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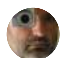

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Theories of Interpretation:

Classical to Romantic Hermeneutics

1. Introduction

1.1. Key terms

Interpretation

Interpretation is a human activity which goes well beyond the boundaries of literature. Any human activity can be the object of interpretation, from action to language to customs to dreams, from scientific theories to archaeological remains. A theory of literary interpretation should rest, therefore, on a general theory of interpretation.

We speak of "interpretation" in a number of different but not unrelated contexts. Interpreting is, in principle, making clear the meaning of something we do not understand. In this first sense we may speak of the interpretation of dreams, of a problem, of a difficult book. An interpreter is also a translator, a person who turns into one language the meanings he understands in another language. But we also speak of an actor as an interpreter, and of musicians as interpreters. With these uses the wider sense of interpretation becomes clearer. The interpreter is the one who makes clear, or the one who makes something available (Sanskrit *phath-* 'to spread around')—the one who acts as a mediator between an original semiotic activity and a receiver. We might as well have started with etymology: the interpreter is in between, *inter,* and gives an new shape to a semiotic complex which would otherwise be incomplete or problematic in some way. Some activities, like music or theater, give the interpreter a role comparable to that of the author: while a novel does not need anybody but its author and its reader, a symphony or a play cannot be appreciated by most receivers unless we have a whole army of interpreters to give it a concrete embodiment. Every new production of the play and every concert are a completion of the original work: not necessarily a "version" or an "adaptation" (which, in turn, are also a further modality of interpretation, a "reading"). The structural need of an interpreter is an important criterion to classify artistic activities—and interpreters, since they are notoriously prone to appearing as well in those places where their presence is not required.

Here we shall concentrate on the interpretation of literary works, and the theory of interpretation of literary works, which one among many kinds of interpretation and one among many kinds of objects susceptible of being interpreted. Interpretation is a form of human communication, and as any form of communication it must follow certain patterns and conventions—otherwise it could never take place to begin with. Each of these interpretive activities is carried out in a specific realm of human action, which helps define the limits and conventions within which the interpretive activity is possible and meaningful. These conventions are not completely fixed: they may be shifted and displaced by a particular interpretive act, but this is not to say that they do not exist. We should keep in mind, therefore, that since interpretation takes place in a definite realm of action (the object of interpretation, the aim of interpretation, the institutional boundaries) the notion of a complete or total interpretation is suspect from the start. No circumstance is neutral, or total.

Linguistic interpretation seems to be more fundamental than most other kinds, since as human beings we are immersed in a verbal universe, and many kinds of interpretations are conceivable only because they take place in language, or through language. Literary interpretation falls in this category. Not only is it carried out through language: its object, the literary work, is also made of language. The interpretation of pictures or films obviously stands in a different relationship to language; literary interpretation is completely immersed in a verbal universe: the meaning of the literary work and the meaning of the interpretation are both verbal meanings.

Interpretation and understanding

Both activities, interpretation and understanding, have to do with the construction of meaning. The difference is one of degree, and there are no absolute boundaries between interpretation and understanding. Interpretation is required for textual elements which resist understanding: difficult or unusual expressions, hidden allusions, texts whose previous interpretations we find unsatisfactory in one way or other. That is, interpretation presupposes understanding; the interpreter relies on a previous spontaneous understanding of the text, which is used as a foothold for the ensuing interpretation.

Understanding in literature, therefore, refers to the ordinary use of language. We understand the literal sense of a text, and then we can interpret other senses. Understanding is the first approach to meaning, the construction of an instrumental meaning which is usually sufficient for many purposes (although it is theoretically problematic). Ordinary conversation, while it abounds in interpretive moves, is in principle addressed towards simple understanding. The description of language aimed at by classical linguistics seeks to describe this level of language: *langue,* the sounds, structures and meanings that we assume to be common to all speakers and which ensure the possibility of communication. Any specific use of language (*parole* or discursive activity) presupposes language structure. Language as a whole should not be conceived as an instrument or a simple code, but we can think of this aspect of language, *langue,* as instrumental to the performance of speech acts from the point of view of the speaker. From the point of view of the hearer,

however, a simple decoding of the message according to the rules of the linguistic system is not enough: he must take into account the more specific rules of contextual use, the specific situation in which the speech act has occurred, his relationship to the speaker and the discourse activity they are engaged in. So in every act of communication there is a general system of reference shared by speaker and listener, but the system cannot be used in a mechanic way: speaker and listener have to engage in a linguistic game which redefines the sense of the bare linguistic elements in order to configurate a particular message or to act on each other through language. If the rules of a speech act are simple and clear to both speakers and they are not redefined through the play of language, we can say that understanding takes place; when the game becomes more complex we begin to speak of interpretation.

Understanding, therefore, is logically and linguistically prior to interpretation. The situation is even clearer in the case of literary interpretation, as in this case the contexts of interpretation and understanding are differentiated from an institutional point of view. We could simplify things by saying that in literature understanding is an activity required of the reader, while interpretation belongs to the critic. Of course this is not so. To start with, all critics are readers as well as critics, and they have to understand the text before they interpret it. And readers may find in a text many obstacles to understanding which require an interpretation. The interpretation is immediately supplied by the reader himself, and few ordinary readers care to ask a critic for one.

The sense in which the contexts of understanding and interpretation are institutionally determined in the case of literature is a different one. Both understanding and interpretation or, still better, the play of understanding and interpretation is present in any use of discourse. What happens in the case of literary criticism is that the interpretation is meant to be shared: it becomes another text, which is set beside the original and becomes public, available to other readers and critics as a help—or as a further problem. In the institution of criticism, interpretations are not for private use: miming the display texts themselves, their critical interpretations become display texts which lend themselves to further interpretation. If the critic is a reader, he is also a writer, a curious intermediary position. In literary criticism interpretation is inseparable from explanation: interpreting is explaining the text, or one's interpretation of the text. It is clear that here we are speaking of a very definite kind of interpretation: not of the interpretive element which is inherent to language use, but a further activity which involves not just the processing of texts, but their production. The critical interpretation is not a private or provisional solution inside one's mind, but a full-fledged construction of meaning which must answer to the specific requirements of relevance and validity of the institutional context in which it takes place.

Application is a further step in the hermeneutic process. It is essential for instance in the hermeneutics of law, when the application of the law to specific cases is essential. In science, phenomena are also interpreted as being explainable by general laws. And as noted by J. Hillis Miller there is a mutual involvement and feedback between theory and practice which has a hermeneutic dimension.

Interpretation and criticism

We have been speaking of literary criticism as the activity where literary interpretation is carried out. However, we should not identify criticism with interpretation. Even further, we should not confuse either interpretation or criticism with literary studies. A map of literary studies could be divided into three great areas: literary history, literary theory, and literary criticism. We call "literary theory" the discipline which studies in a formal way the characteristics of literary texts and other aspects of the literary phenomenon, in themselves or as they relate to other aspects of culture. Literary theory tries to formulate general laws and principles: it is not concerned with the consideration or evaluation of particular works of literature. Of course, a literary theory, whether explicit or implied, underlies any specific study or evaluation of a particular literary work. This study or evaluation of particular literary works is what we call criticism. Therefore, literary criticism presupposes literary theory. Very often, the two concepts are included in the term "criticism," but here we shall attempt to preserve this conceptual difference. The difference between literary theory and literary criticism is a conceptual one_in practice, it may be more or less clear-cut, and so we can speak of the literary theory of a critic who only wrote commentaries on particular works.

A theory of literature may also be said to underlie the discipline of literary history. The study of the historical development of literature may seem at first sigh to be more objective than the criticism of a given work, even though it generally includes criticism as well as mere factual information about literature. But even the more "objective" data are submitted to a theory of literature, which determines which facts relative to the works, the autors or the social context are thought relevant to be included in such a history of literature. But literary history and literary theory as such are obviously different undertakings. And there can be a history of literary theory (with its own assumptions or underlying literary theory) just as there is a history of literature.

Interpretation in the larger sense underlies all of these activities: choosing to mention an author in a history of literature (that is, even the simple action of making him count as a fact) can be said to be a matter of choice and interpretation; so the use and definition of all the concepts of literary theory involves an interpretation of their reach and application. But in the narrower sense of literary interpretation which we are concerned with here it is clear that interpretation belongs in the area of literary criticism, not in history or abstract theoretical thought. An interpretation is a historical fact rather than a history of facts about the work; and it is essentially concrete—a practical concretization of a particular possibility of meaning present in the work. But a theory, or a history, of specific critical literary interpretations is also a theory of literary hermeneutics.

