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INTERPRETATION AND EXPLANATION IN LITERARY STUDIES

When about 1900 the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey introduced hermeneutics as a specific type of rationality in reaction to the (natural) sciences, he based his decision on the fundamental difference which in his opinion characterized the object to be studied. The object of the humanities was defined by him as the textual materialization of mental processes and the object of the sciences as natural phenomena. Via a specific empathic sensibility called «understanding» the hermeneutic scholar was supposed to gain access to the mental qualities of a poet or writer. In an identificatory way he reproduced the sense of the work, thus creating an essential agreement or «ontological homology» between subject and object. Dilthey followed German Idealism (Schleiermacher, von Humboldt) in postulating «diese Assimilation der forschenden Kraft und des zu erforschenden Gegenstandes» (von Humboldt 1960: 588).

The process of *understanding*, which was conceived of as having a principally different structure from that of *explanation*, was declared the epistemological basis, the methodological tool, and the applicative goal of the humanities. Explanation was the assumed goal of the sciences to be reached by methods of, in the words of Dilthey, «counting and measurement».

In the discussion about the «Two Cultures», understanding, congeniality, and ontological homology between subject and object are even today used as arguments to prove the superiority of hermeneutics compared with the technological instrumentalism of the natural sciences. Odo Marquard argues in a rather condescending way that, in the laboratory, historical roots are neutralized and that Buddhist, Muslim, Jew, and Christian are collaborating without any difference: «Solange experimentell gefahren wird, wird herkunftsweltlich nichts entschieden» (Marquard 1986: 75). I am inclined to criticize severely a perspective which favours a highly questionable commitment to tradition above the attempts of a scientific community to do research beyond political, religious, and national boundaries.

In declaring the hermeneutic understanding to be *the* method of the humanities and in renouncing the claim of explanation, hermeneuticians withdraw from validating the results of the process of understanding called «interpretation», with the exception of claiming a certain artistic congeniality.

The sense-making activity of understanding is an individual empathic procedure. Although hermeneuticians are enclined to call it «dialogical», it has an essentially monological character. The so-called «dialogue with the text» is a metaphorical

expression, because a text simply cannot speak and because the communication situation is a disjunctive one, in the sense that author and reader generally do not share identical time-space parameters. The result of the communicative asymmetry is that the recipient — without the consent of the speaker/ writer — is the only one who is responsible for his understanding of the words of the other.

Dilthey was right — and with him those who followed his track, as for example Emil Staiger in Germany and the New Critics in the anglo-american world — in assuming that to understand and to interpret a literary text cannot be considered an explanatory activity. In *Poetics Today* Jonathan Culler (1988) is focusing on René Wellek's distinction between causal explanation and interpretation in literary scholarship. For Wellek explanations belong to the extrinsic activities, which may be informative but which never should be the final goal of literary scholarship.

We could add that making sense means to adapt a literary message to a prevailing frame of reference, to warrant the availability of a text in subsequent historical situations, to open or reopen discussion about it, and to preserve its place in the national or international canon. Making sense of a literary text is a pragmatic and normative activity, the search for an answer to the question: what does this text mean (to me, to us, to our epoch)?

Dilthey has been wrong, however, in my opinion, to conclude that interpretation is the only task to be performed in the humanities, that understanding is the only method to be employed in this realm, and in particular that this leads to a principal disciplinary differentiation between sciences and humanities.

In literary studies as well as in all other domains of so-called reality, investigations aiming at explanations are desirable, possible, and necessary.

In the empirical (or scientific) variant of literary studies, the methodological rules of the empirical sciences are applicable. In this conception, the object has no influence whatsoever on the scientific behavior of the scholar — the assumption of a structural homology is not valuable, no more than it is valuable for the cosmologist or the nuclear physicist.

My proposal would be to differentiate between a literary scholarship as cultural participation, mainly producing commentaries on literary texts, called interpretations, and a literary scholarship as a scientific enterprise producing results with explanatory force.

