INTERPRETING THE 'OTHER' IN DEMOCRACY: TOWARDS A DELIBERATIVE ETHIC

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Abstract

This article cautions against underestimating the complexity of the intersubjective interpretation involved in deliberation between citizens in a democracy. The subjective nature of interpretation potentially sabotages the possibility of truly hearing, or reading, others on their own terms, which, in turn, undermines the democratic ideal of basing decisions on the actual will of the interlocutors. Authentic deliberation can in fact only follow on from a 'good reading' of the other, based on the actual rather than the interpreted views of the various parties. I argue that literary theory's long engagement with such interpretive complexity can be employed to illuminate an interpretive stance that would do justice to both deliberation and democracy. In particular, C.S. Lewis's and Mikhail Bakhtin's arguments point to a reading of the other that, while acknowledging our subjectivity, also envisions the possibility of engaging with the other on his or her own terms.

Keywords: democracy, deliberation, interpretation, literary theory, CS Lewis, Bakhtin

INTRODUCTION

The journey of democracy, both as a governing practice and as an aspirational ideal, has been fraught with increasing challenges during the last number of years. No longer does the road to democracy seem as smooth and broad as it did in the years immediately following the Cold War. One consequence of this change in fortune is that conceptually democracy is becoming increasingly ambiguous; for, since "democracy" continues to evoke such strong rhetorical appeal, it gets applied to, and in, many situations that do not necessarily warrant it as an appellation. This state of affairs calls for a rigorous return to an understanding of the core of the modern appreciation of democracy.

The scholarly community has not been lax in this, as is evident in the emergence of deliberative democratic theory over the past two decades. It is an example of a project aimed at a refocusing of our minds on the core of our democratic appreciation. As it has grown in prominence over the years, deliberative democracy has developed into a rich and comprehensive field of theorising which places the active deliberation between citizens, and between citizens and their rulers, at the heart of democracy. It thus strongly builds on a view of democracy as an expression of trust in the capacity of individual citizens and in their efficacy within the public space.

When democracy is viewed in this manner, with the focus on the interactions between citizens, the inter-subjectivity of this interaction becomes very relevant to democratic outcomes. If democracy requires rigorous communication between citizens, then the citizens are expected to engage directly with the views of those who share the public space with them, and they are not left to their own devices in shaping personal preferences. Instead, the purpose of deliberation is to expose them directly to the views of the other through a process of active, authentic deliberation. Each individual has to open up him – or herself to the views of other citizens and then has to consider his or her personal view on the matter under discussion in the light of others' views and arguments. The careful weighing of arguments for and against different courses of action that is supposed to typify this deliberative process thus presupposes meaningful interaction between citizens. The need for such interactive communication of meaning immediately raises questions of interpretation and understanding across the intersubjective divide. This article aims to explore the issue of such interpretation with two goals in mind. The first is to highlight the importance and complexity of the interpersonal interpretation involved in deliberation in a democratic context by drawing on some insights from literary theory. The second is to explore an interpretive stance that would fit the democratic ideal. This exploration therefore considers the ideas of C.S. Lewis and Mikhail Bakhtin on what constitutes a 'good reading' of a text or person, while also considering various other interpretive stances that might undermine such a 'good reading', with a resultant erosion of the democratic character of deliberation.

DEMOCRACY, DELIBERATION AND THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

In much of modern-day democratic politics, the institutions and procedures that are to give expression to democracy have resulted in a form of aggregative democracy, where individual preferences are formed in private and then merely aggregated by an electoral process. This has led to apathy and a lack of interest in public life in the general population and to elitism in governing circles. In addition, there has also

been an increasingly authoritarian co-optation and even replacement of democracy in various parts of the world. In response to this disappointing situation much, if not all, of democratic theory has taken a decidedly deliberative turn (Dryzek 2004, 145), which feeds on a rich strand in democratic thinking that the possible future for true democracy lies in people's going back to the practice of talking and listening to one another (see Gray 1995; Elshtian 1995; Lasch 1995; Fishkin 1991; Elster 1998; Bohman and Rehg 1997).

Deliberative democratic theory argues that the core of democracy resides in public deliberation between free and equal citizens, where this interaction itself forms the basis of legitimate political decision-making and self-government (Bohman 1998, 401). Legitimacy of democracy should not rest on "the pre-determined will of individuals, but rather [on] the process of its formation, that is, deliberation itself" (Manin 1987, 351–352). All individual persons subject to public decisions should thus participate in this on-going process of authentic deliberation. Such participation is justified, based on the significance of each person, not as a means but in his or her own right. This translates into a form of egalitarianism from which flows the right of each person to be considered, in the minds of the others, a valuable and significant entity when it comes to the ordering of the public space and, more generally, the life in common.