Still, criticism involves many other activities besides interpretation. It includes *textual scholarship*, which shades into literary history: finding facts about the work and using them to establish an acceptable text; tracing versions, corrections, etc. Once we have a definite text the labour of interpretation follows in the realm of logic. But we may follow an alternative way: instead of plunging into the meaning of the text and entering the conflict of interpretations, we may stay at a more neutral level of study, and concentrate on the form of the text: from classical metrics to structuralist studies, we might call this kind of inquiry *analysis.* Analysis can be fascinating because it makes us perceive the way

meaning is constructed, and often allows the identification of objective devices which can be discussed in a text. The analysis of literary forms is crucial, because in literature the way a thing is said is always meaningful, and becomes a part of the content. This is only to say, however, that in the last instance analysis is not valuable in itself, but only insofar as it leads to a deeper understanding of the texts. The more ambitious kinds of analysis merge into interpretation, and this must be so because mathematics will never give us the clue of a literary text. In the study of narratology, we must make use of the figures of the implied author and the implied reader, which belong to the realm of interpretive theory. The results of formal analysis are in the end the object of interpretation. Part of the interpretive task involves seeing what is relevant and worthy of being analyzed and what is not.

But we also have a fourth element in criticism: *evaluation*. The critic cannot just study literary texts: he must also determine their merit. And the relationship between the critical activities of interpretation and evaluation is problematic.

Evaluation

Defined as an ideal activity, interpretation would seem to be logically prior to evaluation. But particular interpretations are not always prior in time to a particular evaluation, though they may qualify or alter it. Actually, literary interpretation is an infinite activity, and if evaluation had to follow interpretation it could be postponed indefinitely. In this view, evaluations would have to be looked at as provisional—given the present state of research into the work. But this view is clearly unsatisfactory. We find here, instead, a version of the hermeneutic circle, relating parts to wholes—in this case, at a conceptual level. Evaluation is taking place all the time, and is fulfilling its aims all the time: we choose certain works as worthy of being interpreted or taught in a course, we define a canon of what is literature and what is not in almost any of our institutional acts. The question of its provisional or definitive nature of these evaluations simply does not arise in most contexts. But we should not be naive about our activity as critics. In evaluating literary works in a particular way, we are trying to define and defend our idea of what is valuable, we are tracing a line of development and rewriting history along the lines of what is desirable. We should try to become conscious of the particular evaluations implicit in each of our choices. But what we can't do is pretend that we can do without evaluation until we have sound interpretations of all the works of literature. That can only happen (if at all) in Judgment Day. Interpretations are not accumulative, even if they seem to be so at times. They fulfill their role and their duty towards the present, but we cannot expect them to be valid forever, much less to be the basis of an objective valuation of any kind. Objective valuation is of course a contradiction in terms. Things are not valuable *in se;* they are valuable for someone. Some literary works (and some interpretations, for that matter) will always be privileged over others because we cannot escape our particular situation (historical, institutional, geographical) and some of these works will be more relevant to us at a given moment. The future will take care of itself, as it usually does, and we can be concerned only with what is useful, valuable and interesting for us.

Interpretation, therefore, being provisional, cannot be the basis for evaluation.

These things work the other way round: we interpret literary texts because they are valuable for us, because they open up new areas of experience and reality which we could not reach otherwise. We have not enough with the text as it stands, and we want more: more details of why this has happened, a yet profounder immersion in that world, a clearer view of what we already know is valuable. That is what most interpretations are for.

Now the relationship between understanding and evaluation cannot be as paradoxical as this. In linguistic art, we have to understand something before we appreciate it. Meaning is fundamental in literature. Even in poetry the value of pure sound is minimum: a full appreciation of the music of verse requires an interplay between sound and meaning which we can't appreciate, for instance, in the most musical of poems written in a language we do not understand; it becomes a mere jingle.

> *Ich duld' es nimmer!*
> *Ewig und ewig so,*
> *Die Knabenschritte,*
> *Die kurze, vorgemessene Schritte*
> *Wieder zu wandeln,*
> *Ich duld' es nimmer!*

Understanding a work is essential before we value it. The contrary can only be called prejudice. But understanding need not be complete before we see that the poem is valuable. An obscure work, badly in need of interpretation, may be appealing for many reasons, not least curiosity about its meaning; the suggestiveness of ambiguity, the promise of something to come. But obviously not all kinds of ambiguity or obcurity are appealing. Interest and appreciation rest principally on what we do understand. And the value of most literature seems to stand strongly anchored on a relatively accessible level of meaning: contradictory interpretations can be given of a great work, but that will not change its value, and we like to think at least that anyone who can understand the language a great work is written in should be able to recognize its value, even if the deeper significance of many things escapes him. Literature does not need the full clarity of a syllogism in order to be shared by all: much of its attractiveness lies in suggestiveness and the challenge it poses to interpretation.

Meaning and Significance

The original reason for interpreting a text is that we do not know what it means. But as there can be many degrees of unknowing, it will be useful to introduce a conceptual distinction between different kinds of meaning. We shall use the word "meaning" generically, to refer to the relationship between the semiotic manifestation of the work and any deeper level of analysis: the meaning of the words, different kinds of narrative meaning such as the fabula or the story, and also the interpretation we attach to a text. In any practical exercise of interpretation, a border will define itself between *what is understood* and *what is interpreted.* What is understood is the meaning of the text; what is interpreted is the meaning of the interpretation. An interpretation, being a text different from the original one, means a different thing. Doubly so in literature, where the relationships

between the elements of the texts are significant and a part of the meaning of the text. That is why some people believe that all interpretations distort and falsify a text, and that the perfect interpretation of a text would be a repetition of the text itself. It is obvious, however, that such a repetition would not be an interpretation in the sense we are defining here. Even if we consider that interpretations distort the meaning of the text, it would be more logical to consider that it is the nature of the interpretation to do so. An interpretation must change the text in some way, otherwise we would not need it; these distortions, in principle, are not a defect of interpretation but its essence. The text has a meaning, therefore, and the interpretation, being another text, has a different meaning. But of course it is in the nature of interpretation that these meanings be related. We call this relation *significance.* Significance is not "the meaning" of the text, but a particular meaning, the result of the interpretive work of the critic.

Intention

Meaning is an intentional phenomenon. Intentional action is implicit in the structure of language itself, as the speech act theorists have shown, and many meanings are constructed in an intentional way. But then many are not; and very often a speaker is unable to set limits to the interpretations given to his words. We can read between the lines in many contexts, not least in literary interpretation. But many will not be willing to accept the interpretations which the author did not intend. The issue of intention is obviously an important one for many of the critics we are going to study. It is often used as a *deus ex machina* to set limits to interpretation, just as in judicial interpretation, where the true sense of a law is supposed to be the one intended by the the original lawmakers. In criticism this issue cannot be solved once and for all, since there is no final authority to determine the value given to the intention of the author; since the principle itself is subject to interpretation discussion can have no end. But it is interesting to note, while studying a theory of interpretation, the definition of authorial intention it uses and the role this intention is given in the theory.

Validity

The use of this criterion of intention takes us to the more general question of validity in interpretation. We could present the issue here as a fight between two big schools, those who believe in the possibility of objective interpretation (e.g. Schleiermacher or E. D. Hirsch) and those relativists who think that no interpretation is valid in itself, that it does not belong to the nature of interpretation to be definitive or even "right" (Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish). Before we rush to side with the latter, we should undo the radicalness of this opposition. It is nearly meaningless to speak of interpretations in general in this respect. The range, relevance and difficulty of the issues involved are so great and varied that such a simple division falsifies the whole question. There are particular problems of interpretation where an agreement is reached, while on the other hand some texts seem to attract interpretations which are ever more diverse and opposite. Some interpretations are obviously irrelevant to anyone concerned with literary studies, and a theory of validity must

take this into account, instead of just saying that there is no possibility of ever validating an interpretation. Even the relativists accept criteria of common sense, and the objectivists recognize the difficulty of agreement. And now, since in a general introduction we must speak in a general way, let us side with the relativists to the extent of saying that as a rule we cannot say that final interpretations are ever reached. New facts may always appear, but more importantly new *perspectives* and criteria of relevance appear all the time. And we should remember that the interpreter is first of all *inter*— in the middle, and that he can never have the last word. In T. S. Eliot's phrase, it is the fate of all the interpretations to be interpreted again.

Hermeneutics

We have spoken of interpretation as a practical activity and an aspect of criticism. But this practical activity also has its theoretical principles, which are precisely our object in this course. Interpretation is one thing, the theory of interpretation is another. The first is a branch of criticism, the second is a branch of the theory of literature.

