From Philology to General Hermeneutics: Schleiermacher

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The rise of historicism in the early modern period is associated with philology and the historical study of modern languages. The philological approach to the classics had developed during the Renaissance (e.g. Lorenzo Valla's historical stylistics). The 18th century had witnessed the rise of rigorous historical studies and of classical philology (Bentley, Wolff). The methods of philology and hermeneutics were introduced to the study of the modern literatures by August Böck (Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Philologischen Wissenschaften). The rise of comparative grammar in the late 18th century is accompanied by a similar interest in comparative literature. Grimm's law and the Grimms' collection of folk tales are manifestations of the same spirit of historical enquiry: a search for the common Indo-Germanistic roots of European literature.

This historical investigation led in the long run to structural offshoots: Vladimir Propp's Morphology of the Folk Tale still has this end (historical investigation) in view; anthropological research such as Frazer's monumental The Golden Bough (1890-1922) also derives from the Romantic historical view. Nineteenth-century linguistics is primarily historical linguistics, and the approach to the modern literatures is above all a philological and historical one.

The sense of the term philology is sometimes restricted to historical linguistics, but originally it had a wider sense which can still be seen in the Spanish usage, or in this definition from the Diccionario de Autoridades:

PHILOLOGIA. s.f. Ciencia compuesta y adornada de la Gramática, Rhetórica, Historia, Poesía, Antigüedades, Interpretación de Autores, y generalmente de la Crítica, con especulación general de todas las demás Ciencias.

Issues of textual philology: discovery, edition and textual study of a medieval or an early modern work. Establishment of text, study of diverse manuscripts, variants, preferred readings. (Basic limitation in approach: the assumption that there is one text which is supposed to be better; modern textual criticism more attentive to different contexts and uses). . The scholarly edition of some forgotten work of the past becomes and remains for a long time the standard occupation of university scholars; a parallel work is being done in historical linguistics (e.g. The Oxford English Dictionary, 1884-1928; Fowler, A Dictionary of Modern English Usage, 1926; Wright, The English Dialect Dictionary; Bradley, The Making of English (1904).

The scholarly essays as we know them now, the philological reference works, the handbooks of literature, are a product of the nineteenth century scholarship; they did not exist before that except in rudimentary forms in the field of classical philology.

The nineteenth century saw the development of standard methods of textual criticism: the comparison (collation) and evaluation of the available texts of a work (manuscripts, editions); the drawing of a stemma of textual history; the establishment of text and of supplementary variants to be published; the intepretation of variants (either as authoritative or non-authoritative), the classification and interpretation of errors (author's, copist's, editorial transmission, typesetters', etc.). We often find one prejudice among textual philologists: the notion that there is one text to be preferred on the basis of the writer's authority (e.g. the assumption that the last text revised by the author is to be preferred to all others, etc.). In the late twentieth century textual critics are more relativistic, and pay more attention to the cultural role of variant texts. Textual philology is combined with historical research, paleography, bibliography and book history.

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Hermeneutics is the theory or science of interpretation. The word derives from Greek hermeneuein: to interpret or traslate into one's own idiom; to make clear and understandable, to give expression. In mythology, Hermes interprets the often cryptic messages of the gods to mortals. As a discipline, hermeneutics began as scriptural exegesis, closely associated to philology (cf. R. E. Palmer, Hermeneutics). Christian theologians developed the theory of plurisignification, according to which a Biblical text could have several senses:

- The literal or historical sense

- The allegorical sense (an Old Testament event or person prefigures a New Testament one)

- The moral sense (a passage is read as a lesson on right or wrong behaviour)

- The anagogic sense (a passage is read as a revelation of the other world)

A line of thought deriving from the Pseudo-Dionysius was especially aware of the figural nature of religious language, requiring interpretation, and insisted on the need to avoid excessively literal readings of religious language (danger of idolatry, of mistaking the sign for the thing signified).

Modern theories of hermeneutics arise from the Protestant reaction to medieval hermeneutics. The Catholic church had claimed sole authority in the interpretation of the Bible. The Protestants insist that the holy text is self-sufficient, that it does not need to be mediated by the Church; it is intelligible. Protestants exegetes wrote many practical guides to Biblical interpretation. The Protestant tradition, in confluence with with the philological methodology of humanistic studies, evolved towards a systematic methodology of textual interpretation in the work of F. D. E. Schleiermacher.

In the late 19th century this became a broader philosophical theory stressing the crucial importance of interpretation to most if not all aspects of human endeavor and culture. Through the impetus of the early work of Martin Heidegger, hermeneutics developed into a general philosophy of human understanding, with implications for any discipline concerned with the intepretation of human language, action or artefacts.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian, expands the hermeneutic theories developed during the Enlightenment period. Schleiermacher seeks a general theory of interpretation which is applicable to all texts, not only to religious ones. 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 (law, religion, etc.). 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 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 sets 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, respectiely. "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.

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: The Handwritten manuscripts 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). For Schleiermacher, "technical" (i.e. psychological) interpretation relies more on divination, on the imaginative projection of the interpreter to the mind of the author; he came to give more and more emphasis to this side of interpretation.

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 words. The same circular relationship is established between the sentences in a text and the complete text. This leads Schleiermacher to formulate a crucial hermeneutic principle: understanding takes place through a hermeneutic circle. a part of something is always understood in terms of the whole, and vice versa.

When we consider the task of interpretation with this principle in mind, we have to say that our increasing understanding of each sentence and of each section, an understanding which we achieve by starting at the beginning and moving forward slowly, is always provisional. It becomes more complete as we are able to see each larger section as a coherent unity. But as soon as we turn to a new part we encounter new uncertainties and begin again, as it were, in the dim morning light. It is like starting all over, except that as we push ahead the new material illumines everything we have already treated, until suddenly at the end every part is clear and the whole work is visible in sharp and definite contours. (Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics: the Handwritten Manuscripts)

The hermeneutic circle defined by Schleiermacher could be described as this constant movement from part to whole as we try to intepret something, which also involves a constant shift from one aspect of interpretation (grammatical and technical) 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. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics has the additional merit of being oriented towards much larger prospects. It deals even with children's acquisition of language, which according to Schleiermacher is also a hermeneutic process.

We see then that the image of the hermeneutic circle is not wholly appropriate. 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." 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 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 element of historicity in 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." 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.

In this tradition, understanding is pure and uncontaminated by the aims of the interpreter. Pure comprehension must precede application of the universal principles it reveals, of the moment of judgment. His attitude to historicity is utopian: he assumes that the interpreter can leap over historical distance and acquire the perspective of the contemporary audience, be absorbed in the view 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).

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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