One of the most valid concepts of interpretation, in my opinion, is that of Frank Kermode. Interpretation is seen by him as an integrative part of canon formation. The survival of texts depends on the combination of an invariable text and ever changing commentaries. Hermeneutics is a normative enterprise, interested in maintaining cultural values and adapting them to various historical situations. «He [Hermes-Hermeneutic] is the god of going between the dead and the living, but also between the text, whether plain or hermetic, and the dying generations of its readers» (Kermode 1979: 2). Kermode alludes to what happened to the Old Testament when Christian theologians were adapting it to their own norms and values: «The Old

Testament made sense only insofar as it prefigured Christianity — This is an extraordinary transformation» (18). In acknowledging frankly the normative decisions taken by interpretive commentaries, Kermode's argument is of a welcome lucidity avoiding the problems which in general confuse the issue on interpretation.

I will try to elaborate on the fuzzy character of the concept of interpretation by presenting three interpretive attitudes which during the last two decades have contributed to the ambiguous state of affairs. The three attitudes have in common that they are characterized by a submission to three different postulates as to the way meaning attribution has to be realized.

The first postulate I wish to mention is that of one ideal interpretation of a literary text. The postulate is supported by phenomenological presuppositions. The Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden has elaborated on it and René Wellek has communicated his ideas to the anglo-american community of theorists and comparatists. The literary text is conceived of as a hierarchic system of strata which have to be integrated by the reader into a final metaphysical quality. During this integrative process the reader has to fill in the so-called indeterminacies. Following the phenomenological argument, differences between the interpretive results are due to deficiencies within the integrating capacity of the interpreters.

The second postulate finds its legitimation in the upgrading of the scientific status of interpretations. Following the philosophy of science of Popper and applying it to the interpretation of literary texts, scholars conceived of interpretations as hypotheses which have to be corroborated or falsified — and the latter would be the more elegant case. Structuralist methodology (developed for the analysis of narrative texts and poetry) was supposed to deliver the instruments for the scientific process envisaged. The result, however, after the achievement of Jakobson's and Lévi-Strauss's (1962) «interpretation» of Baudelaire's «Les Chats» has been that we had to recognize that textual analysis should not be identified with «interpretation». Textual analysis determines elements that qualify as potential carriers of meaning to be realized by interpreters but does not allow for a logical connection with an interpretive decision.

The third postulate has been firmly advocated by E. D. Hirsch, who gives priority to the principle that interpretation has to reveal the author's intention. On ethical grounds, he decided that, notwithstanding the desire to make a literary text personally significant, it is the first and foremost duty of a hearer to respect the meaning produced by the speaker.

Opposite to each of the three postulates which, as we can see, are mutually exclusive, we find Rabbinian commentary on the Tora as an instance of the normative concept of interpretation aiming at reinforcing religious and cultural commitment. Arnold Goldberg elaborates on the relationship between the invariable material text and the open meaning attributions to it: «Canonization of the Scripture did not evoke the need for monovalence at all. Only the sign itself had to be established by tradition, the meaning of it became, on the contrary, totally open for ever changing interpreta-

tions» (Goldberg 1987: 203, 204). It is precisely the situation that the Holy Text is no more liable to changes and additions, which necessitates and favors interpretive discourses, called *Midrasch*. It is the function of the metatext to legitimize and to reinterpret the system of norms that only partially can be deduced from Tora itself. The interpretive discourse contributes to our knowledge of the world which becomes more and more complex or even a negation of what once had been known. The innovative force is on the side of the interpretive discourse, not on the side of the established well-known text.

It is the attribution of the quality «innovative» to interpretations that, in my opinion, guarantees the constant need for meaning attributions to literary works that have been interpreted time and again. Canonized literary texts, although they do not claim the same moral obligations as the Tora and other religious texts do, are nonetheless stages in the process of world knowledge. Only partially they establish by themselves the linkages to earlier forms of knowledge. For the greater part it is the task of the interpretive discourse to establish those links. Often a new interpretation is an effort to preserve a canonized text for a certain community. In other cases it is an attempt to insert the text into the canon of a subgroup and to withdraw it from other (sub)groups (as happens in the case of certain feminist interpretations of classical texts).

The emotional plea of Susan Sontag in «Against Interpretation» (1966) for a sensual processing of literary texts, an erotics of art, fits well into the normative character of the interpretive practice.

