

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Fourteen: Hermeneutics to Reader-Response Theory

Literary theory: “a discourse that treats literature as in some respects a problem and seeks to formulate that problem in general terms. Theory is what is generated when some aspect of literature, its nature, its history, its place in society, its conditions of production and reception, its meaning in general, or the meaning of particular works, ceases to be given and becomes a question to be argued in a generalized way” (Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* [1987]). Preoccupation with theory (secondary) at the expense of literature (primary).

M. H. Abrams’s scheme of the orientation of critical theories: the work seen in relation to reality, to the reader, to the author, to itself (the mimetic, pragmatic, expressive and objective approaches). Currently fashionable theories can be grouped according to the principles governing these orientations:

- expressive and pragmatic (concern with author and reader): hermeneutics, phenomenology, reader-response, psychological schools
- objective (concern with the work): structuralism, poststructuralism/deconstruction
- mimetic and pragmatic (concern with reality): Marxism, New Historicism, Feminism and Gender Theory, Postcolonial Theory

*

Hermeneutics: Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey

Theory of interpretation/understanding (< Greek ἐρμηνεύω [hermeneuō, "translate, interpret"]). Originally the study of text and meaning in Homer and other poets, then in the Bible and in the work of Classical authors (rules devised for interpretation and commentary).

It was made the general theory of interpretation in the 19th c. by **Schleiermacher** (in series of lectures in 1819). His aim: the reconstruction of the meaning of a text, as it was intended by its author (who decided the horizon of understanding) and was received by contemporary readers. To be considered in the process are the personal and the historical contexts of the work: the language, the whole oeuvre, the inner and outer life of the author, as well as the language, the literature and the history of the period.

- Written discourse lacks the immediate, personal authority that in the case of *speech* guides listeners to the meaning.
- Privileged position of the author in creation of meaning is inseparable from the Romantic glorification of the poet (cf. Shelley: poets are “unacknowledged legislators of the world”).

Dilthey

Objective: the creation of a coherent philosophical basis, a foundational theory, for the human sciences (“sciences of the mind” [*Geisteswissenschaften*]): history, philosophy, literature, theology, jurisprudence, political science, psychology, anthropology, etc., in order to establish the “the complex of principles” that “underlies, at one and the same time, the judgment of the historian, the conclusions of the national economist, and the concepts of the jurist, and gives them their certitude.”

The human sciences are important because “we lay hold of reality as it is only through facts of consciousness given in our inner experience. Analysis of these facts is the core of the human sciences” (*Introduction to the Human Sciences* [1883]).

The humanities **interpret**; the natural sciences **explain** (their truth produced by cause-and-effect movements). **Understanding** a prior stage of **interpretation**.

The **hermeneutic circle**: in order to understand something we must approach it with a prior understanding of its meaning (although we do not know the particulars, how they relate to each other and to the whole). Having understood the parts, a new interpretation of the whole follows, in the light of which the parts will assume a different meaning, etc. Not a vicious circle: we arrive at the author’s meaning when there is a balanced state between the meaning of the parts and the whole.

Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer

Husserl

Objects of perception appear as **phenomena** in consciousness. Consciousness is always intentional = it is intended towards an object (aware of the object); the relationship is “intentional,” which denotes **the essential reference character of the phenomena**. “All consciousness is intentional.”

What we can be sure of is not the independent existence of things but how they appear to our consciousness > reality = phenomena in the mind; when analyzing phenomena, the “external” must be excluded; *epoché* (ἐποχή) the suspension of the outer world, the examination of the “bracketed” world, the phenomena in consciousness.

The validity of these investigations extends beyond the particularity of the phenomenological psychologist’s own mind.

For psychical life may be revealed to us not only in self-consciousness but equally in our consciousness of other selves, and this latter source of experience offers us more than a reduplication of what we find in our self-consciousness, for it establishes the differences between “own” and “other” which we experience, and presents us with the ‘social-life.

And if the same object be intuited in other modes, if it be imagined or remembered, or copied, all its intentional forms recur, though modified in character from what they were in the perception, to correspond to their new modes.

- The **author** proceeding like this when engaged in the creative process? Subject-object relationship remains.
- For the reader the intentional phenomena of the author’s consciousness function as objects to be perceived, to have an intentional relationship with, to have as phenomena in his consciousness. A work of literature: the embodiment of the author’s mind. When

we are reading the book we are reading the author's mind, and we have an intentional relationship with it. (Summarized in *Phenomenology*, in the article in the 14th edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* [1929]).

