READER: HERMENEUTICS, READER RESPONSE THEORIES

Formalism, Structuralism, Early Deconstruction: form and art work are taken for granted as independent from context, elitist (focus on canonical pieces), aims at the objectivity of reading, at close-reading (even if all readings turn out to be misreadings) -> focus on the text.

Hermeneutics + reader response – takes the reader into consideration -> focus on the dialogue between text and reader. Part of the German tradition

(as opposed to Practical/New Criticism: England/U.S; Structuralism, Deconstruction: France -> U.S.)

Hermeneutic tradition

1. Hermeneutics: Schleiermacher, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer
2. Reception theory: Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser
3. American Reader-response Criticism: Stanley Fish

Hermeneutics: the art/ principles of interpretation.

Hermeneutics vs. Poetics:

Poetics (formalism, structuralism, deconstruction): how meanings are constructed, how the effect of meaning(s) is achieved.

Hermeneutics: how to arrive at the meaning (as if there was such a thing)

Hermeneutics:

originally a biblical discipline <- the distance between text and reader renders meaning opaque.

“writings can be understood and ought to be expounded principally in four senses.

The first is called the *literal*, and this is the sense that does not go beyond the surface of the letter, as in the fables of the poets.

The next is called the *allegorical*, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that with his lyre Orpheus tamed wild beasts and made trees and rocks move toward him, which is to say that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones. …

The third sense is called *moral*, and this is the sense that teachers should intently seek to discover throughout the scriptures, for their own profit and that of their pupils; as, for example, in the Gospel we may discover that when Christ ascended the mountain to be transfigured, of the twelve Apostles he took with him but three, the moral meaning of which is that in matters of great secrecy we should have few companions.

The fourth sense is called *anagogical*, that is to say, beyond the senses; and this occurs when a scripture is expounded in a spiritual sense which, although it is true also in the literal sense, signifies by means of the things signified a part of the supernal things of eternal glory, as may be seen in the song of the Prophet which says that when the people of Israel went out of Egypt, Judea was made whole and free. For although it is manifestly true according to the letter, that which is spiritually intended is no less true, namely, that when the soul departs from sin it is made whole and free in its power.” (Dante, *Il Convivio* (The Banquet), 1304-07)

Yet: Hermeneutics proper was born out of the Protestant Reformation < -one's relationship with the Bible became personal, no authority (such as the Pope) to tell you what it means

1. Biblical hermeneutics

Translation (such as that of Luther’s translation of the Bible) is always an act of interpretation: Coleridge on Luther struggling with the text:

“Methinks I see him sitting, the heroic Student, in his Chamber in the Warterburg, with his midnight Lamp before him ... Below it lies the Hebrew Bible open, on which he gazes his brow pressing on his palm, brooding over some obscure Text, which he desires to make plain to the simple Boor and to the humble Artizan, and to transfer its whole force into their own natural and living Tongue. And he himself does not understand it! Thick darkness lies on the original Text, he counts the letters, he calls up the roots of each separate word, and questions them as the familiar Spirits of an Oracle. In vain ! thick darkness continues to cover it! not a ray of meaning dawns through it. ... Disappointed, despondent, enraged, ceasing to *think…* he sinks, without perceiving it, into a trance of slumber: during which his brain retains its waking energies, excepting that what would have been mere *thoughts* before now (the action and counterweight of his senses and of their impressions being withdrawn) shape and condense themselves into *things,* into realities! ... All at once he sees the Arch-fiend [i.e. the devil] coming forth on the wall of the room, from the very spot perhaps, on which his eyes had been fixed vacantly during the perplexed moments of his former meditation: the Ink-stand, which he had at the same time been using, becomes associated with it: and in that struggle of rage, ... he *imagines* that he hurls it at the intruder, or not improbably in the first instant of awakening, while yet both his imagination and his eyes are possessed by the dream, he *actually* hurls it” (Coleridge, *The Friend,* 1809.)

1. hermeneutics of law: with the rise of constitutional democracies, it mattered what the law was and how it was to be interpreted – how to interpret the general and how to apply the general to the singular

19th c: Biblical hermeneutics -> literary hermeneutics

*No* hermeneutics devoted to literature until the eighteenth century. (Critics are concerned with evaluation and rhetorics)

Romanticism: cult of the genius. Poet is like the divine creator, who creates something out of nothing. Literature starts to be interpreted as if it was a sacred text, while the Bible starts to be interpreted as if it was literature.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834):

“understanding *does not* occur as a matter of course”

Hermeneutics should be a universal discipline (applicable to the Bible, to the law, and to literature, both ancient and modern)

Interest in the *method* of interpretation (rather than its validity)

19th c: before the linguistic turn (!) - basic assumptions: words mirror the author’s thoughts, meaning is fixed by the author’s intention, the act of interpretation has to reduce the existing gap (!) between reader and author.

