

# Hermeneutics as Criticism

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Establishing distinctions between hermeneutics and interpretation shows how the terms have become interconnected in present day use. Aristotle's and Boethius' uses of the term "interpretation" are compared to the reductive use of the term to indicate approval, normative meanings. Reading of a text is a participation in model-making, of reformulating a world view while involved in the art of reading -- an act increasingly (with the reader's growth in knowledge) formed into considerations of typologies and classifications. Understanding is not apart from interpretation; it is the goal of interpretation. Hermeneutical understanding is seen as understanding the meaning of a literary idea (text) and thus the larger model which corresponds to that idea; the reader is critic who participates actively in the idea's being and its history.

First, we must make clear the relationship between hermeneutics and interpretation. Originally one was used in calc translations for the other: Aristotle's *Perí erminéis* became *De interpretatione* in Boethius; this was the beginning of a real terminological tradition. Just as even in the Middle Ages, *Hermes* was an *interpres*, *hermeneuticum* has no equivalent except in an *interpretativum*. This notion applies to the epic-narrative domain (*narrando fabulam*) as well as to the historical one.<sup>1</sup> The addition of the idea of distinguishing, of *discriminatio* (effective as early as the seventeenth century)<sup>2</sup> introduces a nuance that is even more emphatically critical. Hermeneutics thus becomes an exegesis or interpretation (*Auslegung oder Interpretation*) of written "monuments," guided by specific rules. It can be of two types: grammatical, following the progressive construction of the text, or psychological, transposed into the center of the text's creative process.<sup>3</sup> Its aim is to establish a valid universal interpretation. Beyond these elements, current doctrine has nothing to add; its general sense is to extend the concept of hermeneutics to the whole theory of interpretation.<sup>4</sup> This has the more or less predictable effect of a turnover of terms: hermeneutics thus becomes (in some recent connotations) the general theory or philosophy of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Thus the traditional concept of hermeneutics as method of discrimination (between original and imitated literature, for instance) can reappear at the opposite pole.<sup>6</sup> Since these notions are not

only interconnected but circular, this kind of polarization within the same semantic field is inevitable.

Hermeneutics necessarily places the ideas of sense and signification at the center of interpretation. Hermeneutics interprets the explicit or implicit sense and signification of all symbols, enunciations, texts, or whatever it may analyze. This operation is consubstantial with every kind of explication and primarily of sacred exegesis, which is the discovery of the cryptic, latent, obscure sense of a message or symbol, its meaning and content. For this, the text must be made to speak (*pronunciare*), to become intelligible, to reveal its original meaning: the linguistic expression of the message must be made communicable.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, any meaningful discourse *menéin*, an interpretation of reality, because it says something about something. For Aristotle, any sign that carried meaning (a verbal enunciation, name, sentence, or the like) was an interpretation. Or, in Boethius' "interpretation," "interpretatio est vox significativa per se ipsam aliquid significans."<sup>8</sup> And, since anything can in this sense be a *vox significativa*, can have or acquire meaning, hermeneutics becomes the science of the general interpretation of meanings. But this enormous expansion of the sphere of action is directly proportional to an increase in problems: provoking a great explosion of meanings, hermeneutics suffers from a real embarrassment of riches, not to say complete confusion, produced by the significative act of hermeneutics. This inevitably results in a great variety, contradiction, and uncertainty of senses and significations, and that same hermeneutics must choose among them. This observation, too, is traditional (occurring in St. Augustine, Abélard, and others)<sup>9</sup> transmitted through the whole Classical doctrine of hermeneutics, the object of which is "To know the meaning (*Bedeutung*) for each separate case, according to the real use the author intended."<sup>10</sup> What is the real meaning? An entire hermeneutics must answer this crucial question.

In fact, what it offers us is merely a framework in which to solve the problem by means of variable options, methods, and criteria. Which is the most correct sense, brought out by the best reading of the text, to make it maximally accessible to the reader?<sup>11</sup> The traditional answer comes from official, established, dogmatic tradition: interpretation should be based on the authentic reading of the authoritative religious texts (*auctoritates Sanctorum*). It operates with and brings out only the senses admitted by conciliar decision, the unanimous agreement of the church authorities, magisterial glosses, and so on.<sup>12</sup> In this sense interpretation is reduced to the exegesis of given, normative meanings. Their validity is guaranteed by the authenticity of their basic sources; this vicious circle appears in all interpretation of this kind.