The theory of interpretation is often called *hermeneutics.* According to Webster's, hermeneutics is "the study of the methodological principles of interpretation and explanation; *specif.* the study of the general principles of Biblical interpretation." This is due to the fact that systematic thought about the principles of interpretation was developed around biblical studies. Today we may use the term hermeneutics in a general sense, but nevertheless it keeps strong philosophical and theological associations. Richard Palmer gives us another relevant definition: "Hermeneutics is the study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts." The study of understanding is a formidable task, and it belongs to philosophy and psychology rather than to literary theory. The word "hermeneutics" brings along with it the echoes of one of the great philosophical influences of this century, the hermeneutic philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur. Since this is only a particular school of thought we shall use the more neutral term "interpretive theory."

2. Semiotic roots

2.1. The sign according to Saussure

Here we shall only suggest some of the ways in which a theory of interpretation can be grounded on a general semiotics. The notion interpretation is implicit in the very definition of semiotics. A sign is meaningful, that is, it can be interpreted. To start with, we have a surface phenomenon, the signifier, but we only understand the sign as a sign when we grasp the relationship between the signifier and the signified. But "understand" is too weak a word to use for some kinds of signs. Traffic lights can be understood, but linguistic signs

have to be interpreted. Precisely this is one of the shortcomings of Saussure's theory of language. Concentrating on *langue* the way he does, Saussure neglects the linguistics of *parole,* which involves interpretation and negotiation of meanings, as modern textual semiotics has shown. In V. N. Voloshinov's view,[1] Saussure describes the sign as if it were a signal, neglecting the *implementation* a sign needs on the part of the receiver in order to become meaningful. The same objection to structuralist theories is put forward by Ricœur or Gadamer: language is not merely understood, it is interpreted. Meaning is not ready-made in the form: it is fully realized only in the act of reception, which is therefore semiotically significant.

2.2. The sign according to Peirce and Voloshinov

Charles S. Peirce gives a somewhat more complex account of the way semiosis works, since he is concerned also with the actual use of semiotic systems, not just with their structure.

Voloshinov's conception of ideology and Peirce's theory of semiosis may be usefully compared. For Peirce, too, the chain of semiosis is an unbroken one. In Peirce's theory, a sign is "a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object , as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant." [2]

But the moment we direct our attention to the interpretant, we find that it becomes a sign, which needs a further interpretant for its determination (Peirce 1.541). The meaning of a sign is the translation of the sign into another system of signs (Peirce 4.127). It is significant that Peirce criticises the Cartesian notion of the ego's accessibility to immediate intuition much as Voloshinov declares that individual consciousness is a fiction. Before Voloshinov, Peirce points out that there can be no cognitive functions outside the use of signs.[3]

That the semiotic chain is endless does not mean that it is cut off from the world. Instead, it means that the world is a semiotic construct:

> Every sign stands for an object independent of itself; but it can only be a sign of that object

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[1] V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.* Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1986.

[2] Peirce, *Collected Papers* [Vol.] 2. [p.] 274. For another perspective on Peirce's relevance to a feminist theory of stereotype, see Maryann Ayins, "The Implication of Sexually Stereotypic Language as Seen Through Peirce's Theory of Signs," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 19.2 (1983): 183-197.

[3] This metaphysical break with Descartes (or with Kant, who maintains the notion of "thing in itself" as a regulative principle) is found in various ways in Berkeley, Hume, Fichte, Nietzsche, Husserl or Quine. The epistemological consequences are still being drawn today by structuralism and post-structuralism. For Peirce's critique of Descartes, see the Walter Benn Michaels,"The Interpreter's Self : Peirce on the Cartesian 'Subject'," *Georgia Review* 31 (1977): 383-402. Rpt. in *Reader-Response Criticism.* Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. 185-200.

> in so far as that object is itself of the nature of a sign or thought. For the sign does not affect the object but is affected by it; so that the object must be able to convey thought, that is, must be of the nature of thought or of a sign. Every thought is a sign. (Peirce 1.538)

That is why Peirce can have his cake and eat it, or preserve a concept of truth while he denies that any sign translates finally into a piece of non-semiotic world.[4] Peirce admits that there is a final interpretant for the sign. However, this final interpretant connects semiosis not to a *ding an sich* , but to human action. And the object Peirce refers to is not outside semiosis; it is also a semiotic construct. It is not the object "itself," but an "Immediate Object," that is, the "Dynamic Object" (the object-as-independent-of-the-sign which is the cause of the representation*) as it is represented by the sign* , on the ground that only some traits of the Dynamic Object are declared to be relevant for the particular use we have in mind. That is, the "ground" is a component part of meaning. Immediate objects do not exist outside the scope of human action—and this is not a contradiction but a tautology. For our practical purposes: the aims of interpretation will inevitably become a part of the meaning of the interpretation; the situation of the interpreter is a meaningful aspect of the interpretive activity.

Peirce's conception of the ground of meaning has its equivalent in Voloshinov's theory; it is what Voloshinov calls the implementation of the sign on the part of the receiver. It is Voloshinov's major objection against structuralist approaches that they do not account for an essential phase in linguistic communication: they only explain that an utterance is recognized to be conformed to a linguistic system of identities, but they do not provide us with a way of understanding the *novelty* of the utterance with respect to the system: *"what is important (...) about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign"* (Voloshinov 68). That is, understanding does not equal the mere recognition of the form, because already the form is one that does not belong to a single abstract system such as described by objectivist theories; it is caught in a net of multiple and changeable systems, and its co-text, context and the contribution of the receiver will activate in a specific way its potential infinity of meaning. A lion, for instance, is not just a big African cat; it is also a symbol of might, of monarchy, of natural forces, of endangered species, of cruelty, of nobility of mind, of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Productions. A specific discourse situation may work on these or other potential meanings to bring further echoes to the sign. In any use of the word in communication it requires an ideological implementation, one that will define its meaning as it is used in this specific instance. "Any act of understanding is a response, i.e., it translates what is being understood into a new context from which a response can be made" (Voloshinov 69). Or again, "Language, in the process of its practical implementation, is inseparable from its ideological or behavioral impletion" (Voloshinov 70).

Another interesting element Peirce can offer to a theory of linguistic interpretation

[4] For Peirce, truth is not a correspondence between the world and its representation, but "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate"; the real is not the real but "the object represented in this opinion" (Peirce 5.407). At other times Peirce makes clear that we have to suppose an ideal scientific enquiry to define truth.

is his classification of the kinds of signs into symbols, indexes and icons.

— A symbolic theory of interpretation will try to find hidden meanings which are to be recognized according to an interpretive key. These may go from the allegorical or numerological interpretations of the past to more "intuitive" or elaborated keys such as the ones used by Northrop Frye.[5]

— An indexical theory of interpretation considers the text as an index of its origin, either in the mind of the author (psychoanalysis), in his past life (biographical interpretation) or in his social position (Marxist criticism).

— An iconic theory of interpretation would see the text as a system of repetition and reproduction of textual structures—and possibly criticism too as a subliminal repetition of the moves of the text. Structuralism and deconstruction could be considered in this light.

The best use of this classification would be to try to escape it. Interpretation cannot be totalizing, or complete, or definitive. But it should try to avoid being reductive, even if it is fated to be so. We should keep in mind the bird's eye view of semiotic activities and of our place in them as interpreters. An interpretation should be powerful, try to be more comprehensive than previous interpretations, to bring to bear on the work new data and a fresh perspective. It should go beyond antagonical interpretations and help us transcend them, offering us new light on the work and on the nature of relevance itself. A useful interpretation is precisely one which breaks down barriers to understanding, and makes us see, in Wordsworth's expression, similarity in dissimilarity, and dissimilarity in similarity. Interpretation should be poetic at least in this sense.

3. Classical Hermeneutics

"Hermeneutics" derives from the Greek verb *hermeneuein,* "to interpret." Other related words include *hermeios,* the priest at the Delphic oracle, and the messenger-god Hermes himself—who is related to *hermeneuein* already in Plato's *Cratylus.*[6] It is not clear which of the words derives from the other. Apart from being the god of merchants and thieves, Hermes was the god of speech and communication. He invented both language and writing, the tools we use to grasp and transmit meaning. As the interpreter of the divine will, "Hermes is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp."[7] Richard Palmer offers a

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[5] Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays.* Princeton (NJ): Princeton UP, 1957.

[6] Plato, *Cratylus.* Trans. H. N. Fowler. (Loeb Classical Library, vol. IV). Cambridge (MA): Harvard UP, 1977.

[7] Palmer, Richard E. *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1969), 13.

suggestive analysis of three basic directions in the sense of *hermeneuein*; all share, however, the basic meaning of "making something understood," "bringing to understanding":

1) To express, to say, to speak aloud, to announce. Oral recitation, hermeneia, was a way of making poets known in Greece. These reciters, the rhapsodes, combined the functions of minstrels and interpreters: their role, according to Plato, was to understand the poet's meaning and "interpret the mind of the poet to his hearers" (*Ion* 12).[8] Oral language is more clear than written language, and one of the primary senses of interpretation is to read, to allow a text to speak, to allow written language to come to the life of speech once again. Palmer defines reading as a dialectical grasping of meaning, in which we reinfuse oral language into writing, supplying attitude, intonation, emphasis. To read aloud involves a reproduction, and therefore an interpretation of the text. Even more, "every silent reading of a literary text is a disguised form of oral interpretation" (Hermeneutics 17).

