle be explained away, any specific attempt to provide an explanation would probably involve a complication of assumptions.

Some of these complications do not necessarily amount to direct contradictions: we can still offer a reading in which the soul is the speaker, the body is the addressee, their coexistence is joyful, and still the soul beseeches a peaceful departure. While this set of assumptions is possible, it is admittedly much more complicated than the assumptions made by JD1 or even those of JD2. As with JD3, JD4 also reads the "as … so" construction as a comparison in which the first two stanzas share the same topic (the right way to approach death), rather than as an extended simile (in which the second stanza introduces a different topic); but, as we saw earlier in JD3, this fact in and of itself does not necessarily make JD4 more complicated.

To conclude this section, let us look at yet another reading of the two stanzas, with another assumption regarding the identity of the speaker and the addressee:

> **Interpretation #5** (hereafter JD5) states that: (a) The first stanza describes a scene of virtuous men on their deathbed, departing gracefully from their soul; (b) The speaker in the poem is a clergyman; (c) The addressee is either

the speaker's wife or a nun; (d) In the second stanza the clergyman expresses his contempt for ordinary corporeal love and encourages the addressee to adopt a behavior suitable for holy love.

As with JD2, JD3 and JD4, there is no direct contradiction of any textual details of the poem. And as with JD2, JD5 takes quite seriously several textual details that JD1 (our "standard" reading) treats only in passing: with JD5 this relates to two expressions in lines 7-8: " 'Twere *profanation* of our joys / To tell the *laity* our love" (my emphasis). If we assume the speaker to be a clergyman with a built-in aversion to corporeal love, the use of these expressions would make perfect sense. Note that it is more difficult to reject JD5 on the grounds of economic reasons. The assumptions that the speaker is a "regular" person and that he is a clergyman are not only compatible with the textual details of the poem, but we can also argue that they have the same degree of probability and complexity and can account for the same number of textual details. The assumption that the speaker is a regular person takes seriously the idea of a love-bond between the speaker and the addressee, and reads "profanation" and "laity" as expressions meant to intensify the sense of the unique, refined nature of this love-bond between the two. The assumption that the speaker is a clergyman (or a pious Christian averse to corporeal love) takes quite seriously the expressions (treated as mere colorful hyperbole by JD1); and by the same token it plays down the idea that the speaker and the addressee are involved in any real (corporeal) love relationship. The more we continue with reading the poem, the more it becomes clear that JD1 has the upper hand and that the speaker is not a pious Christian averse to corporeal love (he is even capable of erotic, sexual innuendos). Since, however, we have decided to limit ourselves to interpreting only the first two stanzas, we can treat JD1 and JD5 as genuinely competing interpretations.[24]

Do We Have to Choose Among Interpretations?

In the case of "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" it was quite easy to make a choice between the two interpretations, because OMD2 was significantly less economical than OMD1. With the above five interpretations of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," however, the situation is much more complex, not only because we have more to choose from but also because it is sometimes not clear if the principles of economical interpretation can be of any help. This apparent "draw" has to do with the fact that most of the offered interpretations do not introduce outrageously complicated or improbable assumptions, and most of them (except, perhaps, JD2) succeed in explaining a similar number of relevant textual details. Furthermore, when some assumptions of an interpretation seem at first sight as less probable and hence more complicated than others (e.g. the speaker is a person's soul), they still can get support from pertinent contextual factors (e.g. the poetic tradition of dialogue between body and soul) and thus challenge their status as "complicated." The fact that we are dealing with a complex, ingenious poem, which activates a rich linguistic,[25] rhetorical and literary network of pertinent contextual and co-textual facts (Donne's other *Songs and Sonets*, the heterogeneous poetic tradition of the Renaissance, the history of ideas, the history of Christianity, etc.) further complicates the situation, and makes it difficult to isolate all relevant factors in order to satisfy the methodological principle of *ceteris paribus*.

If the different interpretations can be seen as competing among themselves and there is no clear or simple winner (especially after we have become aware of the complexity of the poem as well as of its context), are we thus to make an arbitrary choice in which each reader may follow his or her heart? Empirically, this may be what actually happens; after all, not every reader attempts to produce multiple interpretations at every point of reading, especially in the initial stages. Rather, there is a natural tendency to go along with our initial assumption or hypothesis, unless we encounter new textual details or

new contextual facts (i.e. pertinent world knowledge) that compel us to re-evaluate that assumption.[26] The moment we are presented with multiple, competing interpretations, however, either produced by ourselves or handed to us, we have to activate the logic of economical interpretation. When that logic fails to choose a clear "winner," we can then either choose one on a whim, or we decide to simultaneously maintain all feasible interpretations and perhaps even enjoy the "hovering" among the different options. Poetic language is, after all, known to be replete with ambiguities, ironies, paradoxes, tensions and complexities, and may be a strong incentive to maintain multiple interpretations.[27] When we take these characteristics of poetic language into account, the fact that some of the five interpretations logically exclude others (e.g. the speaker can either be a mortal or a celestial creature) should not intimidate us.