Heidegger

Central concern of his philosophy: '**Being**'; the basic sense of **truth** (*aletheia*): the *unconcealment* by which all **beings** show themselves to be. **Truth** is **neither** the "correctness" or "correspondence" of assertion with regard to states of affairs, **nor** the **agreement** of subject and object within those assertions; it is rather the *self-showing* that allowed beings to be objects of assertions in the first place.

Phenomenology therefore should **make manifest what shows itself in unconcealment as what is (at) present** = it should investigate **Being** ("the transcendens [sic] pure and simple").

But **where** and **with what beings** should the investigation **begin**?—the question of the meaning of Being could be raised in a phenomenologically concrete manner only by asking about **the Being of the question**, that is to say, about the way the question presented itself and showed itself to be. **Heidegger: he started with "the human beings who pose this question"** because then the investigation into Being will be an inquiry about the Being of any being.—**The Being of this questioner is "existence" or Dasein (There-being)**. Dasein is the kind of **being that has logos**: the power to gather and preserve things that are manifest in their Being (tools, things with which we have a relationship = the world). Dasein: being-in-the-world.

Dasein caught in its **past, future, present**. At any given moment of my time all three structures are in play; time articulates all the structures of human existence.

The "Being" of this being (Dasein, There-being) involves interpreting ("*hermeneutics* in the original signification of that word): making sense of experience (of objects); we come to things with "prejudice," fore-sight, fore-conceptions, but we derive them from the things to be interpreted; in the process of interpreting we assimilate them, the truth of a thing asserts itself against our fore-meanings; we cannot ignore the past (tradition, history) or the future (anticipations), thus what experience means to us is historically determined, yet at the same time it is relative as historical determinacy changes and the interpreter is richer with what he has understood. The same applies to **texts**. The hermeneutic circle for Heidegger possesses an ontologically positive significance (*Being and Time* [1927]).

Gadamer

The true hermeneutical task is the interpretation of written texts where the sense of what is said is completely detached from the person saying it. The relationship between reader and text is that between subject and object > reading is a dialogue in which the reader asks the text questions and the text asks its own questions in return; the horizons of reader and text merge. "The horizon of understanding cannot be limited either by what the writer had originally in mind, or by the horizon of the person to whom the text was originally addressed" (*Truth and Method* [1960]).

Reader-response theory: E. D. Hirsch, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish

Hirsch

Distinction between **meaning** and **relevance/significance**; textual meaning is determinate and constant; what changes is its relevance. Consider the couplet from Marvell: "My *vegetable* love should grow / Vaster than empires and more slow." "Vegetable" in Marvell's time: "vegetative," not what it means to us. The meaning that should prevail in the interpretation is the poet's. The object of perception remains identical, although the position from which we perceive it is different from what it was ("Objective Interpretation" [1960]).

Iser

Texts have a polysemantic nature and the reader in the reading process creates an illusion (= his actual experience of the work), that is, out of an indeterminate number of meanings he chooses one; owing to the polysemantic nature of the text, this will be replaced by a different illusion when the text is read next, or by another reader ("The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach" [1972]).

Fish

There are no determinate meanings; the "old model" that utterers ("speakers, authors, critics, me, you") are in the business of handing over prefabricated meanings, encoded, and our job is to find the code, does not hold. **"...Meanings are not extracted but made, and made not by encoded forms but by interpretive strategies that call forms into being."** Interpretive strategies are not natural but learned, and shared by **interpretive communities**, which explains the (relative) stability of interpretation among different readers ("Interpreting the *Variorum*" [1976]). How come that communication occurs?

Stressing the **context**: "Is There a Text in This Class?" (1980), title essay of book (Harvard UP, 1980); the anecdote of Fish's student asking a colleague at the beginning of the new semester. Two possible meanings in the given situation: "Is there a text in this class?" may mean (1) "Is there a book to be used (e. g. the *Norton Anthology*) during the semester"? (2) "Do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" Implications: relativism of meaning; solipsism; in reality relativism is avoided (although it might be possible) as teacher and student are in a specific situation where they can speak confidently; there is no solipsism either, as their set of beliefs is not individual-specific but communal and conventional.