2) The second meaning of *hermeneuein* is "to explain". To explain involves to make clear a meaning which is not evident. Aristotle calls his treatise on the truth and falsity of statements *On Interpretation.*[9] In this way, he seems to point out that interpretation is a primary maneuver in the construction of meaning. A logical statement is already the product of an interpretation, of joining a subject and a predicate, of relating two ideas. In this way, Aristotle places a basic moment of interpretation even before logic, rhetoric or poetics. Explanation cannot be completely separated from simple description: from the moment we choose or accept a standpoint, a view on the object, a starting point and a series of tools for our description, we are already effecting an interpretive task.

3) The third sense of *hermeneuein* is "to translate." We have already mentioned the kinship of interpretation and translation. Translation from another language often involves not just a change of grammatical perspective, but also a culture clash. The translator must mediate between two different world-views and areas of experience. This is a problem in translation which escapes any methodical rules, because each new situation must be solved by the translator on the basis of those aspects of the work that he wants to emphasize: a sense of immediacy, or clarity of meaning, or precision in reference. A literary interpretation is also a translation in this sense: the interpreter must mediate between the work and the interpretive context, which very often amounts to giving the work a new sense, to enlarge its significance, just as a translation acquires new meanings which were not present in the original text.

However, when we turn to classical criticism we find that interpretation originally appears as the exception, and not as the rule. In Aristotle, in Horace or Longinus the meaning of a poem is not usually subject to debate: it is there, it is evident for the audience and shared by all, and only occasional obscurities need interpretation (usually of a

[8] Plato, *Ion* (c. 388 BC). Trans. B. Jowett. In *Critical Theory since Plato.* Ed. Hazard Adams. San Diego: Harcourt, 1971. 12-19.
[9] Aristotle (Aristóteles). *Peri Hermeneias*. Trans. Patricio de Azcárate. In Aristotle, *Tratados de Lógica (el Organon).* México: Porrúa, 1982. 49-64.

grammatical kind).[10] However, a tradition of literary interpretation already exists in the classical world, and it will gain strength in the later ages. An opposition between the literal meaning and the hidden meanings found by interpreters will develop, and in the end it will become consubstantial to the definition of poetry. The origin of this line of thought is to be found in the allegorical interpretations of classical texts, of texts which are "sacred" in one way or another. The interpretive tradition is linked from the beginning to a religious question: there is a mystery at the core of the text, and the supreme paradox occurs that language does not mean what it means. Instead, meaning proliferates and negates itself simultaneously.

The word "allegory" (allegoria) was already used in ancient Greece. It was a late (Alexandrian) coinage, but an earlier word with this meaning, *hyponoia*, "deep meaning" or "underlying sense," existed before the diffusion of "allegory." According to Quintilian, "*allegorian* facit continua *metaphora*" (*Institutio* IX 2, 46). Augustine will compare allegory to parable, and uses the word aenigma for those allegories whose sense is obscure. Under the neoplatonics, new terms are introduced to designate hidden meanings*: mystérion, ainigma, symbolon.*[11]

Allegorical readings are found already among the first Homeric scholars, such as Theagenes of Rhegium and Metrodorus of Lampsachus.[12]

Theagenes (6th century BC) was the first to study the life of Homer and also his work in a double sense: an interpretation of hidden meanings and a grammatical study of the Greek language as used by Homer. The main aim of allegorical interpretation was to defend Homer from his detractors—the philosophers who react against the traditional mythic conceptions. Foremost among these was Plato, who in his *Republic* banned fictional poetry from the perfect commonwhealth and denounced Homer as the author of immoral narratives not fit for the education of children or the religious beliefs of the citizens. This reaction was not new or exclusive in Plato. A reaction against the religious conceptions of Homer had taken place already in the 6th century BC. The behaviour of his gods is found to be immoral; some thinkers go further and feel uncomfortable with such an anthropomorphic vision of divinity. These new attitudes had to come to terms with the preeminence of Homer as the fountainhead of Greek civilization, and the continued taste for his works. Allegorical interpretation allowed to restore and even reinforce Homer's position in the cultural tradition, tracing back to his works all sorts of discoveries and conceptions.

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[10] Allegory is not even mentioned among the possible defenses of poetry listed in chapter XXV of the *Poetics.* When it comes to justify problematic passages, Aristotle seems to be wary of interpreters: "We should . . . solve the question by reference to what the poet says himself, or to what is tacitly assumed by a person of intelligence" (XXVI).

[11] J. Tate, "On the History of Allegorism." Classical Quarterly 28 (1934): 105-14.
Thulstrup, Niels. "An Observation Concerning Past and Present Hermeneutics." *Orbis Litterarum* 22 (1967): 24-44.

[12] For a list of Homeric scholars and allegorists, see Pseudo-Plutarco, *Sobre la vida y poesía de Homero;* Porfirio, *El antro de las ninfas de la* Odisea; Salustio, *Sobre los dioses y el mundo.* Trans. Enrique Angel Ramos Jurado. Madrid: Gredos, 1989 (8-191) 13-15.

Most of the allegorists were not strikingly original. Even though their interpretations may seem far-fetched to us, they followed a logic of their own and respected an interpretive tradition, without risking themselves too much in adding new interpretations of their own. However, most of the works in this tradition have reached us in a fragmentary state, mainly through references in other writers. Apart from interpretive fragments in non-critical works, and critical notes or scholia which focus on grammatical problems and the odd interpretive question, the main extant treatises in this allegorical tradition are:

- Heraclitus, *Homeric Allegories.* (1st century AD)
- Plutarch, *On the Life and Poetry of Homer* (2nd century AD?)
- Porphyry, *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey.* (3rd century AD).

Exegesis in these works develops along four main lines:

— Physical exegesis: Homer knew and expressed in mythical form all kinds of knowledge about nature and the laws of the material universe. This kind of exegesis was one of the first to appear, since it is already found in the time of pre-Socratic thinking, when thought was concerned mainly with the structure of the universe.

— Historical exegesis (applied to myths). A myth is traced back to a historical event which was elaborated upon by the poet (e. g. in the work of the peripathetic writer Palephatus, *De Incredibilibus*).

— Moral exegesis. Homeric narratives are allegories of good and evil, of virtuous or sinful behaviour. This kind of exegesis appears later than the physical one, and will flourish under the Stoics and the followers of Plato and Aristotle (though not with Plato or Aristotle themselves). Plutarch (*De audiendis poetis*) rejects against scientific interpretations of Homer, and favours a moral interpretation of the myths and epics. As late as the 12th century we still find Eustatius, the archbishop of Thessalonica, writing moral Commentaries on the Homeric poems, which are interpreted as educational literature.

— The last type of exegesis will be *mystical.* Mystical exegesis was present at least since the work of Plutarch (A. D. 46? - 120?). It became common under the neo-Platonics, in the third and fourth centuries A. D., and its importance grew under Christianity. The events in a narrative will be taken to be a representation of the afterlife, of the fate of the souls. This kind of interpretation is inspired those sections of the myths or the epics which deal with a voyage of the hero to the nether world (in the *Odyssey,* the *Aeneid,* in Plato's myths, or "Scipio's Dream" in Cicero). But whole narratives will soon be interpreted allegorically in this way: the *Odyssey* will become the story of the soul's wandering in the world before reaching eternity.