By extension, the authentic (true, objective) sense is attributed to the original meaning, the initial connotation of the words or texts, so that significations are deciphered which may be basic, specific, or altered, or even which have been lost. This obliges hermeneutics constantly to check and to distinguish between the text's literal, basic meanings and its derived ones. The literal meanings become authentic and the derived ones, secondary; the former more profound and original, the latter only possible; the first linguistic, lexical, the second non-linguistic.<sup>13</sup> The distinction between denotative and connotative expresses the same profoundly hermeneutical choice and difficulty: the determination of values becomes a referential problem of establishing one meaning through another, one significative system through another. Deep and superficial senses, interior and exterior, latent and manifest, hidden and obvious, are more hermeneutical alternatives. A Romanian *Hermeneutics* of the nineteenth century made the same distinction, which is by now quite ordinary: "The meaning is imparted through the verbal, or immediate, and through the real, or mediate. The verbal, or immediate, which is always strictly and essentially called the literal, turns out to be closer through the actual meaning of the words, terms, etc."<sup>14</sup> It is not chance that senses and significations are classified on two levels: hermeneutics has by its own nature a dual horizon of signification. If messages of all kinds had put only direct, flat, elementary, generally valid meanings into circulation, then hermeneutics would never have appeared or would have proved totally useless. But on the contrary, it is a long and methodical investigation and interpretation of multiple meanings, an uninterrupted search for possible meanings.

At this level, hermeneutics becomes heuristic, the direct result of the polysemy of enunciations and texts. Semantic chaos, confusion, and obscurity make it imperative. Sacred or profane, hermeneutics tries to put in order this domain of infinite uncertainty, which the medieval exegesis of the Bible called unfathomable, *mira profunditatis*, a vast and deep repository of multiple meanings. If there is a need for a *Clavis Scripturae*, a key to interpretation, this is explained in the same way, raised to the level of a fundamental hermeneutical principle: *De multiplici Sacrarum literarum sensu*.<sup>15</sup> Each word has a single sense (*Sinn, sensus*), but many significations (*Bedeutung, significatione*); and not only each word but each image, each plastic, iconic symbol too. What is called, in contemporary hermeneutics, "the problem of the double sense" or "of sense,"<sup>16</sup> is also included in this category of traditional, established observations. It becomes clear that hermeneutics cannot escape or go beyond the basic condition of its object: the polyvalence of every kind of language.

This vice is transmitted to literary ideas, opening out in two ways in that significative universe: from the central, basic nucleus or etymon, in

widening concentric circles toward a whole modelable system; while these circles (i.e., levels of signification) in turn presuppose an opening out (i.e., clarification) through the interpretation of the critic of literary ideas. It is a mutual dialectical relationship: the system of literary ideas has a potential capacity for signification, it generates its own sense, while the critic discovers and introduces into this potential, latent, expanding sense a personalized sense and modeling schema. The critic in effect introduces one message into another (the usual hermeneutical-interpretive situation), injecting, as it were, a new significance into the previous variants of meaning: the construction *sui generis* of a model of the literary idea. Viewed in this perspective, it is impossible to clarify the meanings of literary ideas and get around the obstacle of polysymbolism by relating these to the intentions of one text or another (a very controversial hermeneutical process). Of course the author of any given literary-theoretical work has certain intentions, and carries them out in the act of formulation. But these have no value, no significance in the construction of a model of the literary idea as a whole. The only legitimate and constructive intention, from our point of view, is that of formulating the model itself, as a systematic project and act.

A way to get around the difficulties of polysymbolism and the ambiguity of texts is to put them into a preconstituted schema of interpretation; hermeneutics has proposed this method from its very beginning. The senses are put in order through classification and typing. We will not here discuss the quality of such typologies, but merely point out that they are historically and methodologically legitimate and possible. Furthermore, hermeneutics appertains, in large part, to the domain of typology. We shall see that the hermeneutics of literary ideas retrieves and amplifies just this tradition, a tradition with great modeling potential.