Democracy is thus an affirmation of this person-centredness, for it embraces active and rich engagement between citizens, where each individual is recognised as possessing the right to speak and to be heard, and where all are also bound by the mutual obligation to allow the other to speak and to be truly heard (Cooke 2000, 954–956). This engagement with other citizens for the sake of the life in common is aimed at making democratic control not merely symbolic, but substantive. Such deliberation should ideally entail a process of discussing, defending, and confronting various issues and views in a thoughtful and intentional way, with the aim of coming up with defensible reasons, accounts and explanations for public decision (Saward 2002, 121).

For this deliberative context to be true to the person-centred focus of democracy, it has to ensure that it actually does justice to the people involved, that in the deliberation citizens actually *hear* each other, that in the context of democracy's ideals we acknowledge one another in our deliberation sufficiently to discipline our listening, so that we can actually hear one another's voices and the intent that they want it to convey, because they speak with a right, an authority, that democracy accords them.

No understanding emanates from deliberation without interpretation, and there can be no interpretation without the possibility of multiple (mis)understandings. Furthermore, the nature of most contemporary political societies is such that

interpretive difficulty is almost sure to abound, because the increasing diversity of our societies results in the fact that the people we are likely to encounter in deliberation come from very different cultures and contexts. Hence, they may ascribe very different meanings to words and concepts. It is thus a given that we will have to interpret – it is an inevitability and a necessity for us as meaning-seeking creatures (Ball 2004, 18–19). How, then, are we to go about it? The reality is that interpretation is not such a simple or linear and systematic process[1]. The multiplicity of our individual interpretation(s) of 'the other', in terms of both the person's speech, and his or her broader personhood and social context, shape(s) our imagining of the person and therefore our responses to them in any deliberative process. This issue should be taken seriously, as how we interpret the views of those we encounter in deliberation has an impact on how we act, that is, on the positions we finally adopt in respect of the public choices we make. Our hermeneutical engagement with 'the other' thus warrants our attention.

To elucidate this hermeneutic process, we can turn to the field of literary theory and its understanding of the interpretive process, in order to direct our attempts to interpret others as persons who have a message which they want to convey. This is important, because the democratic imperative compels us to regard and value the other in the mutuality of the public space.

Literary theory, literary criticism, linguistics, and the history of literature make up a detailed and academically rich field of exploration and study. In this study, two apparently dissimilar scholars from this field are considered, namely C.S. Lewis and Mikhail Bakhtin. Both cover a wide range of topics in the humanities, but see their primary academic interest as belonging to the field of literature and language. More importantly for this study, both display an acute awareness of what it would take to be a good hearer of another, of how to do justice to a text or another person in a communicative situation, without losing sight of the role of personal reflection and discernment. Both Lewis and Bakhtin, as will become evident in the discussion below, display a sensitivity toward the awkward cognitive spaces between particularity and universality, between servitude and mastery, and between acceptance and judgment – spaces that are very familiar to theorists considering democratic deliberation.

C.S. LEWIS'S VIEWS ON RECEPTIVE READING

C.S. Lewis taught English Literature and Philosophy at Oxford from 1924 to 1954, before moving on to a chair in Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he remained until the end of his career. His academic career produced such highlights as the magisterial *English Literature of the Sixteenth*

Century (1954) and his election as a Fellow of both the Royal Academy and the Royal Society of Literature.

Towards the end of his life Lewis authored *Experiment in Criticism* (1961), in which he focuses on what he calls "different ways of reading" (Lewis 1961, 5), that is, different practices involved in our interpretation of texts. He deliberately tries to shift the focus from a critical approach, which evaluates the worth of texts in themselves, to the practices of the reader engaging with the text. This 'experiment' acknowledges the position of readers as not only reading the given text, but as also engaged in a process of establishing meaning in relation to the text. Different readers extract meaning from a text in different ways.[2] Lewis states that, as readers, we will always interpret, but that this does not imply that we as readers fully control the "truth" of a text. Our closeness to the heart of a text depends on how we go about reading the text. In this, he distinguishes broadly between "using" a text and 'receiving' a text. Using a text refers to the practice of employing the text to assist or support our own activities. Receiving a text requires us to open ourselves up to really hear and receive from the author.

This distinction is helpful in the context of democracy[3], for while an other-regarding attitude is widely recognised as being constitutive of democracy (see Chappell 2012, 7–8; Talisse 2005, 112–113), what is not always acknowledged is that this "other-regarding" can takes place in a number of different ways. Consider the following analogy: the willingness in democracy to be other-regarding corresponds to being willing to pick up a new book and to read it. It reflects a readiness to be open to new and different ideas from other citizens, which in itself is already a major step towards a democratic public space. But what Lewis shows us is that we can read this new book in different ways. We can adopt a variety of interpretative stances or attitudes when we so read the new text, and these stances or attitudes can appreciably impact the meaning we extract from the text. Thus, whether we engage with the other citizens in a receiving or a using manner will have a substantial bearing, not only on the extent to which we do justice to them, but also on the democratic nature of the engagement itself. It is in this light that Lewis's views invite further consideration.