The Stoics were important allegorizers of Homer. They interpreted the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as moral treatises, where the main heroes enact the Stoic ideals of morality and resist the personifications of vices and foibles which assail them. The early allegorical treatises are lost, but we some later works which belong to the same tradition have been

preserved. Heraclitus (1st century AD—not the Pre-Socratic philospher!) is the author of *Homeric Allegories,* a work in the Stoic tradition.[13] The avowed aim of Heraclitus is to defend Homer from the accusation of immorality. It is curious to see that he presupposes the greatness of Homer, and deduces from it the necessity of an allegorical reading, rather than the other way round: "Homer is pitilessly charged with lack of respect towards divinity: all of his stories would be irreverent, unless we interpret them as allegories" (I,1). Heraclitus defines allegory as "the trope which consists in speaking about one thing, but which in fact refers to another thing different from the one mentioned." The interpretations he proposes were common in the Stoic tradition, where they present few variations. Heraclitus follows the order of the poems, not a logical order according to the kind of meaning retrieved, but his interpretations are mainly physical or moral: "Homer pits vices against virtues, and presents the elements warring against their contraries" (54,1). Physical exegesis explains problematic passages as a figuration of natural phenomena. Where Apollo kills the Greeks with his arrows in the *Iliad,* Heraclitus finds a representation of the plague diffused by the heat of the sun, without any responsibility whatsoever on the part of the divinity (6,5). So, "the choler of angry Apollo is not arbitrary; rather, it is the philosophical expression of a physical phenomenon" (16,5). In fact, according to Heraclitus, Homer is the first and foremost among the philosophers of natrue: "Actually, Homer is the first author to put forth ideas on the nature of the elements; he is the teacher of all those who followed him with those discoveries of which they seemed to be the authors" (22,2). In favour of these interpretations, Heraclitus points to the poetic and metaphorical language used by the early philosophers, such as his namesake Heraclitus of Ephesus or Empedocles. The extended passage in the Iliad where the shield of Achilles is described as it is being forged by Hephestos is the most comprehensive of Homer's allegories:

> In the vast and cosmogonic vision of the passages where the weapons are forged, Homer has concentrated the genesis of the universe. Whence came the earliest origin of the world, who was the artificer, how the diverse elements parted from the compact whole they constituted, all this Homer explains with clear examples as he forges in Achilles' shield an image of the cosmos in its circular shape. (43, 1-2)

Moral exegesis transforms characters into embodiments of vices or virtues. Heraclitus identifies some of the gods in the *Iliad* with parts of the soul of the human protagonists, such as they had been described by Plato. Athena is reason, Ares is courage and Aphrodite is desire. The whole of the Odyssey is a moral journey:

> If somebody wants to examine closely Odysseus' wandering journey, he will find that it is an allegory from beginning to end. Indeed, when Homer presents his hero as the instrument of all virtues, he is using him philosophically to teach wisdom, since Odysseus hates vice, which destroys the life of men. (70,1-2)

There is no mystical exegesis in Heraclitus, since this kind of interpretations will not become common before the end of the first century AD. In order to justify his

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[13] (Pseudo-)Heraclitus. *Allegoriae in Homeri fabulas de diis.* 1st century AD? Spanish trans. in Heráclito, *Alegorías de Homero.* Antonino Liberal, *Metamorfosis.* Introd. Esteban Calderón Dorda. Trans. María Antonia Ozaeta Gálvez. Madrid: Gredos, 1989.

interpretations, Heraclitus has often resource to etymology, but his etymologies are not to be relied on: they are more akin to word games, a kind of extravagant punning which tries to force together surface and the hidden meaning. Nonetheless, sometimes he gets his etymologies right:

> As to Iris [from *eíro,* "to say"], the messenger and envoy of Zeus, she symbolizes the language "that speaks," just as Hermes [from *hermeneúo,* "to interpret"] is the language "that interprets." Both are the messengers of the gods, and their names mean nothing other than the faculty of expressing thought by means of speech. (28,2)

It is a curious corollary of Heraclitus' interpretive assumptions that the literal sense seems to be obliterated by the allegorical one to the extent that there is no trace of immorality left, and "both works, first the *Iliad* and then the *Odyssey,* let us hear unanimously a voice which speaks of piety, a voice free from any kind of impurity." We could argue that he does not really counter the Platonic objections to Homer, since according to Plato these stories about the gods should not be permitted, whether they have an allegorical meaning or not.

After Heraclitus, we can mention Pseudo-Plutarch (again, not the author of the *Parallel Lives*), who wrote a work *On the Life and Poetry of Homer*.[14] His aim is to show that all kinds of human knowledge, including all sorts of literary devices and styles, can be traced back to some passage or other of the Homeric poems:

> if we read everything they say not in passing but rigorously, we shall find that they contain all rational sciences and arts,and that they have procured posterity numerous starting points, as well as the seeds of sundry words and actions, and this not only to poets, but also to historians and philosophers. (II, 6)
>
> And we should not find it strange that he expounds his thoughs by means of enigmas and myths. The reason is a poetical one, and also a habit of the ancients, to entrap the sould of those lovers of truth who have a certain taste for art, that they may look for truth and find it the more easily, while ignorant people are kept from despising what they cannot understand—since hidden meanings are attractive, while it is vulgar to express things in an open way. (II, 92)

Very often the kind of analysis found in Pseudo-Plutarch is not what we would call an allegorical interpretation, but rather a somewhat far-fetched analysis of presuppositions and style.

Pseudo-Plutarch tells an interpretive anecdote dealing with Homer. On arriving to the island of Ios on his way to a musical competition in Thebes, Homer sat on the shore and saw a couple of fishermen arriving and he asked them about their catch. They happened to have caught nothing, and had passed their time killing their lice. So they answered: Everything we caught, we left behind; everything we failed to catch, we bring with us.

[14] Pseudo-Plutarch. *De vita et poesi Homeri.* 3rd century AD? Spanish translation in Pseudo Plutarco, *Sobre la vida y poesía de Homero;* Porfirio, *El antro de las ninfas de la* Odisea; Salustio, *Sobre los dioses y el mundo.* Trans. Enrique Angel Ramos Jurado. Madrid: Gredos, 1989. 8-191.

Being unable to interpret this problem, Homer died of discouragement.

The neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry, with his allegorical reading of *The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey,* offers yet another version of allegorical interpretation. Porphyry notes that patent absurdity requires an allegorical interpretation: the absurd will therefore become its opposite, the most meaningful.

> Since the tale is full of such obscurities, it cannot be a random invention, written as a mere pastime, or a precise geographical description; rather, the poet is using an allegorical mode of expression. (IV)

> We should not think that such interpretations are strained and plausible verisimilitudes devised by the witty; if we consider the wisdom of the ancients, Homer's vast intelligence and his rightness in all virtues, it will be impossible to reject the idea that under a mythical form he alluded enigmatically to images of diviner realities. (XXXVI)

The most salient feature of Porphyry's approach is the combination of historical and allegorical interpretation: that is, historical data and current knowledge about myths are used to support an allegorical reading of a passage in the *Odyssey.* Porphyry is one of the first close readers in history, since he devotes a whole treatise to the exegesis of eleven Homeric lines. The episode of the cave of the nymphs in the Odyssey can be read allegorically because such caves sacred to the nymphs actually existed and were given an allegorical signification, according to Porphyry. Whether this actual cave was real or fictional, he argues, the interpretive problem is the same: to discover the intention of those who sacred the cave or of Homer himself in inventing it. Another characteristic of Porphyrian allegory is the ease with which he offers different readings of a single element: an Homeric line can be read in the direction of historical, moral or mystical exegesis. The senses Porphyry finds are, quite predictably, those of neo-Platonic philosophy: an allegory of an ordered universe and the reincarnation of the souls. This will not prevent Porphyry from complaining that other Homeric interpreters "try to carry the poet away in the direction of their own thoughts."

In the 6th century, Fabius Planciades Fulgentius will offer us an interpretation of the Aeneid as an allegory of human life from birth to salvation. A similar equation of an epic narrative and the span of human life had already been proposed by one Numenius with reference to the *Odyssey* (see Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* XXXIV).[15] Fulgentius' aim is to explain "the hidden natural lore of Vergil, avoiding those things which are more dangerous than praiseworthy" (69). There are things in the poem, indeed, which are best left to the Pagans, not being fit for Christian ears. The *Eclogues* and the *Georgics* also contain deep meanings: Fulgentius relates a particular science or art to each of the books in these works. He begins his explanation of the *Aeneid* with an invocation of the poet himself, and Virgil appears, muttering "some mysterious truth that wells up within him" (70). Virgil himself explains the origin of these mysterious truths: "I rejoice . . . because

[15] Spanish translation in Pseudo Plutarco, *Sobre la vida y poesía de Homero;* Porfirio, *El antro de las ninfas de la* Odisea; Salustio, *Sobre los dioses y el mundo.* Trans. Enrique Angel Ramos Jurado. Madrid: Gredos, 1989

although I did not know the full truth concerning the nature of the righteous life, still, truth sprinkled its sparks in my darkened mind with a kind of blind favor" (72). The development of the Aeneid is divided into three phases, just like the moral life of man: from the inner capacity of childhood, through the process of learning, to the fully formed moral person. These phases are shown allegorically. For instance, Book 1 of the *Aeneid* begins in medias res, with a storm that throws Aeneas and his companions on the African shore. Fulgentius is not satisfied with this temporal distortion, and turns the beginning of the poem into a real chronological beginning through allegory: "The shipwreck symbolizes the perils of birth in which the mother suffers birth pangs, and the infant endures the danger of being born" (73). Through the first few books of the *Aeneid*, the hero is a child: first he is unable to recognize his mother, then he is reared and educated, he becomes independent of his father and suffers temptations of vanity (the cyclops) and lust (Dido). But he listens to the voice of reason (Hermes) and follows the path of study which takes him to the underworld, or hidden knowledge. Later Aeneas fights Turnus, a symbol of rage, and Mezentius, impiety. These intepretations are bolstered up by a generous use of fanciful etymologies which turn the names of the characters into a description of their allegorical sense. Fulgentius chides Virgil for his ideas on reincarnation, but he inaugurates the medieval tradition of looking on Virgil as an inspired Pagan who received an indirect light from a divine source. This conception, that divine revelation may be present in other cultures in an imperfect form, before its full manifestation in the Christian revelation, is characteristic of the neoplatonists of the Alexandrian school, like Origen and Clement of Alexandria.[16]