How, then, is interpretation to be accomplished?

1. Before interpretation can even begin, the interpreter must acquire a good knowledge of the text's historical context.
2. Interpretation has two sides:
   1. *Linguistic or grammatical*: to understand the usage of words and therefore their meaning (historical context: what a word meant at a certain age in history.)
   2. *Psychological*: focuses on the author's psychology. Appeal to authorial psychology to resolve ambiguities at the level of linguistic meaning. It helps to grasp the “essence” as opposed to sheer outward “form”. It is a “divinatory” method (i.e. roughly, a method of tentative hypothesis, going beyond available empirical evidence -- from French deviner: to guess or conjecture.)

3. Hermeneutic circle (paradox): we cannot truly understand the text’s structural and linguistic parts except in the light of the whole, and we can only know the whole as it is expressed in its parts.

“The reader projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again the latter emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there.” (Gadamer)

Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)

* suspends the "natural attitude " of everyday knowing ->focus on what is immanent in consciousness itself. -> "brackets" the object-world, in a process he calls *epoché,* or "reduction"
* consciousness is made up of "intentional acts " correlated to "intentional objects. " -> the phenomenon (the object-as-it-appears to consciousness – noema) is the object-as-it-is-intended. The "intentionality " of consciousness is its directedness toward objects, which it helps to constitute. Consciousness is not a mere receptacle of sensory data about external objects, but has part to play in the act of perception. Objects are always grasped partially and incompletely, in "aspects "that are filled out and synthesized according to the attitudes, interests, and expectations of the perceiver. (Even though I can see only one side of a cube, I know what it is, in its wholeness.) Every perception includes a "horizon” of potentialities that the observer assumes, on the basis of past experiences.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)

For Heidegger, we and our activities are always “in the world”, our being is being-in-the-world (we do *not* study our activities by bracketing the world). We are always already determined by the world itself, by tradition, and the context in which we live: historicity, belongingness, situatedness, finitude, temporality. -> *Dasein*

The structure of *Dasein* is understanding or interpretation. Before understanding anything special, I always already interpret something *as* something. This kind of interpretation precedes (!) all acts of consciousness. The first movement of mind is interpretative.

Language: it is in language that understanding happens!

Truth (*aletheia*): the *unconcealment* by which all beings show themselves to be. *No* correspondence theory or truth (i.e. the correspondence between the statement and the real world), but *self-showing.* (Esp. in the work of art: it is in the artwork that truth as unconcealment happens – then truth withdraws itself – only to show itself again).

Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

*Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode,* (1960)*:* difference between truth and method. attacks the “method” of what he(!) calls historical method that characterised the German hermeneutic tradition before, that is, he dismisses the belief that one can set aside preconceptions, one’s own historically conditioned point of view, that one can completely enter into the mind of another.

Integrates Heidegger’s historicity of *Dasein:* our being in the world is always determined by tradition, history, culture -> *prejudice:* we cannot approach any work of art, any object without prejudices (<-Heidegger: we always already interpret sth *as* sth). -> prejudice (sth good) = *horizon*

We approach the work of art (the horizon of the past) from the horizon of the present

->interpretation: “*dialogue*” between horizon of the past and horizon of the present -> understanding (always deferred): ideally, the” merging of horizons”. Presupposes some common ground between past and present, a continuity.

Hermeneutic circle: can also be understood as a relationship between the present and the past 2. attacks historicism because it condescends toward the past: makes it a mere object of knowledge, rather than engaging in a dialogue with it.

dialogue: learning from the other, endless questioning - we enter the alien world of the artefact, and, at the same time, draw it in our own realm -> a more complete understanding of ourselves. We open up to receive the work of art that tells us something new about ourselves. At the same time, we open up the work of art itself, which receives new meanings through our questionings.

By placing the emphasis on reception Gadamer paves the way for reception theory.

Reception Theory*(Rezeptionsästhetik).*

E.g. Borges: "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1939)

The temporal distance separating the repetition from the identical original renders the repetition non-identical, different. (different context of the reception, different horizon of expectation.) – favourite piece of both reception theory and deconstruction

Hans Robert Jauss (1921–97)

*Literary history is not the relationship of literary facts, but the chain of the reception of different readers in time*.

Reception continually actualises the meaning potential of the work.