There is another thing that we can do: when we consider several interpretations that are not necessarily mutually exclusive, we can combine some of their assumptions. Thus, for example, we can try and reformulate our assumption about the identity of the speaker in a way that would accommodate both JD1 and JD5, and suggest that the speaker is a person who may not necessarily be an ecclesiastic but who is someone with a strong religious background or way of thinking. This latter formulation can be judged, from the standpoint of the economy of interpretation, as a bit more complicated than the assumption that he is an ordinary person (JD1) or that he is a clergyman (JD5). Let us not criticize this small complication too hastily, however. In fact, it can offer an important key to applying the principles of economical interpretation to complex poetic texts.

I would like to argue that, when we interpret poetic texts, we are willing to pay the price of complicating our assumptions in order to capture nuances of meanings in the poetic text. Furthermore, despite the fact that JD2 has been rejected because (compared to JD1) it has been found less economical, this does not mean that we have to reject it *in toto*. Whereas JD2 is unacceptable in its present form, we cannot deny the fact that line 6 does create the "hovering" impression that

the speaker has super-human powers, that he is capable of producing floods and tempests. We can take these secondary meanings and connotations into account, too, when formulating our assumption about the speaker. The outcome may appear quite complicated: the speaker is a person departing from a beloved woman who has a strong religious background or feelings, and the speaker also creates an impression that he and/or the addressee are capable of producing highly intense, bigger than life signs of grief. True, such an assumption is quite complicated, but it may still be worthwhile not only to ponder it but also to embrace it from the point of view of economical interpretation.

Such a complication of assumptions is worthwhile from the point of view of economy precisely because it succeeds in explaining not only the basic meanings of words, but also the nuances and connotations of many textual details (e.g. the specific wording of line 6). We can recall in this context Pound's famous formulation: "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (Pound 28). True, when we try to capture semantic nuances and multiple connotations, the associated assumptions become more complicated—but by the same token the notion of what is the domain of our textual details changes and expands: not only the *explanans* has become more complicated but also the *explicandum* has grown and now contains more details. In other words, if we remember the principle of *ceteris paribus*, we should not automatically dismiss any complication of assumption but, rather, measure it relative to the specific number and nature of the textual details it succeeds in explaining.

For some specific purposes indeed (e.g. when we have to provide a schematic account of a poem), the simple and brief formulations of JD1 may suffice. If we want to delve more deeply in our interpretation, however, and to account not only for certain conspicuous meanings but also for the rich net of nuances and connotations, a certain degree of complication in our assumptions is not only tolerable but almost unavoidable. Thus, despite the price of complications of

assumption, we also achieve some important gains; despite what seems to be a violation of economic principles, therefore, its basic logic of achieving a good ratio between assumptions and textual details is maintained.

A Challenge to Economical Interpretations of Poetic Texts

Before concluding, let me play *advocatus diaboli* and challenge the applicability of the concept of economical interpretation to poetic texts (even in its broad meaning suggested earlier). According to this challenge, whereas economic principles are operative in our interpretation of simple, popular songs like "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," the interpretations of literary and poetic texts are and should be free from the reins of such principles. Imagine, for example that "Old MacDonald" is brought to a class of creative writing (as a "stimulus"), and students are asked to respond to it in inventive ways and to make it "relevant" to contemporary adult readers. In such a context OMD2 would not only be a reasonable reading but might even be hailed by the professor (by the same token, JD2 will be embraced as a refreshing, novel reading of Donne's first two stanzas of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning"). The interpretation of literary texts, according to this challenge, should be like the situation in such a class of creative writing, and free imagination should take precedence over economic principles (whose only realm is restricted to simple, ordinary texts).

The answer to this challenge is two-fold. First, it does not seem reasonable to assume that we have two mental apparati (or modules) —one initiated by ordinary texts and the other by poetic texts. This proposition would imply that our mind works in a very uneconomical way. Second, the challenge may not be a genuine one, because it admits, too, that there are two kinds of interpretative activity: one concerned with "making sense" of textual details and integrating them into a coherent whole, and the other treating texts as "stimuli" for the readers' creative imagination. Thus, when we compare two

interpretations we should also factor in the relevant interpretative situation and realize that scholarly interpretative activity does not directly compete with free, imaginative readings. OMD2 (or JD2) may win the "contest" over OMD1 (or JD1) when they are presented in the context of a class of creative writing because they would get "extra points" for being more imaginative (regardless of their economy); but would lose in a scholarly context/contest, because some of their assumptions are poorly supported by textual details (there may be of course also some imaginative assumptions that are strongly supported).