Other interpretive traditions parallel this taste for allegorical readings of literature. Arithmology or numerology was already fashionable in antiquity (Philolaus, Speusippus, Plutarch, Porphyry, Fulgentius). This kind of interpretation tries to find significant numerical recurrences in works (e. g. number nine in Homer, according to Pseudo-Plutarch II, 145), and an hermetical sense was attributed to those numbers. But the real favourite is personification: giving a concrete human shape to an abstract principle or idea. Cornutus (1st century A. D.), another Stoic writer, wrote a *Digest of Greek Theology* where he explains the physical or moral significance of the Greek gods. The Greek pantheon seemed to call for this kind of interpretation, and it seems that in the late Antiquity it was common to see in the figures of the Gods allegorical representations of natural or moral phenomena. Thus, Plutarch tells us that "the Greeks see in Chronos an allegorical representation of Time."

The taste for allegory came more and more to affect writing and creation, and not merely interpretation. We can mention an obvious example: the parables in the New Testament, which are immediately explained by Jesus himself, acting as author and interpreter of the hidden sense. Indeed, Christianity will favour the use of images of ordinary life to reflect the work of God; the whole universe becomes a symptom of God's existence and can therefore be read, interpreted. Reality becomes the symbol of a hidden meaning. Allegorical poetry will also be written, also with a moral or religious aim in view. Prudentius wrote a *Psychomachy* which will become the model for countless poems

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[16] Hardison, O. B., Jr. et al, eds. *Medieval Literary Criticism: Translations and Interpretations.* New York: Ungar, 1974. P. 68.

in the medieval tradition (from the *Roman de la rose* or *Piers Plowman* to *El Criticón* by Baltasar Gracián or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). In the medieval morality play *Everyman,* the soul of Everyman is assailed by allegorical figures representing the virtues and the vices, who fight each other in a psychological landscape. These allegorical works stem from a previous tradition of allegorizing readings of other works.

In the late classical age these traditions will converge with other influeces comming from the near East: the first kabbalistic interpretations of the Bible, which followed a path similar to the allegorizations of the Homeric poems, and the hermetical tradition of writing coming from Egypt. The opposition between the surface meaning and the hidden meaning reigns supreme, and is the whole substance of writing, the secret of its power.

Complex interpretations will meet a measure of opposition from the very beginning. Plato already laughs at deep readers in *Phaedrus,* rejecting the allegorical interpretations of myths. Alluding to a physical interpretation of a local myth, Socrates affirms that he is satisfied with the surface meaning of such stories, and that he is ready to believe them at face value, without trying to go into deeper philosophical exegesis: "As for me, Phaedrus, I consider that such interpretations have a charm of their own, but they require too much time and work on the part of the interpreter" (854). Moreover, he implies that once we begin to interpret, there is no way of stopping, and that more and more elements will seem to require an interpretation as we go along. Socrates' advice is that we delve in ourselves, and leave the stories alone. This irony did not prevent Plato from using parables and allegorical narratives in his own works—and to tempt later interpreters into the exegesis of these myths. The main body of *Phaedrus,* however, deals not with mythical stories, but with discourses and treatises. Both, however, seem to share the same fate: they are fixed pieces of language which have a face value and cannot go beyond it themselves. It is here that Socrates delivers his famous criticism of writing and his defense of dialogue:

> The awful thing about writing, Phaedrus, is the real similarity it has with painting. Indeed, pictures look like living beings, but if you ask them anything they remain solemnly silent. The same happens with writings: you could think they speak as if they were people, but if you question them on the things they say, in order to learn, they answer only one thing, and always the same. Besides, once they have been written, all discourses circulate everywhere and in the same way, among the experts and among those who care nothing about them, and they do not know who they should address themselves to and whom they should avoid. And when they are abused or unjustly insulted they always need their father's protection, since on their own they are unable to defend or help themselves. (802)

It is not surprising that Plato looks on the meaning of a text as insufficient, and derived from the conscious act of meaning of the author. The image of dialogue as opposed to dissection will remain an ideal for contemporary hermeneutics—but we must still define a way to engage in a dialogue with texts, a possibility which is rejected by Plato.

The poets are called "interpreters of the gods" or "messengers of the gods" by Plato

(*Ion* 15).[17] But elsewhere he does not seem to care much for the mediating role of thie poet, and the hermeneutical function is reserved for the philosopher.

Epicurus will criticize Stoic allegorical interpretations. So will Aristarchus, the great Homeric scholar of Alexandria, who will oppose to these conceptions a more contextualized historical approach: in his view, Homer's poems should be read as belonging to an earlier and simpler age, and that their figurative way of thought is a kind of primitive philosophy, not a key for modern philosophies. Plutarch (*De audiendis poetis*) complains that interpreters sometimes force and distort the sense of discredited myths trying to find hidden senses.

This debate on the excess of allegorical reading will often be repeated in centuries to come: in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance, and even today in a different form. This is because allegory, in some form of other, has always been a part of the activity of the critic. Criticism is not just a repetition of the meaning of the work, but an expansion and interpretation of that meaning, and allegory is often used as a tool to expand and interpret meaning.

4. Early humanist hermeneutics

The idea of hermeneutics experiences a significant evolution in the period from the Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century. Originally, the term "hermeneutics" was applied to the theory of biblical exegesis. The concept expands gradually to cover the field of philological methodology in general. During the nineteenth century the concept becomes still more ambitious: in Schleiermacher hermeneutics is the ground of all linguistic understanding, and in Dilthey it is the methodological foundation of the *Geisteswissenschaften,* or "sciences of the spirit", including history, literary studies, art and law.

The first sense of hermeneutics is "the theory of Biblical interpretation." Hermeneutics, therefore, does not refer to the actual activity of interpretation, but only to its guiding principles: such, for instance, as were described by Aquinas in his section on the different levels of meaning of a Biblical text. The first book explicitly devoted to hermeneutics is J. C. Dannhauer's *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponenedarum sacrarum litterarum* (1654). It is significant that the notion and the theory were developed to a greater extent in the field of protestant theology. There were many manuals of

[17] Plato, *Ion.* Trans. B. Jowett. In *Critical Theory since Plato.* Ed. Hazard Adams. San Diego: Harcourt, 1971. 12-19.

protestant hermeneutics written during the eighteenth century, as a practical aid to ministers who have to preach on Biblical texts and their significance without recourse to authority in their interpretation—at least, not the direct authority of the Catholic church, where all legitimacy derives from the past and the authority of the Pope. Initially, Luther reacted against medieval hermeneutics defending the legitimacy of only the literal reading of the Bible. But as a whole,. Protestant hermeneutics is more open to the idea that the Bible as the word of God does not have a fixed meaning, but must be interpreted again by each age. Indeed, some interpretive doctrines surprisingly similar to the contemporary Protestant "demythologization" of Bultmann and Ebeling were put forward by the Fathers tof the Church before doctrine hardened into official orthodoxy. "Gregory of Nyssa (343-96) had interpreted the early narrative of Genesis not as history but as doctrine in the form of a story" and "Origen had described the Biblical story of the creation as a wise and useful poetic figment".[18] Still, any kind of religious interpretation is controlled by a certain amount of stated or unstated dogma. Let us remember Augustine's dictum that in reading Scripture anything unbecoming with Christian doctrine should be interpreted until it fits that doctrine. This applies to religious interpretation generally: in order to hold a creed, some limits must be imposed on interpretation.

The evolution of hermeneutics in the direction of philology originated in the application of philological methods to the Bible itself. The authority of the Catholic dogma became problematic from the moment the idea (and the need) arose to study the Bible not as a sacred text, but as a text, in its purely linguistic and compositional aspects. The catholic authority stood on shaky basis, indeed, since it did not use an original text but a translation—the Vulgate. In his *Annotations on the New Testament* (c. 1444), the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla submitted the Biblical text to linguistic criticism: "His aim was to correct errors in the Vulgate by reference to the original Greek; and the work provided Erasmus with the suggestion for his edition of the Greek Testament."[19]

This was a so-called "grammatical" interpretation of the Bible, but soon other interpreters more concerned with the meaning of the Bible as a historical text were dealing with it on a non-dogmatic ground, setting it on a level with other texts of the past. In the neoclassical age, "both the 'grammatical' and 'historical' schools of biblical interpretation affirmed that the interpretive methods applying to the Bible were precisely those for other books" (Palmer 38). In his *Tractatus teologico-politicus* (1670) Spinoza affirms that "The norm of Biblical exegesis can only be the light of reason common to all" and according to Johann Augustus Ernesti's *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti* (1761), "the verbal sense of Scripture must be determined in the same way in which we ascertain that of other books" (in Palmer 38). The task of the Biblical interpreter for these writers "was to go deeply into the text, using the tools of natural reason, and to find those great moral truths intended by the New Testament writers but hidden within different historical terms" (Palmer 39). The eighteenth century is the age of the development of philological and historical methodology, and hermeneutics will become identified with this approach.