When Lewis talks of the "using" of a text, he refers to a situation where the reader remains in control and uses the text merely to enhance or stimulate that which is already in the self. The focus thus remains on the self and on our control over the text as long as we extract only that from it which interests us or resonates with pre-existing categories of interest. When we approach the text thus, looking for something to use, we lose the essential otherness of the text. "We are so busy doing things to the work that we give it too little chance to work on us. Thus increasingly we meet only ourselves" (Lewis 1961, 85).

In contrast to this mere "use" of the text, Lewis identifies a receptive stance. Instead of turning a text into a vehicle for our subjectivity, we begin with a largely negative process whereby we lay aside, as much as possible and in a purposive way, "all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations", so that we can then follow this with the positive action of receiving. Such 'receiving' entails a process of "surrender", where we truly determine to 'Look. Listen. Receive', and to '[g]et ourselves out of the way' (Lewis 1961, 18–19). Any question as to whether a text is worthy of our surrender is superfluous, since the worth of a text can only be determined once we have fully received and appreciated it. This form of surrender is also not passive. Lewis refers to it as an 'imaginative activity', where the reader needs to engage his or her imagination, with the imagination always acting in obedience only to the text (Lewis 1961, 19). Furthermore, such a full reception of a text does not imply agreeing with the text, but it does place us in a position where we should first fully appreciate it and only then evaluate it.

Even those to whom Lewis refers as literary readers, or specialised literary academics, may be inclined to "use" a text instead of receiving it, usually when they read a text in order to determine a philosophy of life. All texts can be taken and examined in terms of their temporal context, their material context, or their social setting. But the historicist, Marxist or cultural interpretations focusing on these contexts reflect instances where the text is not seen as an 'other' to be received, but as a means to identify or explicate a philosophical principle which the reader wishes to advance. Even literary readers (as with all readers), in their use of a text, never avail themselves of the full text, that is, of all its particulars, because they will focus only on what they can use.

Transposed into a deliberative democratic setting, the difference between an interpretive stance based on 'using' the other citizens and their utterances on the one hand, and 'receiving' from them on the other hand, is significant. This distinction affects our ability to achieve public decisions that actually justify the appellation "the will of the people". Deliberation as a thoughtful weighing-up of various views before making a choice on the matter at hand implies that the various views of others have to be genuinely received before they can be weighed up. If a citizen is inclined merely to "use" those they encounter in deliberation, this can result in a citizen's constantly reducing or reconfiguring every view expressed by other citizens into a statement that is instantly and effortlessly recognisable for them in terms of their own frame of reference or preferred philosophy of life. This implies that such citizens would not do justice to those views. For them, the interpretative process entails identifying the most suitable (and stereotyped) category into which to fit the other person and his or her view(s). They refuse to look beyond the expressed words of the other to really try to see the meaning that these words carry for the other.

Lewis's main objection to this form of engagement is "that you never get beyond yourself", for it calls out of you "only what is already there" (Lewis 1961, 21). Since the text then merely reinforces what is already in us, the simpler the representation of the text we receive, the better. Any subtleties and originalities only confuse whatever sense of clarity we have, and cause us to feel less in control of the issue under deliberation. Other citizens and their inputs into the deliberative process can then easily be turned into caricatured straw men, to be knocked down easily by our pre-packaged counter-arguments. Even if we pride ourselves on the inherent logic and reasonability of our arguments, the question still remains whether we wield our reason and logic against the actual person and his or her arguments, or whether we are merely tilting at windmills by imposing our reading of the world on our fellow deliberators. A receptive stance towards the other can lead to a full encounter with the other, an encounter that may well be iconoclastic, in that being confronted with the views of a true other may shatter our perceived understandings of reality, forcing us to interrogate our own views seriously, leading us out of ourselves (Lewis 1964, 61–63).

In a deliberative democratic setting, Lewis's argument would encourage an attempt to go further than merely considering the words we hear from the citizens we encounter, to "look along" those words to get at the meaning that the speaker is trying to convey through the words, and to the speaker him- or herself (Lewis 1970, 212–215). Failure to do so leaves us at risk of misrepresenting the position presented to us by other citizens. We might interpret their words within the parameters set by our own preconceived categories of understanding, even to the point of judging them exclusively in terms of grossly simplistic external classes such as their gender, ethnicity, level of education, religion or culture. Unless we try to move beyond the mere words that we hear from others to transcend our own interests and preconceptions, we run the risk of not appreciating the others we meet in a truly democratic sense. We have to respect them and their views as complex constructs of experiences and meanings that they wish to, and, in the democratic sense, have a right to, convey to us; we cannot filter their views, or reduce them to some message about life or public affairs which our own experience suggest to us.