The same holds true for the acrobatics of sense making of Deconstruction. Notwithstanding the heavy philosophical claims and the ambition, typical of all ancient and new forms of hermeneutics, to establish an exclusive methodology for the humanities, the real force of Deconstruction lies in its interpretive practice, its daring and innovative examples of making sense and rewriting the canon.

The question may rise whether and to what extent the fallacy of arbitrariness in my concept of interpretation can be prevented. My answer is: via the strategy of *argumentational validation*. While in the case of problem solving under scientific conditions *explanatory validation* is required (a validation on the basis of explanatory force), in the hermeneutic process of meaning attribution explanations cannot be submitted. Following Ernst von Glasersfeld, interpreters of literary texts are not in the position to offer subsequent (follow-up) experiences as testing ground for their interpretation's viability (Von Glasersfeld 1983: 217). What they can do, however, in my opinion, is to make the argumentational design of their discourse as transparent and strong as possible for the sake of consensus. The final judgement of an interpretation can never be: meaning *x* is the adequate meaning of text *T*. Formulated, however, as follows: meaning *x* of text *T*, given the arguments and explicit decisions (a,b,c...) of subject *S*, seems to the subjects *S'* and *S''* highly plausible, is a judgment which, though contingent, is far from arbitrary. In this perspective, interpretation remains a highly rational procedure.

It strikes one that the second judgment is more complicated than the first one due to its multifactorial structure. To begin with, the illusion of an objectified situation of one text/one meaning, with no subject interfering, is replaced by a more «subjective» one. The subject that interprets a text, however, cannot decide in a monological situation on the validity of his/her own meaning attribution. To communicate, it is in need of the consensus of one or more other subjects. Validation of interpretations is realized by argumentation, or, to quote David Bleich (1978), by «negotiation». Interpretation, in this perspective, is a kind of human interaction stimulated by texts. Like with other forms of human interaction, as for example working in a team or educating a child, decisions have to be made and have to be defended by arguments. As to literary texts, decisions have to be made on themes and motifs of the text, on its historical setting and original problem solving capacity, and, last but not least, on its transferability into a changed historical situation.

The transfer of earlier literary texts into today's historical context belongs to the *appropriating* variant of hermeneutics insofar as the interpreter's own historicity is chosen as a starting point. In general, a decision to produce a coherent, monovalent meaning of a text is achieved with the help of such sociological or historical, philosophical or anthropological concepts and world views that are accessible to the interpreter. For example, Walter Benjamin's literary interpretations were determined by his historical theses. René Girard's anthropological concept of «mimetic desire» guides his interpretation of Shakespeare and Richard Wagner. A sociological concept like «alienation» has helped to produce interpretations of Kafka's work; the conceptualization of gender has led to reversals of established meaning; finally there is psychoanalysis applied variously to give meaning to literary texts.

The justification of meaning attributions is the guiding principle behind the argumentational validation. In general, an interpretive discourse is defended by an appeal to elements of the text.

Let us recall the example of the duck-rabbit picture, the figure with which the dependence of perception on perspective is usually demonstrated. With regard to the potential of the form, the perception of a duck or a rabbit is arguable; but the perception of an elephant in the same figure would require other defense strategies. An elephant might be imagined, but it will require much more persuasive strategies and negotiation to reach the consent of other subjects.

To sum up, the hermeneutics of making sense is a form of cultural participation, necessary to guarantee the permanence of a culture's main intellectual achievements. The rationalism of this enterprise is warranted by argumentational validation.

Problem solving, on the contrary, in literary studies is a form of scientific endeavor necessary to come to grips with the different psychological and social variables which play a role in the ongoing process of literary production and reception. The rationalism of this enterprise is warranted by explanatory validation, by explanatory force.

We deal here with the so-called empirical study of literature. In this branch of research the human sciences are not conceived of as an exception to the general

scientific tradition. The distinction in English between «the sciences» and «the humanities», which gives terminological support to a much deeper rooted separation of «the two cultures» is not compatible with a scientific tradition which is characterized by the quest for explanation. Itamar Even-Zohar (1986) criticizes the position of literary scholarship as follows: «Nowhere has this cleavage, that is between a position that accepts the scientific program involving the quest for laws and its rejection, been more visible than in the study of literature». He does not deny the legitimation of an engaged «literary criticism», but he wishes to «indicate how abused is the concept of 'theory', lightheartedly employed by everybody, once it is divorced from the postulate of laws».