Establish the horizon of expectation of the first readership -> reconstitute the question to which the work originally gave an answer, the reasons why it was provocative, original.

E.g. Baudelaire’s “Spleen II” I. From Jauss’s own horizon: 1. reads the text in a linear way, takes notice of each important element-> 2. interpretative 2d reading: from the perspective of the whole, takes account of the elements he left in suspense. II. Historical reading: 3d reading: reconstructs the original horizon of expectation of the poem and establishes the reasons why it appeared provocative. -->Merging/fusion of horizons is not self evident (as it is with Gadamer), but the result of a long analytical work.

Good works: subvert our expectations and trigger a change of horizons: the reader is exposed to a new experience that requires a shift of horizon. Bad works conform to our expectations, they do not require any kind of shift or movement between horizons.

How to establish the original horizon of expectations?

He examines the public responses to a "great work" by comparing them with the reception of other works popular at the same time + takes account of the list of all those other works that were known by the first readership. Then, he isolates those aesthetic features and "devices " of the text that, because of their novelty, could have a mind- (or "horizon " -) expanding effect on the reader.

Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007)

"blanks " or "gaps,": texts leave great portions unexplained to the reader, such as gaps in the narrative, blanks in descriptions -> this basic indeterminacy (!) of all texts "implies" the reader and begs her participation in the production of meaning throughout the process of reading.

Iser (unlike Jauss) does not analyze actual readings of texts, but proceeds from an ideal, "implied reader." – sufficiently imaginative, sophisticated, and open to the text’s challenges.

Reader response criticism – US.

Emerged in the 1970s, in reaction against New Criticism, which reduced accounts of the reader’s responses to mere "affective fallacy."

Eric Donald Hirsch, Jr. (1928--)

*The Philosophy of Composition* (1977): what makes prose more or less readable?

cultural literacy: reading comprehension requires not only formal decoding skills but also wide-ranging background knowledge (cultural literacy). James Joyce is readable for university students, but not for college students.

*meaning* of a text vs. *significance* of a text. Significance: the text’s meaning for us: -> pushed to its extremes: each reading reflects the reader’s own psyche, background, problems s/he is interested in, rather than the text s/he actually interprets.

Stanley Fish (1938--) Milton scholar. He came to Milton by accident. In 1963 — the same year that he started as an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley — the resident Miltonist, C.A. Patrides, received a grant. The chair of the department asked Fish to teach the Milton course, notwithstanding the fact that the young professor "had never — either as an undergraduate or in graduate school — taken a Milton course" (269). The eventual result of that course was *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (1967; rpt. 1997).

His [Satan’s] Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine

Hewn on Norvegian Hills to be the Mast

Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand

He walked with, to support uneasy steps

Over the burning marble

1. His Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine

Hewn on Norvegian Hills to be the Mast

Of some great Ammiral

The size of his spear is to be equal to that of the tallest pine cut and shaped in Norway to become the mast of a ship –> Satan’s spear is very big, so he is also very great. You have the image of a great spear and a great Satan.

2. His Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine

Hewn on Norvegian Hills to be the Mast

Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand

The spear was, in fact, the size of a wand. It was nothing but a wand.

First, you imagine how big his spear was, and then, as you procede in reading, you have to reconsider your conceptions: the spear turns out to be the size of a wand. You have the image of a miniature Satan, holding a wand

3. His Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine

Hewn on Norvegian Hills to be the Mast

Of some great Ammiral, were but a wand

He walked with, to support uneasy steps

Over the burning marble

It turns out that your first conception was right. Satan is really big, because he uses his spear, which is equal to the tallest pine and the big mast, merely as a wand, as a walking stick.

*Paradise Lost* educates us into realizing that every time we think we grasp the point of a text, the text proves that we are fallen readers, that we have prematurely understood what's there.

*Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972), “Interpreting the Variorum”(1976)

It isthe reader that brings the text into existence. (I.e. it is not *Paradise Lost* that leads the reader, but rather: the reader brings the text into existence by actualising its meanings – such as re-enacting fall – misunderstanding -- and the redemption – understanding. The reader makes visible the texts’ potentialities.)

new term: Interpretive community decides what counts as text as well as what counts as interpretation. The (historically, culturally, geographically, politically determined) interpretive community to which we belong guides our interpretations, it decides whether or reading can be considered as an interpretation at all. (E.g. whether an analysis can count as a legitimate interpretation.)

The reader has to come from somewhere, h/she isn't an autonomous being. -> it's not the text that produces the reader, it's not the reader that produces the text, but it's the community that produces the reader who in turn produces the text.