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[18] J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Renascence.* 1947. New York: Barnes and Noble; London: Methuen, 1968. 58-59.
[19] Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Renascence* 13.

The most common use of the term "hermeneutics" in English is still the one relative to the Bible. From here, the use of the term expanded to refer to the interpretation of any obscure text requiring a special method to extract hidden meaning. For instance, in his *Primitive Culture* (1871), Edward Burnett Taylor affirms that "No legend, no allegory, no nursery rhyme, is safe from the hermeneutics of a thorough-going mythologic theorist." And in the twentieth century we speak of literary hermeneutics, historical hermenteutics, law hermeneutics. In this way, the kinship between these interpretive activities has become more evident.

But of course the practice of hermeneutics existed long before the word was applied to it. Any system of theology which is based on the control or the explanation of the meaning of a sacred text can be considered to be a hermeneutics: in Old Testament times there were already canons for the proper interpretation of the Torah. And any approach to a critical text, as well as any theory of literature, can be said to contain an implicit hermeneutics. We always rely on an explicit or implicity system of interpretation: the text is not interpreted in its own terms, but in the interpreter's terms.

A problem arises when we consider the difference between explicit and implicit systems of interpretation. In one sense, a theory can be said to exist only when it is explicitly formulated as a theory. The difference is obviously significant, since an explicit theory requires a greater degree of theoretical elaboration. Otherwise, a theory is not properly speaking a method of interpretation, but an object of interpretation: we impose the form of theory on an activity which is eminently practical. The same happened when the interpreters of Homer wanted to make him the founder of rhetoric, and gave as proof his use of rhetorical figures. A further complication is that both the implicit and the explicit theories of interpretation that we analyse are not fixed forever in their significance: their meanings change as we study them; they are interpreted in their turn.

Now, as far as literary hermeneutics from the Middle Ages to the Age of Reason are concerned, the best places to look for a theory of literary interpretation are the treatises dealing with the nature and composition of poetry. Up to the eighteenth century there are no critical monographs dealing with a single author or work, and in the absence of concrete examples discussion about the meaning of poetry often remains quite vague. However, if we take the risk of interpreting the poetic theories we can deduce their implicit hermeneutics.

An dominant conception, above all during the later Middle Ages and the early renaissance, is that of poetry as a kind of coded philosophy, moral or natural science presented under the form of images and fables which must be decoded in order to reach a hidden meaning where all the substance lies. Poetry here is a kind of code, an elaborate artifact on the part of the author.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf's theory of composition is all-intentional, privileging the Idea over matter according to the classical neo-Platonic conception dominant in Christian thought at the time:

> If a man has a house to build, his impetuous had does not rush into action. The measuring

> line of his mind first lays out the work, and he mentally outlines the successive steps in a definite order. The mind's hand shapes th entire house before the body's hand builds it. Its mode of being is archetypal before it is actual. . . . Let the mind's interior compass first circle the whole extent of the material. Let a definite order chart in advance at what point the pen will take up its course, or where it will fix its Cadiz. As a prudent workman, construct the whole fabric within the mind's citadel; let it exist in the mind before it is on the lips.[20]

The idea is the body of the work, and the task of poetic art is to clothe this idea with the appropriate garments: the proper words and the colours of rhetoric. Presumably the task of the reader would be an inverse one: to strip the idea naked, working his way through the colors of rhetoric.

In his Genealogy of the Gentile Gods,[21] Boccaccio writes a practical manual of classical mythology for the use of poets, but he also feels compelled to defend the use of these pagan myths. He is asking for liberty in thematic choice. He distinguishes fiction from lies, and defends poetry from the attack of those who only pay attention to the superficial meaning: "Poetic fiction has nothing in common with any kind of falsehood, for it is not a poet's purpose to deceive anybody with his inventions" (Genealogy 131). Besides, the making of fictions is the acknowledged social role of poets. In this way he justifies the use of Classical mythology, which is not intended to be considered true. Likewise, the poets may alter historical facts or change the order of events (and in this they are opposed to the historians). The poet is nearer to the philosopher than to the historian, although he does not work by syllogism but only by contemplation.

Boccaccio holds that we can find in poets the same use of allegory as in the Scriptures. Both sacred and profane texts can be praised for disclosing at once both the text and a mystery, although the two forms of writing only coincide in the method of treatment, and not in the end they have in view. Boccaccio praises the use of allegorical meanings, which allows everybody, the wise, the fools and children, to find whatever meanings they can digest (*Genealogy* 128, 130). Allegory, then, does not seem to be pedagogical for Boccaccio, but rather an enticing and mnemonic way of presenting truth to those who already know in some way:

> Holding that poetry is allegorical and truthful at hidden levels, though untruthful on the surface, he defends the use of allegory in the same way as Aquinas: meaning acquired by toil should ultimately be of more pleasure and better retained. (Adams 124)

The unlearned are pleased with the external fable and the learned are exercised with the hidden truth. It may be noted that Boccaccio speaks of the "content" or "hidden truth" of poetry as if it were a disembodied truth which precedes in composition the shaping of the work. The "fiction" or external form is not a means of reaching the content, it is not its expression: it is an obstacle, a veil, something which must be taken away before we

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[20] *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf.* Trans. Margaret F. Nims. Select. in *Medieval Literary Criticism.* Ed. O. B. Hardison et al. New York: Ungar, 1974. 123-144 (128).

[21] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogia deorum gentilium* (c. 1366); select. ("Genealogy of the Gentile Gods") in *Critical Theory since Plato.* Ed. Hazard Adams. San Diego: Harcourt, 1971. 127-135.

recognize the truth in the work.

Boccaccio pushes farther his analogy between poetry and theology whenever they coincide in end as well as in method:

> I say that theology and poetry can be considered as almost one and the same thing when their subject is the same. Indeed I go farther and assert that theology is the poetry of God.[22]

And he goes on to quote Aristotle (*Metaphysics,* III.4) who considered that the first theologians had been the poets: thus, the "highest" science derives from the "lowest." The Scripture often uses poetry and fables to adorn its meaning; a further proof that poetry and theology are not so far away from one another. This is a humanistic concern, and will become a general attitude during the Renaissance. Poetry can teach wisdom and virtue just as theology does. "It veils truth in a fair and fitting garment of fiction" (*Genealogy* 127).

This "veiling" is what distinguishes poetry from the other art of language, rhetoric; according to Boccaccio:

> among the disguises of fiction, rhetoric has no part, for whatever is composed under a veil, and thus exquisitely wrought, is poetry and poetry alone. (*Genealogy* 128)

This account of interpretation tends to divorce form and meaning, and to leave their apparent divergence unexplained. In Boccaccio or in Rabelais' prologues form or the literal sense appear as something that can be discarded in order to get to the meaning.

The allegorical conception of poetry was dominant also among the humanists of the fifteenth century. According to Guarino, "In poetry we must fix our thoughts on the underlying truths rather than upon the 'imaginations' in which they are expressed" (in Atkins 25). In a dialogue by Erasmus of Rotterdam, poetry is presented as an esoteric art with a highly decorative style. The muse Thalia argues that poetry has the virtue of "hiding truth in ambiguous words and enigmatical expressions, which, though all may read, yet they may not understand" (in Atkins 49). The poetry of Virgil and Homer is said to be wholly allegorical. Similarly, in Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique* (1553-60), we find the doctrine that "There is no one tale among all the poets but under the same is comprehended something that pertains to the amendment of manners, to the knowledge of the truth and the setting forth of nature's work"; poets write in allegorical fashion "so that none might understand but those unto whom they pleased to utter their meaning" (in Atkins 83). The same conception appears in many other Renaissance scholars.

These theories are contrary to the Aristotelian conception that will become commoner in the later Renaissance and the eighteenth century, which does not rely on allegorical interpretations of poetry but on the peculiar place of poetry as a kind of concrete philosophy, a dialogue between knowledge and experience. In the earlier conception, the meaning of poetry is pre-determined; it is less so in the neo-Aristotelian theories, which

[22] Boccaccio, "On the difference between poetry and theology" (*Life of Dante,* chapter X); rpt. in Adams 126.

continue their development until what is perhaps the most perfect expression of this line of thought, the New Critical theory of the "concrete universal."