Lewis acknowledges that this tendency to be self-referential in our interpretation of others is reinforced by the situatedness of our knowledge. In the essay *Meditation in a toolshed* (1970), he states that "you can step outside one experience only by stepping inside another" (Lewis 1970, 215). There is no external point – such as an *a priori* notion of the meaning of words (Lewis 1970, 254–257), or some moral philosophy of life – from which all experience can be observed and evaluated in its full sense. This perspectivist position of Lewis can be summarised as being that of a "critical rationalist" (Reppert 2003, 44), someone who believes in the power

of reason and evidence, but also that human finitude makes the full deployment of reason in human life always elusive. He accepts that we are epistemologically hedged-in because we are constantly on the inside of an experience. Lewis would thus not feel fully comfortable with views such as those expressed in John Rawls's (1970) "original position", Jürgen Habermas's ideal speech situation (1996) and Brian Barry's (1989; 1995) formulation of impartialist reasoning.⁴. Even though these attempts to find a 'social point of view' are used in democratic theory mainly as argumentative devices exploring the grounds for sound public reasoning, such as providing a basis for criticising partial and one-sided arguments (see O'Neill 1991, 298–304), Lewis's mainly epistemological point still takes logical precedence. He argues that Reason may be impartial, but human reasoners never are (see Lewis 1970, 128).

The various impartialist positions mentioned above all claim to provide access to a non-perspectivist grounding for argumentation: all argue that an external epistemic position can be formulated, from which it is then possible to judge an argument or utterance. This position is then not just used as a criterion for the evaluation of deliberation, but as the authority for "correct" evaluation. However, there is no such external position, for we all speak and think from within our experience or own interpretive "horizons" (Gadamer 2004, 304). Impartialism as a theory has value in sensitising deliberative reason to the problems posed by, for example, asymmetries of power, uneven resource distribution and stark prejudice (themes which are all close to the heart of egalitarianism and democracy), thus opening up deliberation, but it can also be seen as merely another device to impose a reductionist system of moral thought, a closed philosophy of life, or even a type of moral absolutism (see Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Young 1990).

Lewis's perspectivist position, however, does not lead him to the conclusion that almost no knowledge of the other is possible, in that we are so trapped in the self that no bridge to the true "other" is possible. He does not surrender to such a radical form of scepticism. He believes that it is possible to 'receive' from a text, in that we can, albeit only partially, go beyond ourselves to step inside the experience and meaning of the other. This is certainly a more optimistic position than the radical, yet highly influential, branch of reader-response theory exemplified by the French thinkers Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault (1984, 101–20) and Jacques Derrida, and more broadly by theorists generally classified as poststructuralists.

Barthes, in clear opposition to Lewis, claims that we should look *at* a text and not through it (Belsey 2002, 20). He argues that there is nothing behind a text for us to explore; there is no final meaning or 'signified' behind the text that will give us insight into the true meaning of a text. All we have is the text, or the "signifiers" themselves. He concludes his essay *The Death of the Author* (1977, 142–148) with

the bold statement that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author". A similar view is posited by Derrida (1976, 163), who claims that "[t]here is nothing outside the text". It follows that according to the deconstructionist branch of poststructuralism, the stories told by others can have no settled meaning to us. Not only can misreading result from a lack of information or intelligence, or the difference between the speaker's background or context and that of the listener, but there is an inherent indeterminacy to language itself (Lilla 1998, 46). There remains no authority we can turn to for the sake of meaning. Meaning becomes radically destabilised.

In light of Lewis's distinction between "using" a text and "receiving" it, this radical stance implies that any receptive attitude we might want to assume with regard to a text is ultimately just another form of "using" the text, since the meaning we extract from it is largely the result of the reader's acting on the text from out of the reader's own pre-existing selves. For Barthes, all reading thus entails "using". Anything the text might contribute to us is actually just the "self" rummaging through the "self" in order to find meaning to attach to the text; it is a reinforcement of what is already there, and, if we are to embrace Barthes' position, there is no point in making the effort to quiet our own well-established ideas shouting in our heads in order to hear the text speak: there is no way of knowing or even engaging with the authorial intent. This does not mean that there will be no communication and no transfer of knowledge, but that any such communication or transfer will be under the control of the reader.

This view is ultimately problematic for a deliberative model of democracy, in that it removes the possibility of public choice resting on meaningful intersubjective deliberation on the issues under discussion in the public space. Indeed, it closes down the possibility of a transfer of meaning-filled knowledge from one citizen to another without that meaning being opened up to such a variety of possible interpretations – that the citizen trying to convey these ideas plays almost no role in the ultimate meaning attached to these ideas. The author (in this case, the citizen we are listening to in deliberation) is dead. Thus the deliberative process as a thoughtful consideration of the views posited by all the participants in the process will not in fact produce any common agreement based on shared meanings. There is ultimately no possibility of valuing others in terms of the meanings *they* wish to covey on the issue under deliberation, because, although we may hear their speech, all the meaning we ascribe to it emanates from ourselves as readers.