There is clearly a genuine disagreement as to whether we should allow or even encourage creative, "wild" readings in a scholarly context: deconstructionists would probably support such a move, and conservative critics would probably oppose it. This would be more like a practical, ideological or pedagogical debate—but not necessarily a theoretical one. As long as those who encourage "wild," imaginative interpretations admit that there is a legitimate activity of "making sense," an activity that is guided by economic principles, the edge of the challenge is removed. Firstly, because even ardent supporters of the application of the principles of economical interpretation (such as myself) can happily encourage imaginative, even "wild" readings—as long as they are offered in the context of creative, not scholarly activity. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, I suspect that even avid advocates of creative, imaginative interpretations have their own version of economic principles at work: they might embrace a reading that sees the speaker in Donne's first two stanzas of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" to be Jupiter; but no one (I hope) would suggest that he is a Hippopotamus.

Concluding Remarks

It is important to understand that to advocate the applicability of economical principles to the interpretation of poetic texts does not

mean that I want to deny the complex nature of such texts. Such a position also does not deny the fact that the interpretation of poetic texts is by far more complicated than the process of interpreting ordinary, simple texts. The basic guiding principles, however, may apply to both areas. Just as there is a difference between the complexity involved in washing dishes every day and that of organizing a new apartment (the former is done almost automatically, while the latter requires conscious, sometimes complicated decisions, such as where should I place my new bookcase and where should I put my copy of Donne's *Songs and Sonets*?), in both cases the economic principle of trying to achieve maximum goals via minimum effort is operative.

The inventiveness of literary works and the fact that they are complex, multilayered texts encourage interpreters of such texts to suggest complex, inventive readings. The fact that some critical schools (e.g. psychoanalytic, deconstructionist) rely on non-intuitive assumptions further encourages readers to come up with novel readings, which further complicates the picture. Thus, the debate between the advocates of "making sense" of texts according to the principles of economy, and the proponents of "imaginative" interpretations is not over. If we realize that each of these two kinds of activity has its role and place in culture, and as long as we try to understand in what kind of activity we are engaged, the better the chances of our avoiding futile debate between the two camps. Furthermore, as I have argued earlier, the application of economic principles to the interpretation of poetic texts does not mean that we deny the complexity and richness of these texts. On the contrary, it takes this complexity quite seriously and consequently allows for, nay even encourages, the complication of assumptions—but without necessarily violating the basic logic of economical interpretation.

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NOTES

[1]Such an interpretation can also be labeled as an efficient or elegant interpretation; since the latter term involves strong positive, aesthetic implications, I will try to stick to the more neutral term economical interpretation in this discussion.

[2]See Eco, *Interpretation*, especially 45-66, Siegel, "Creative Paranoia," and McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, 81-82. In developing my arguments in this article, I am indebted to Eco's criticism of uneconomical interpretations as well as to Abrams's criticism of "New Readings," and to Reichert's description of how we "make sense" of literature.

[3]Qtd. in Siegel 50.

[4]Such interpretative activity is rooted, according to Eco, in the tradition of Hermeticism, motivated to find "hidden messages" in (innocent) texts. See also my criticism of Margolis's historicist approach to interpretation (Fishelov, "Interpretation and Historicim"). In an article on two interpretations of S. Y. Agnon's "Tehilah" by Amos Oz and Eddy Zemach (Fishelov, "Agnon's *Tehila*"), I suggested that in addition to "elegant" (i.e., economical) and "paranoid" interpretation (many details with simple assumptions and few details with complicated assumptions—respectively), there may be two additional kinds of interpretation: "schematic," which explains few details while using simple assumptions; and "poetic," which explains many details but using complicated assumptions.

[5]This tendency can also be found in rigid ideological thinking in which certain assumptions are kept regardless of the ensuing complication of assumptions. I would like to thank Shimon Sandbank for this comment.

[6]The logic of economical interpretation can be associated with the ontological principle of Occam's razor, which states, according to its popular formulation, that "entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity."

[7]The text is quoted from: "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," *Wikipedia*, 4 Dec. 2012, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Dec. 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Old_MacDonald_ Had_a_Farm&oldid=526344401>. For some of its sources and variations, see also: "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," *The Traditional Ballad Index*, ed. Robert B. Walz and David G. Engle, California State University, Fresno, 6 Dec. 2012 <http://www.fresnostate. edu/folklore/ballads/R457.html>.