A fundamental situation is by nature archetypal. Every schema offers an invariable form of interpretation, one that sets a standard. In fact, it has been observed that the archetype itself imposes a meaning, "an invariable nucleus of meaning." It makes sense of some traditional linguistic matrices in which it recognizes its name, its verbal identity.<sup>17</sup> The medieval theory of the four senses is the basis for four different kinds of hermeneutics, four classical methods of interpretation: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical, referring respectively to the direct, the analogical, the moral, and the theological or transcendental senses. The terminology is rather unstable, especially the term "allegorical," which is in turn interpreted as a key method for all figurative meanings.<sup>18</sup> It is not our intention to reconstruct the history of this concept; that project has been masterfully undertaken by Henri de Lubac, among others. But it is not without importance that modern hermeneutical theories rediscover or claim this very doctrine, in an obviously traditional, established way. A whole exegetical

methodology (see Tyconius, *Liber Regularum*), a topology (Flacius Illyricus, *De tropis et schematibus sacrarum literarum*), a theory of signification (*De modis significandi*) are involved in it, too.<sup>19</sup> Current references to Dante (*Convivio*, II,1; *Epistolae*, XIII) and in general to the fundamental distinction between the literal and allegorical, the literal and spiritual senses,<sup>20</sup> become completely comprehensible. We have here a real hermeneutical commonplace. The method may also be extended to historical interpretation, which is also typed<sup>21</sup> (especially--inevitably--through the analysis of language). This topological quality is confirmed by various observations; for example, there are parallel and constant elements, "topical elements which explain non-topical ones," and many others.<sup>22</sup>

The final stage of this essay starts with another traditional question: is hermeneutics an act of understanding, and to what degree is it possible to speak of understanding in the domain of literary ideas? First we must point out that any distinction between understanding (exegesis) and interpretation (hermeneutics)<sup>23</sup> is erroneous, for the simple reason that: hermeneutics being in essence an exegesis as well, it cannot but have the same objective: understanding. In a close examination of this notion in its hermeneutical text and context, Schleiermacher developed three aspects which will be useful to our argument: a) the interpreter introduces his or her own sense into the interpreted text; b) the aim of understanding is to decipher the inner content of thought, essential thought (inner and expressed being one and the same thing); and c) "the art of understanding" implies a whole, total understanding of its object.<sup>24</sup> But interiorization is not only an attribute of the hermeneutical object, but of the hermeneutical subject as well. In Dilthey's terms, understanding becomes an "interior experience," a process through which we come to know an interior with the help of exterior signs, exegesis or interpretation being the art of understanding vital manifestations fixed by lasting expressions.<sup>25</sup> The rational, Hegelian concept, according to which "understanding means nothing more than the grasping of something in pictorial thought and in memory,"<sup>26</sup> is left behind.

The abstract and highly specific nature of the literary idea imposes certain limits. If the hermeneutics of literary ideas is, like all dialectical processes of knowledge, not only a confrontation but also a collaboration between subject and object, it cannot be reduced to an intersubjective act, an affective penetration,<sup>27</sup> to the "life" (*das Erleben*) of an idea. That any real participation in the life of the idea implies a transposition, an inner vibration, an affective penetration seems to us indisputable: there is a lyricism, an enthusiasm, even a euphoria to ideas. The adventure of ideas, in the sense of an existential risk or experiment, is very real to the true student of ideas. But the life of the idea cannot be reduced to interiorization alone; it is also an objectivization in the form of a theoretical

system with a logical principle of development which can be constructed in the form of a model. Thus it is not accidental that one can speak effectively of constructing the model of the literary idea.

Through this very aspect of subjectivity, hermeneutics asserts its creative potential, its quality of an art of interpretation, an artistic understanding. Contemporary formulations express this creative act even more precisely. Hermeneutics is a "reconstruction of a construction,"<sup>28</sup> a recreation from within of a concept, system, or model. The relationship between these two is one of reciprocity and circularity through a reciprocal transfer of energy and suggestion—a process which leads, in its evolutionary forms, to true identity.<sup>29</sup> This empathy or *Einfühlung*, defined with considerable precision by Herder,<sup>30</sup> removes all boundaries between subject and object, between I and thou, between interpreter and interpreted text: "To understand a text involves the same possibility of perfect comprehension as does self-understanding."<sup>31</sup>

On this basis, it has been possible in the present era to construct a real ontological hermeneutics (initiated by Heidegger, and continued by Hans-George Gadamer, among others), the result of the principles that we are most concerned with. In essence, the sense of interpretation merges with that of existence. Reduced to its simplest expression, the equation would look like this: being-which-understands = being-which-understands-another-through-itself; this is ontological identity and coalescence. Understanding another (e.g., a text) becomes a manifestation of our ability to understand as existential act. "To understand a text means to weave it into your own mode of existence. Anyone who does not weave it in, does not understand it, will never be able to explain it." This interiorization of meaning has been found in some Oriental mysticism.<sup>32</sup> We understand things that come and go in our lives, through immediate confrontation. All understanding is conditioned by the mode of the person understanding. The inner sense develops only through interiorization.