In addition to such reader-dominance (and as an outflow thereof), there is a further interpretative activity which can inhibit a truly receptive stance towards our democratic equals, namely suspicion. Lewis refers to what he calls a "poisonous … kind of teaching which encourages [the reader]… to approach every literary work

with suspicion". The root of such an approach can be quite reasonable – in a world filled with propaganda and power play, we may want to protect ourselves against deception and manipulation by acquiring such a "habit" of suspicion to protect ourselves from "bad writing". Unfortunately, it may also make us "impervious … to the good" (Lewis 1961, 93). This form of "social and ethical hygiene", this '[v]igilant school' (Lewis 1961, 124) of suspicion, for all its merits, can be problematic if one wishes to achieve a receptive reading. As he explains:

> Even if it is right we may doubt whether such caution, so fully armed a determination not to be taken in, not to yield to any possible meretricious appeal… is consistent with the surrender needed for the reception of good work. You cannot be armed to the teeth and surrender at the same moment (Lewis 1961, 128).

In exploring the topic of suspicion, Lewis identifies a reading "habit" which has gained in strength considerably since he wrote the passage cited above. A hermeneutics aimed at showing that neither texts nor human actions, if properly understood, are as innocuous or straightforward as they might seem, but that both are actually reflections of hidden drives, class interests, power networks, etc., has gained much prominence through the work of notable figures such as Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, whom Paul Ricoeur (1970, 32) cites as 'masters' of the school of suspicion. Ricoeur asserts the increasing prominence and relevance of such a hermeneutics of suspicion.

In democracy, and politics in general, this approach is especially pertinent, given the highly ideological nature of much of what is brought to the table in politics. However, in the context of deliberative democracy, it must be recognised that a hermeneutics of suspicion tends to undermine the citizen, in that it makes it difficult to acknowledge his or her uniqueness. When we are suspicious, we are so intent on identifying the hidden interests and power networks at play that we are likely to miss the person. It becomes all too easy to reduce the democratic authority of the person, his or her "voice", to just another function of entrenched power relations that needs to be unmasked. Lewis explains the risk in the following extract, which can easily be applied to a deliberative context:

> To take a man up sharp, to demand sternly that he explains himself, to dodge to and fro with your questions, to pounce on every apparent inconsistency, may be a good way of exposing a false witness or a malingerer. Unfortunately, it is also the way of making sure that if a shy or tongue-tied man has a true or difficult tale to tell you will never learn it. The armed and suspicious approach which may save you from being bamboozled by a bad author may also blind and deafen you to the shy and elusive merits – especially if they are unfashionable – of a good one (Lewis 1961, 128).

Suspicion can play a valuable role in the evaluation of what we hear from others in deliberation, but it must not be at the expense of truly receiving from the other. We have to make sure that we first get ourselves – and our suspicion-clad evaluation – out of the way to receive what the other wants to convey, before we then respond with thorough consideration and deep analysis of the person's position. This will then include all attempts at identifying hidden interests, closed ideological stances and the like, as the nature of true deliberation requires.

Lewis thus acknowledges the difficulty in bridging the gap between the text (and its author) and the reader – to know the text with nothing of yourself – but this does not lead him to a scepticism which raises an impenetrable interpretative barrier between these entities. He acknowledges the finitude of humans, a finitude which lends an unavoidable hermeneutic character to all human engagements, but he does so without surrendering to a full-blown hermeneutics of suspicion. He warns that a life trapped in the self may have far-reaching consequences both for the "narrowing of sympathies and even of thought" (Lewis 1938, 130) and argues that we cannot simply passively accept that it is impossible to get out of the self. He acknowledges the difficulty of "a temporary annihilation of the self" (Lewis 1961, 138) as well as the inertia of our imagination in terms of our own reality (Lewis 1961, 55–56). Nevertheless, we do have choices – what Bakhtin (1981) calls "emotional-volitional moments" – where we need to choose between good reading and bad reading. All reading, or what we glean from a text, is not necessarily shaped just by the inner experiences of the reader, and his or her social context. Perhaps "we can never quite get out of our own skins" and "[w]hatever we do, something of our own and of our age's making will remain in our experience of all [texts]" (Lewis 1961, 101), but such a lack of full knowledge does not imply a lack of all intersubjective knowledge. We are not completely trapped inside the self. Lewis explains:

> But I can at least make some progress towards [seeing from the point of view of a text]. I can illuminate at least the grosser illusions of perspective… If I can't get out of the dungeon [of the self] I shall at least look out through the bars. It is better than sinking back in the straw in the darkest corner (Lewis 1961, 101–102).

It is important to note the image evoked here by Lewis. People are trapped in themselves, he says, as in a dungeon, a small, confined space in which one is incarcerated against one's will. In this dungeon the full freedom of an unrestricted life is not an option. All movement is severely restricted, with no realistic chance of escape. But, then again, as prisoners we are not completely cut off from the outside world. There is a window through which we can peer in order to gain a different perspective on life. We thus, even in the midst of this confinement, have a choice to make: we can either look through and project our thoughts and imagination out

through the window, or we can surrender so fully to our confinement that we lose interest in, and awareness of, the outside world.