[8]The suggestion to treat the descriptive-interpretative as a pair, in which "descriptive" holds the position of means and "interpretative" the position of ends or goals, is developed in Fishelov 1993.

[9]The name of the fast food chain is spelled differently (McDonald), but since historically these are interchangeable spelling, and pronounced similarly, it should not interfere with this reading.

[10]Theoretically, the song could have used different wording—e.g. "[animal voice] in the east, [animal voice] in the west etc," instead of "here […] there […] everywhere"—or any other formula that offers an opportunity for repeating the animal's voice.

[11]Some basic facts about the history of the McDonald fast food chain can be found in: "McDonald's," Wikipedia, 5 Dec. 2012, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 Dec. 2012 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=McDonald%27s&oldid= 526559931>.

[12]This invented example illustrates how our knowledge of pertinent contextual facts (in this case, certain socio-linguistic facts) makes us accept certain assumptions as more probable (and hence simpler) than others: both "Old Mac-Donald Had a Farm" and "Old Häagen-Dazs Had a Dairy" have the same syntactical structure and the same deep semantic structure ("Old [proper name] had [a place in which food is produced]"), and only our world knowledge guides us to offer the probable assumption that "Old Häagen-Dazs Had a Dairy" is related to a specific food chain.

[13]There is one interesting difference between forming assumptions in the interpretation of texts (day-to-day and literary alike) and in forming scientific assumptions (i.e. explanations of natural "details"): in the former we rely on common sense, on common knowledge, and on our linguistic and cultural "baggage"; whereas in the latter we are invited to abandon common sense and go beyond common knowledge, e.g. the assumption that the earth revolves around the sun is preferred over the Ptolemaic assumption that the sun revolves around the earth because it is more economical (succeeds in explaining many astronomical "details"), despite the fact that it is counter-intuitive and deviates from common sense.

[14]The MLA *ILB* cites about 40 items devoted to the discussion of this poem and JSTOR about 330.

[15]The text is quoted from Redpath's edition of Donne's poems.

[16]If we broaden our perspective to the entire poem, theoretically such an assumption could be integrated in its overall interpretation and be found consistent with other textual details (e.g. the speaker utters the words "our love" in jest). Thus, a local contradiction of one textual detail does not automatically invalidate an overall interpretation. For methodological reasons outlined earlier, I limit my analysis to the first two stanzas of the poem.

[17]We know that in *Songs and Sonets* the speaker usually is a male lover; we know that a "Valediction" is about a farewell between lovers (at least in Donne it is). Even if we did not have these contextual hints, we would go, *ceteris paribus*, for the more probable option, and a man as a speaker of the poem is more probable than Jupiter.

[18]I could also write in all cases "he or she" and "his or her," but I *assume* that the speaker is, like the poet, a man. It is important to understand that, when we take

the speaker to be a male, this is also an interpretative assumption, not a necessary, logical conclusion of the textual details.

[19]For the different components that constitute similes (source, target, ground and marker) and the variety of relationship between them, see Fishelov, "Poetic and Non-Poetic Simile," and "Simile Understanding."

[20]See *OED* "so" *adv.* and *conj.*, definitions 22.a. and b. for the "as … so" constructions. For the difference between simple comparisons and simile, see Fishelov, "Poetic and Non-Poetic Simile": 13-14.

[21]One may ground this interpretation in the rich medieval and baroque poetic tradition of dialogues and debates between body and soul. See the excellent discussion of Bossy.

[22]This assumption would face a major (in fact, impassable) difficulty when later in the poem the speaker refers to "Our two souls" (line 21), but since I am only concerned here with the first two stanzas, one can still argue for JD4, albeit temporarily.

[23]For the possibility of a playful exchange of roles between body and soul, including the metaphorical attribution of corporal traits to the soul and vice versa, see Bossy.

[24]For the process of gradually building our interpretation, including deciding between competing hypotheses, and sometimes accepting two competing hypotheses, see Perry and Sternberg.

[25]In addition to its multilayered use of English, the poem also extensively activates and plays on Latin words and roots, as has been beautifully demonstrated by Bauer.

[26]For various aspects of the dynamics of the reading process, see Perry.

[27]Suffice it to mention in this context the classical works of Empson on types of ambiguity (Empson 1966 [1930]), Brooks's work on the language of poetry as the language of paradox (Brooks 1947), Tate's work on tension in poetry (Tate 1949), and Beardsley's notion of plenitude of meanings in poetry (144-47). The co-existence of competing interpretations in literary texts is not restricted to the level of minute semantic variations but can be applied to the story-line itself (i.e. two mutually exclusive hypotheses about what happened could gain equal support), as has been convincingly argued by Rimmon-Kenan 1977, and Perry and Stern-berg 1986.

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