What has been called the metahermeneutics of *Dasein*, the actual condition of intelligible and understanding consciousness,<sup>33</sup> casts some light upon certain aspects of the common practice of hermeneutics. It does presuppose an implication, a participation in the idea's life and destiny, which excludes the possibility of external, superficial, purely formal hermeneutics. Without an inner understanding of the idea (we shall soon see in what sense), the hermeneutical act becomes flat, miscarried, purely didactic, and totally meaningless. If all these exegeses bring no results, the reason is that the critic has not supported the idea, has not lived it, has not adapted its every detail. Put simply, there must be an affinity, a correspondence, a deep interaction, between the literary idea and the critic. Not every critic can study every idea, then. In the case of literary ideas, the

critic must have a vocation, in all forms, for ideas and for ideological imagination; the critic of ideas is a real creator of ideas. Understanding the idea is already such a person's mode of existing with the idea; the critic is integrated into the idea's being and history. A reciprocal creative participation, understanding the idea increases our capacity for understanding. The being grows, develops, is transformed. It becomes more receptive, more available, more pliant, and more elastic, through integration into the "hermeneutical efforts."<sup>34</sup> In short, it becomes more understanding.

This whole analysis leads to the unification not only of the content and method of hermeneutics = understanding = exegesis, but also of the terminology. And these notions end up by becoming interchangeable and circular: in order to understand, you must adopt a hermeneutics, you must interpret; in order to interpret, you must understand, you must practice a comprehensive interpretation, one which understands through a vital relationship with the object. This terminology is further generalized: understanding through interpretation, interpretation = [hermeneutical] effort to understand, understanding interpretation (*il capire dell'interpretare*)--the list could continue indefinitely.<sup>35</sup> The two concepts can be distinguished analytically, but not on the plane of concrete hermeneutical experience, which has no priorities, subordination, or preferential order. The only distinction is that, rather than deciphering symbols and meanings, our hermeneutics deciphers the literary idea through a rationalized understanding as much of the interpretive moment as of the interpreted idea.

Our new definition of hermeneutical understanding can therefore only be the following: to understand the meaning of a literary idea, its inner system, and hence the functioning mechanism of the corresponding model. The critic is analytically transposed into the idea's logical center, assumes its basic principles, and understands the node, meaning, and rhythm of the literary idea's development throughout its history. Understanding merges with the act of modeling, of constructing a model. It implies a system, a coherent order, which in this case becomes the essential criterion for understanding.<sup>36</sup> It becomes clear that the old hermeneutical objective, established by Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey, and taken up by many others,<sup>37</sup> of aiming to understand a text better than its own author, can now be accepted only in the following form: that a complete understanding of the idea's system as transposed into model is absolutely superior to a fragmentary understanding of the idea as expressed in partial definitions. Which is to say that the modeled idea, which becomes its own author, understands itself far better in this universal, synthesis-type form than in fragments, of *membra disjecta*.

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2. Ralph Cohen, *The Art of Discrimination; Thomson's The Seasons and the Language of Criticism* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1964), pp. 6-7.
3. Dilthey, *Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik, Wilhelm Diltheys Gesammelte Schriften*, V, 1924 (Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1921-ff), pp. 319-320.
4. Alphonse de Waelhens, "Sur une herménéutique de l'herménéutique," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 60 (1962), 573; Monroe C. Beardsley, "Modes of Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 32 (1971), p. 143.
5. Italo Mancini, "Profilo di una ermeneutica integrale," in *Ermeneutica e tradizione*, ed. Ricoeur (Padua, 1963), p. 149.
6. Geoffrey Hartman, "The Interpreter: A Self-Analysis," *New Literary History*, 4, No. 2 (1973), 225.
7. Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles* (Paris, 1952), p. 29; Kerenyi, "Origine e senso dell'ermeneutica," in Ricoeur (ed.) *Ermeneutica e tradizione*, pp. 133-134.
8. Aristote (= Aristotle), *De l'interprétation* (French trans., Paris, 1936), p. 77; P. Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation; Essai sur Freud* (Paris; Editions du Seuil, 1965), pp. 30-31; Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des interprétations* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969), p. 8. "An interpretation is a meaningful message by itself with several significations."
9. Therese Francey, *Les Idées littéraires de Saint Augustin dans le 'De Doctrina Christiana'*," (Saarbrucken, 1920), p. 15; G. Pare, A Brunet, and P. Tremblay, *La Renaissance du XII-e siècle, Les Ecdes et l'Enseignement* (Paris: J. Vrin [Ottawa: Inst. d 'Etudes Médiévales], 1933), p. 291.
10. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik* (Heidelberg, 1968), p. 64.
11. Quentin Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts," *New Literary History*, 3, No. 2 (1972), 394.
12. Henride Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale, Les Quatre Sens de l'écriture* (4 vols) (Paris: Aubier), I, 59; M.D. Chenu, "'Authentica' et 'Magistralia,'" *Divus Thomas*, 28 (1925), 263-265; E. Manguot, "Herménéutique," *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, ed. F. Vigouroux, III, Part 1, G-I (Paris, 1926), p. 619.
13. Richard M. Kain, "The Limits of Literary Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17 (1958), 217-218; Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History*, 3, No. 1 (1972), 314-315.
14. Eric Donald Hirsch, Jr., "Objective Interpretation," *PMLA*, 75 (1960), 470; Jean Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), pp. 206-207; Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des interprétations*, pp. 16, 26; quoted in Sasu, "Hermeneutica: Textul și contextul lecturii" (Hermeneutics: The Text and Context of Reading), *Echinoc*, No. 11-12 (1973).