Lewis thus accepts that we as subjects are severely constrained by our context, our culture, our history and that we can surrender to this, sink back in the straw, so to speak. However, we do still have some wiggle room, a volitional space where we can make an ethical choice to partially counter this confinement by acknowledging the outside world, the other, allowing it to invade our perspective and making it a worthy focus for our attention. For Lewis, the option between either free choice (where we can fully rise above our context or epistemic horizons and make objective choices) or complete subjectivity (where we are epistemically determined by our context) is just too simplistic. Both entail a reduction. He would agree with Ricoeur (1981, 211) that our subjectivity does not cut us off from the other (as if there were no window in the dungeon), but that it does severely complicate our engagement with the other.

In the midst of this constraining reality that confronts us, there thus remains the choice[5] for us to receive from the other: the "all-important conjunction (Reader Meets Text)" (Lewis 1961, 128–129), the meeting between the I and the other, where neither the I nor the other comes to dominate or control the encounter, but where I come to receive from the other and to give, in acknowledgment of an incompleteness in ourselves:

> [T]he question 'What is the good of reading what anyone writes?' is very like the question 'What is the good of listening to what anyone says?' Unless you contain in yourself sources that can supply all the information, entertainment, advice, rebuke and merriment you want, the answer is obvious. And if it is worthwhile listening or reading at all, it is often worth doing so attentively [in acknowledgment of the other] (Lewis 1961, 131 –132).

Lewis's hermeneutic stance thus encourages an attitude of receptiveness towards the other, an attitude through which we at least attempt to first get out of our solipsistic existence, and to recognise that there are riches in the other. We have to develop and cultivate such a stance, because to lose this "taste for the *other*" (Lewis 1940, 125) is to lose the mutuality from which our only hope for the good life follows. We have to recognise that there is a difference between a "good reading" and a "bad reading" of the other, and that if we want to encourage the good life, the life in common, we have to choose to receive from the other.

The significance of Lewis lies in that fact that, while he acknowledges the inevitability of interpretation as we listen to the other, he nonetheless still recognises the importance of the agency of the speaker (the author) in terms of meaning. It is exactly such an appreciation of the speaker's agency that undergirds a deliberative

understanding of democracy. From Lewis we can extrapolate that our interpretation of our fellow citizens needs to be disciplined in recognition of the insight that the mutuality of our lives places an obligation on us truly to *receive* from those we encounter in deliberation.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN AND THE IDEA OF LOVING ATTENTIVENESS

Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of human consciousness as dialogical presents us with an interesting avenue to explore the demands that Lewis's idea of a receptive or attentive reading of a text place on us, as Bakhtin considers both the epistemological basis of such a position and the ethical-volitional stance it would require.

In his earlier work, most notably in the essay *Art and answerability* (1990), Bakhtin uses the term "answerability" to refer to the interactive nature of our relations to other humans. It points to the realisation that the other is not just an object which can be studied from a distance, but can answer back and respond to us. It implies a multifaceted, continual flow of intersubjective communication which constantly shapes and reshapes both Person and Other. This view remains present in all his works and is eventually broadened to encompass the whole of the person's consciousness (Morson and Emerson 1990).

In his later works, Bakhtin developed the idea of dialogism. In a dialogic literary work, there is a continual dialogue with other works of literature and authors. It does not merely respond rhetorically to these other works, but informs and is continually informed by these previous works. This view is not limited to literature. All thought, and consciousness itself, appears to him to be dialogical. Our thought, consciousness, and communication never exist in a vacuum, but are always a response to what came and was said before, and what will be said or done in response (Bakhtin 1981). The human mind is thus composed of multiple, overlapping and often contradictory voices of others (Jacobs 2001, 51).

Furthermore, Bakhtin also believes that it is important for us to acknowledge that a person we are listing to in a communicative setting is exerting himself in an effort to fill the words he is using with the intent he wishes to convey. The words used when speaking are ... half someone else's. It becomes [the speaker's own] only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions ... when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own ... intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there

that [the speaker] must take the word, *and make it [his] own*" (emphasis added, G.W.) (Bakhtin 1981, 293–294).

When listening to others, we thus have to ensure that, in Lewis's words, we 'look along' the words used and not "look at" them only, so as to ensure we populate the words with the intentions of the other and not with our own.

In order to truly understand the intentions of a person, a person dialogical in thought and consciousness, we have to be able to account for and appreciate his or her 'manifoldness', and it is in this context that Bakhtin explains that a hermeneutics of a text or person must be characterised by a loving attentiveness (Jacobs 2001, 51–52).

> [O]nly love is capable of holding and making fast all this multiformity and diversity, without losing and dissipating it, without leaving behind a mere skeleton of basic lines and sense-moments. Only … *lovingly interested attention* is capable of generating a sufficiently intent power to encompass and retain the concrete manifoldness of Being, without impoverishing and schematizing it. An indifferent or hostile reaction is always a reaction that impoverishes and decomposes its object: it seeks to pass over the object in all its manifoldness, to ignore it or to overcome it … Lovelessness and indifference will never be able to generate sufficient power to slow down and *linger intently* over an object, to hold and sculpt every detail and particular in it, however minute. Only love is capable of being aesthetically [hermeneutically] productive; only in correlation with the loved is fullness of the manifold possible (emphasis added, G.W.) (Bakhtin 1993, 64).