The development of the idea of *style* during this period is also significant. In the Middle Ages, a style was a fixed mode of expression you could have resource to (cf. the theory of the *sermones*). Even when it was associated with an individual, it is conceived as an object of imitation, a system of reference. In the early Renaissance, there is a war waged between the Ciceronians, the defenders of classical authority and a restrictive purity of style based on the model of Cicero, and more liberal humanists like Politian, who defend an idea of style as an individual achievement. The classics must be studied not with a view to copying them, but in order to develop one's own style. In the eighteenth century, we shall find Buffon's dictum that "the style is the man." The idea of individual style develops together with the bourgeois ideals of individuality and subjectivity: the heyday of stylistic criticism is found in the nineteenth century. From the moment we conceive of a style as something that can be identified and linked to the personality of a writer, new modes of reading become possible. The text becomes a symptom of the writer, and we need no longer just read its content; we can read the perspective it offers on that content; we read the form, the associations of ideas, in a word, the personality behind the text.

5. Schleiermacher's Romantic Hermeneutics

Friedrich Schleiermacher expands the hermeneutic theories developed during the Enlightenment period.[23]

He conceives hermeneutics as the basic framework where all linguistic understanding takes place. This means that in his work hermeneutics is no longer an abstruse discipline having to do with special interpretive techniques to be applied to obscure texts: all hermeneutical processes are shown to originate from the common ground of linguistic understanding.

Enlightenment theories are divided into a number of specific fields. Schleiermacher will speak of a general hermeneutics. The hermeneutics of previous authors are also partial in that they take understanding as a matter of course. Schleiermacher, on the other hand, constantly takes into account the possibility that misunderstanding is equally possible.

Linguistic understanding, whether it is used in the exegesis of a work or in

[23] Friedrich August Wolf, *Vorlesung über die Enzyklopädie der Altertumswissenschaft* (1831); Johann August Ernesti, *Institutio Interpretis Novi Testamenti* (1761); Friedrich Ast, *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* (1808). References are to F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts.* Ed. Heinz Kimmerle. Trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986. Trans. of *Hermeneutik.* 1805-33.

following an ordinary everyday conversation, rests on the same principles. It involves a negotiation, or a mediation (let us keep in mind here our conception of interpretation as translation) between a realm of generality, the linguistic system, and a realm of particularity, the personal message the speaker wants to convey. Speaking involves articulating this particularity out of the generality of language, and understanding involves a similar shift between two set of criteria, those of the system and those of the message. Both speaking and understanding can be said to be hermeneutical activities in this sense. The ground of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is the concrete experience of how we come to understand somebody else's meaning.

A complete hermeneutical understanding consists of a play of two different operations, one more objectivistic, the other more subjectively oriented. Schleiermacher calls these "grammatical" and "technical" (or "psychological") interpretation. "Grammatical" interpretation interprets a word or sentence as an instance of general language; "technical" interpretation as an instance of "style", as the expression of an individual mind and communicative intention.

> Just as every speech has a twofold relationship, both to the whole of language and to the collected thinking of the speaker, so also there exists in all understanding of the speech two moments: understanding it as something drawn out of language and as a 'fact' in the thinking of the speaker.[24]

These different techniques and aims coexist in all interpretive enterprises; in fact, they work towards each other, and "In this interaction the results of the one method must approximate more and more those of the other" (*Hermeneutics* 190). However, one or the other aspect can become dominant, and then we find different "schools" or kinds of interpretation—the second kind less subject to polemical discussion, in Schleiermacher's opinion (185).

There are also two methods to grasp new meaning: the comparative, by which an author or text is compared with similar authors or texts, and the divinatory, which involves the interpreter's intuitive contact with the spirit of language and his insight into the individuality of the author. Therefore, understanding is a complex process consisting in a mediation between system and message, and involving an interplay of linguistic versus psychological understanding on one hand, and comparison and divination on the other. The scope of hermeneutics broadens gradually as emphasis comes to fall on the last term of the opposition. Understanding a word is an operation closer to the realm of linguistics than to that of psychology. But the intuitive, subjective and psychological side of interpretation becomes more significant as the object of our understanding expands into a text, a work, a set of works, and the whole personality of an author.

Besides, there is no understanding so simple as not to require this interpretive negotiation. The whole of the sentence must be known before we know the precise meaning of the word; but in order to know the sentence we must know the individual

[24] Schleiermacher, qtd. in Palmer, *Hermeneutics* 88. It can be argued that Schleiermacher's conception of the interpretive act is too wide-ranging and general in its scope, and insufficiently attentive to the situational or historically located dimension of interpretation.

words. The same circular relationship is established between the sentences in a text and the complete text. The hermeneutical circle defined by Schleiermacher could be described as this constant movement from part to whole in explanation, which also involves a constant shift from one aspect of interpretation to the other, from one interpretive strategy to another. This conception is very suggestive and it would be interesting to compare it to present-day theories of discourse processing, such as the opposition between "top-down" and "bottom-up" strategies.[25] Schleiermacher's hermeneutics have the additional merit of being oriented towards much larger prospects. It deals even with children's acquisition of language, which is for Schleiermacher a hermeneutic process.

We see then that the idea of the hermeneutic circle is not wholly appropriate.[26] We move from part to whole through the help of analogies and divination; and then from whole to part. But now that part is no longer the same: it is transformed by our better understanding, and it will provide a firmer grasp for another assault on the whole. We see, then, that the famous hermeneutic circle is really a spiral. Only those interpretations which do not produce new meaning are circular.

Given this spiralling definition, it is not surprising if perfect understanding can never be attained. Indeed, from the moment a work is considered as a part of a larger whole, the interpretive movement starts again; it is easy to see that trying to read the text of culture embarks us into an ever-expanding interpretive process.

Heinz Kimmerle's thesis is that Schleiermacher shifted from a language-oriented hermeneutics towards a more subjectivist and intentionalist one. Schleiermacher's definition of understanding is, in fact psychologistic: it is "the re-experiencing of the mental processes of the text's author."[27]

Even though this assertion is borne by the amount of attention given to each side of interpretation in Schleiermacher's early and later work, respectively, the conclusion is not so easily drawn. We have already observed within the very structure of hermeneutical development as conceived by Schleiermacher a movement from the objective to the subjective side: it is not far-fetched to suggest that as his hermeneutical outlook broadened, the later emphasis on technical interpretation was only natural.

A problem that is left unsolved by Schleiermacher is whether attention to the process of composition affords a better grasp of the finished text. His hermeneutics seem to endorse this conception, which is challenged by twentieth-century interpretation. Certainly, for him one of the aims of hermeneutics is to understand the "intimate operations of poets and other artists of language by means of grasping their entire process of composition, form its conception up to the final execution" (*Hermeneutics* 191).

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[25] See e.g. Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler. *Introduction to Text Linguistics.* 1972. Trans. Robert de Beaugrande. London: Longman, 1981; T. A. van Dijk and Walter Kintsch, *Strategies of Discourse Comprehension.* New York: Academic Press, 1983.

[26] Palmer (*Hermeneutics* 87) gives an insufficient account here.

[27] Palmer, *Hermeneutics* 86.

A tendency of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics is pointed out by Kimmerle. His emphasis on understanding as such, understanding as a universal process, led him to play down the role played by the historicity of both the object and the subject of interpretation. This is not to say that he does not take into account the existence of such a difference; far from it, "For Schleiermacher, the historical text is not addressed directly to the present interpreter, but to an original audience. The present interpreter is to understand that original communication in terms of its historical context."[28] Indeed, the emphasis is so great that it is placed completely on the retrieval of that meaning, leaving aside the question of its application to present-day circumstances. The latter falls outside hermeneutics for Schleiermacher: in his view, hermeneutics is not the art of applying but the art of interpreting. And it is precisely this conception of a pure and disinterested retrieval of meaning which is objected to when Gadamer opposes the tradition opened by Schleiermacher.[29]

In this tradition, understanding is pure and uncontaminated by the aims of the interpreter. Pure comprehension must precede the application of the universal principles it reveals, of the moment of judgment. Schleiermacher's attitude to historicity is utopian: he assumes that the interpreter can leap over historical distance and acquire the perspective of the author's audience, the author's contemporaries, and be absorbed in the views of past people. However, we must take into account that Schleiermacher is presupposing an initial community of shared experience or interests at the root of his theory (*Hermeneutics* 180).

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[28] James Duke, "Schleiermacher: On Hermeneutics" 13.
[29] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method.* Trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming. New York: Seabury Press - Crossroad, 1975. 1988. Trans. of *Wahrheit und Methode.* 2nd. ed. (1965).

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