15. Lubac, *Exegese medievale*, I, part 1, 119, 129; Matthia Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis Scripturae, seu, De Sermone Sacrarum Literarum, plurimas generales regulas continens* (Basileac: Per P. Quicum, 1567), pp. 49-64.
16. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, p. 17; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1965), pp. 128-177; Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des interprétations*, pp. 16, 65; Marino, *Introducere în critica literară* [Introduction to Literary Criticism] (Bucharest: Editura Tuneretului, 1968), pp. 64-76.
17. Carl Gustav Jung, *Les Racines de la conscience* (French trans., Paris, 1971), pp. 49, 95.
18. E. Moirat, *Notion augustiniene de l'herméneutique* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1906), pp. 22-24, 26.
19. M.L.W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 500 to 900* (London, 1957), p. 68; Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis Scripturae*, pp. 210-211 ff.; Lambertus Mariëde Rijk, *Logica modernorum; A contribution to the History of Early Terminist Logic* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1967), II, part 1, pp. 121-124.
20. Richard M. Kain, "The Limits of Literary Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17 (1958), pp. 215, 218; Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation," *New Literary History*, 3, No. 1 (1972), p. 313.
21. George Boas, *The History of Ideas: An Introduction* (New York: Scribner, 1969), p. 144; Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History*, 4, No. 2 (1973), 303, 307, 313.
22. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, pp. 43, 66.
23. Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des interprétations*, p. 7.
24. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik*, pp. 20-23, 32.
25. Dilthey, *Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik*, p. 318 et passim.
26. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. by A.V. Miller (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1969), p. 755.
27. Peter Szondi, "L'Hermeneutique de Schleiermacher," *Poétique*, No. 2 (1970), p. 146.
28. Dilthey, *Die Auslegung der Interpretation, Hermeneutik*, in *Wilhelm Diltheys Gesammelte Schriften*, VII, 1921 (Leipzig and Berlin: B.G. Tuebner, 1921), pp. 217, 225.
29. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 175, 177.
30. Quoted in Mihail Nasta, "Prolegomenon," in *Poetică și stilistică, orientari moderne* (Poetics and Stylistics, Modern Orientations), by [urii] M. Lotman (Romanian trans., Bucharest, 1972), p. xv.
31. Gadamer, *Le Problème de la conscience historique* (French trans., Lovain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, and Paris, 1963), p. 35.
32. Henry Corbin, "L'Intériorisation du sens en hermeneutique soufie iranienne," *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 26 (1957), 58.
33. Heinz Kimmerle, "Hermeneutische Theorie oder ontologische hermeneutik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 59 (1962), 114-130.

34. Mircea Eliade, *La Nostalgie des origines; Méthodologie et histoire des religions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 10.

35. Rudolf Bultmann, "Das Problem des Hermeneutik," p. 227; Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation*, pp. 18, 54; Ricoeur, *Le Conflit des interprétations*, p. 292; Mancini, "Profilo di una ermeneutica integrale," p. 149.

36. Gadamer, *Le problème de la conscience historique*, pp. 67, 71.

37. Hermann Patsch, "Friedrich Schlegels 'Philosophie der Philologie' und Schleiermachers frühe Entwürfe zur Hermeneutik," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 63 (1966), 438, 461; Dilthey, *Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik*, p. 331; Hirsch, "Objective Interpretation," p. 463; Karl Otto Conrady, *Einführung in die Neuere deutsche Literaturwissenschaft* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1968), pp. 146-147 *et passim*.

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