The form of attentiveness over the 'other' that will thus do justice to the manifoldness of Being will thus neither circumscribe it within rigid boundaries, forcing it to fit with a presupposed theoretical framework, nor will it view it as a mere chaos of detail with no form or pattern at all. A truly answerable act – an ethical stance towards the other – is always historically concrete and attentive to the particular (Bakhtin 1993, 30). There is an openness to the substantive input from the other, and the text or the other person cannot be understood only in terms of the reader's or hearer's own categories, nor can it be understood as just a bundle of signifiers with no interconnected pattern aimed at meaning. Attentiveness to the text or person thus will avoid a generalised or 'schematized' overview of the text, and will be aware of all its particulars, which it will lovingly attempt to bring together.

A loveless, indifferent or hostile reading is unable to recognise the plurality and the unity of the text or the person. It "always … impoverishes and decomposes its object" (Bakhtin 1993, 64). Indifference, or what an Enlightenment epistemology might approvingly prefer to call disinterestedness, is as great an impediment to knowledge as hostility, because both tend to reduce and to impoverish. Bakhtin calls it "schematizing" (Bakhtin 1993, 64), which implies a rationalistic desire

to subsume the open-ended qualities of real-life communicative and social acts in an all-encompassing explanatory system. Bakhtin thus shares with Lewis the conviction that only a limited truthfulness will emerge from the imposition of a pre-set scheme (what Lewis calls a philosophy of life) on the other. For Lewis, such an approach would constitute an instance of "using". For Bakhtin, such a stance leaves no space for the careful attention to all the details of the text or person, in which every particular should be carefully attended to and related to all the others, even the smallest – all sculpted together – by means of a volitional act, which Lewis would call an "obedient imagination", that is, through the non-passive act of receiving from a text (Lewis 1961, 19).

Bakhtin argues that a loving attitude to the subject can lead to better knowledge of the other. Hostility and indifference will not do so, but what can love do? What does he mean by "loving" attention or contemplation? Even a framework as broad as love based on a common "humanity" results in an impoverishment, because it actually detracts from the difference between the I and the other, from the "otherness" of the other, as it attempts to force the other into a category or generality that originates within the self. Ultimately, there remains a persistent "secondhandedness" to the knowledge we have of others, in that we see only what they do, and hear or read their utterances. This leads to "unfinalisability" in terms of our knowledge of others (Jacobs 2001, 55–57). There will always be something of us in our knowledge of the other.

But how then does Bakhtin understand the type of attentiveness he refers to as "loving"? Is it the mere level of attentiveness that explicates it – the more details are considered, the more loving the attentiveness? A reader such as Derrida is very attentive in his reading, but does this constitute what Bakhtin would call a "loving" reading? Bakhtin's view emanates from his understanding of us as dialogical beings, and that we have to recognise the otherness or difference of the other in such a way that we can act on it. Since we cannot withdraw from this dialogic, we are under an obligation to act accordingly. Our actions and stance toward the other must reflect our acknowledgment of this continual difference or uniqueness. We have to recognise that this otherness to be found in the other constitutes us as well. This then requires of us the volitional stance of constant attentiveness or "faithfulness" (Bakhtin 1993, 38), a faithfulness based on "un-self-interested love" (Bakhtin 1993, 64) in recognition of the 'manifoldness' – the irreducibly complex wholeness – of a person. For Bakhtin, any deliberation aimed at authentic and substantive engagement with the other will thus have to reflect the ideal of a love expressed in faithfulness. The Russian word translated as "faithfulness" literally means "being-true-to" (Jacobs 2001, 63). When

one attends to the other lovingly and with constancy, one is thus being true to the person, one is doing the person justice.

CONCLUSION

If we are to aim at a true democratic openness in our engagement with the other, we need to recognise that our hermeneutic stance towards other citizens will have a significant impact on whether we truly listen to them or not.

Both Lewis and Bakhtin – as well as most poststructuralists – will agree that our engagement with the other is always irreducibly mediated. Any engagement, such as in deliberation, which aims at hearing the other, requires of us an attempt to get out of ourselves so as to hear the other on his or her own terms. Here the poststructuralists are not sanguine at all, thus undermining, through their understanding of intersubjectivity, any hope for a deliberative form of democracy. Lewis and Bakhtin, however, at least remain hopeful. If, then, we are to advance the ideal of democracy rooted in substantive citizen-to-citizen deliberation, we have to pay careful heed to the insights of Lewis and Bakhtin as to what such openness would entail.

Such openness requires a "good reading" that entails a receptive stance towards the other (Lewis), which recognises the need to be faithful to them (Bakhtin) in that we, in love and consistency, recognise and embrace our mutuality in life with them. Both Lewis and Bakhtin argue that as we do justice to the other, we in turn experience some relief from the prison of the self – by receiving the gift of their otherness – into a greater realisation of the good or answerable life. This measure of release from our historical embeddedness is a gift we can only receive from the other. Both Lewis and Bakhtin believe that we are confronted with a choice, or a volitional moment, as to how we are going to read the other: we can engage in a "good reading" or a "bad reading". In a bad reading, we remain isolated in the self with only a caricatured experience of the other as our distant agonist, whereas in a good reading, we aim to do true justice to the other through a receptive and loving reading, and in the process we also experience some release from the confines of the self into a fuller experience of Being.

In democracy, there is a further reason for a good reading that rests on us, maybe even in the form of an imperative, in that democracy itself requires of us a good reading of the people we encounter in public life: if democracy grants to each person who lives under public decisions an authority to speak and to be authentically heard, then it is incumbent on the rest of society to hear them on their own terms. This implies that a good reading of the other will thus also do justice to two of the

core ideas of modern democracy, namely universal egalitarianism and respect for individual autonomy. It will ensure that the person who speaks can be heard and can thus contribute to public decisions in terms of the actual intent of his or her conscience, reason, and agency.

Attaining a good reading in deliberation is not easy, however, and indeed represents a very high ideal which challenges the extent to which we can acknowledge both our individual agency and our mutuality in modern mass societies. Obstacles include the risk involved in a loving and receptive stance towards the other, who will most likely be a stranger: we have no guarantees that this stance will be reciprocated – and thus, the all too easy recourse is to insulate ourselves from the risk by enclosing ourselves within ourselves, or at best, into a very restricted sense of mutuality emanating from a "philosophy of civility" (see Taylor 2011, 46–48). Then there is also the prevalence of strong epistemological scepticism in much of (post)modern thought and attitude, exemplified in the radical reader-response theories of Barthes and Derrida, and a parallel suspicion, which in its effort to 'unmask' the oppressive nature of much of society's authority structures also undermines the democratic right of the individual to be heard.

In light of these obstacles, it might be argued that this democratic ideal is just too high an aspiration for the public arena and that we should rather turn our consideration to models of democracy which embrace the agonistic nature of our pluralistic societies[6]. However, ubiquitous plurality in and of itself does not preclude the possibility of understanding or agreement (see Crowder 2006), even though there might always be a "second-handedness" to the knowledge that we can hope to attain. The greater ontological fullness which deliberation on the life in common can arouse in us, if it is based on a good reading of the other, can make the challenges these obstacles present seem less daunting.

The current challenges faced by democracy in the world, both in the form of active rejection by some, and indifferent neglect by others, should cause us to actively remind ourselves of the core ideas and challenges contained within the idea-set and practice we call "democracy". This study aimed at just such a reminder, a reminder as to the continual intentionally that democracy requires of us. We need to be constantly vigilant, not just concerning external threats to democracy, but also as regards the reality of the demands it makes on us as individuals. Democracy requires of us the acquisition of a democratic ethic in which we intentionally aim at a "good reading" of our fellow citizens. Such a purposeful and intentional attempt at hearing fellow citizens on their own terms is one of the cornerstone obligations which democracy imposes on us. Without it, the ideal of a democratic order embodied in, and emanating from, deliberation, the ideal of doing justice to each citizen, will remain forever elusive.

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NOTES

1   Not only are our interpretations conditioned by our presuppositions, but these presuppositions are themselves persistently mutable and not absolute.
2   This makes Lewis an early proponent of the rather broad reader-response branch of literary theory, which includes widely disparate theorists such as Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss, Roland Barthes, and Hans-Georg Gadamer.
3   The approach adopted throughout this paper of extending insights concerning the interpretation of text to broader interpersonal contexts such as friendship, society and politics is familiar in contemporary literary studies. Gadamer's entire interpretative enterprise was molded by his broader interest in intellectual history, clearly embracing ethics and moral philosophy (see Gadamer 2004). Catherine Belsey (2002), in her broad overview of poststructuralism, asserts that this applies equally to poststructuralist theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. Martha Nussbaum (1990: 169) also argues that it has become difficult to distinguish literary theory from philosophy both in terms of questions considered and the names of authors used. However, such a broad application of hermeneutics is not uncontested, a point well made by Jürgen Habermas's treatment of the potential problems of such an approach (see Habermas 1985).
4   From a literary point of view such an impartialist position is assumed by a theorist such as E.D. Hirsch (1967) who believes that we can have access to the authorial intention without the reader's own perspective clouding the reading.
5   It should be clear from the above that the choice Lewis has in mind here does not refer to a completely free choice as would be entailed in a understanding of free agency, but rather refers to a view that in the midst of our subjectivity there does remain a space, a limited space, for choice. This narrow space enables true intentionality in thought and action - as epistemologically finite beings we do have some control over how and what we think and do. Even in the prison of subjectivity there remains a measure of choice.
6   See, for example, Mouffe (2000).

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