For the sake of clarity, let me underline that I have not in mind a structure of knowledge with the scientist at the highest hierarchical position and with science considered the absolute source of knowledge. Far from that. I admit that there are different ways to knowledge, for example the religious or the artistic way, or even the way of practical experience in everyday life. What I want to stress is that we have to respect the conventions of each of these social systems and the role-expectations the participants agreed upon. That means, that the literary critic has to obey to other role-expectations than the literary «scientist».

Scientific research relies on particular conventions, which during a long time have proved to be valuable and necessary for solving problems concerning the relation of man and nature and the coordination between human beings on all imaginable levels.

What is to be called a scientific problem is submitted to changes in the course of history. In the past, genetic manipulation or nuclear fission did not occupy a place within the realm of sciences. Popper gives a worthwhile definition of a scientific discipline which runs as follows: «What usually is called a discipline is nothing more than a well delimited and construed conglomerate of problems and provisional solutions» (Popper 1974: 108). Against the background of these considerations, it is absolutely inadequate to suppose that the «object» of a science of literature is «literature», that this has always been the case and that it will remain always the case.

The «object», declared of utmost importance by hermeneutics, has lost its prominent position in the philosophy of science. Intersubjectively agreed upon problems are the object of a discipline but not, for example, a library filled with literary works.

In scientific research the subject — as the instance who decides on the data and data combinations to be considered research «facts» — is of equal or even more importance than the object. Consequently one could launch the rather paradox statement that all sciences are essentially human sciences.

To reach a more concrete level, some instances of actual problems calling for explanation in literary studies should be mentioned. There are, for example, the following questions: what are the functions attributed to literature and by whom are they articulated? Or: how can it be explained that readers of literature accept

fictionality? Is there an aesthetic function and how could it be identified and isolated? Which are the institutional aspects of literature, respectively of «talking about» literature? What are the reasons for literary evolution? What is the role of intertextuality in literary production and reception? What can be known about reading processes and meaning attribution to texts?

Problem areas from which hypotheses can be derived are numerous, since the claims that have been made for the functioning of literature and reading processes have long been intuitive postulates rather than descriptive and explanatory statements. All has still to be done in this field. To begin with: the transformation of intuitive statements into hypotheses, followed by the stage of operationalizing concepts into empirical designs, and finally by validating the hypotheses.

One of the most prominent problems in literary scholarship has always been the case of fictionality versus factuality. In traditional literary scholarship two different kinds of textual products (factual and fictional texts) have been assumed and much energy has been invested to elaborate on criteria capable of accounting for the differences. While developing those — mainly linguistic — criteria, scholars at the same time tried to justify the existence of factual and fictional texts by ascribing different functions to them.

Nowadays, scholars working in the empirical field of literary studies try to avoid these fallacies. Having become aware of the fact that claims for a phenomenon like a language of fiction and of fiction alone cannot be substantiated and that functional statements need empirical validation, the approach to the problem of fictionality has changed. Siegfried J. Schmidt developed a theory of literary communication which is not any longer text-oriented but actor- or action-oriented. The basic concept of his theory is the concept of convention. He refers to D. K. Lewis (1969) — and I could refer to Douwe Fokkema (1989) as well — who both define conventions in opposition to natural laws. Conventions are agreements to solve coordination problems in social interaction. Literary communication is conceived of by Schmidt as an autonomous system — next to other social systems — which came to relative autonomy in Europe during the eighteenth century, when the loss of authoritative religious and philosophical systems favored the growth of systemic differentiation.

The elaboration of conventions suitable to regulate the behavior of the participants of the literary communication system resulted in the acceptance of (a) the aesthetic convention and (b) the polyvalence convention.

Siegfried Schmidt's formulation of the aesthetic convention runs as follows: «Hypothesis about the *Literary Aesthetic Convention*: It is expected in our society of all participants who intend to realize aesthetic communicative texts from linguistic surface texts that they must be willing and able:

- (a) to de-emphasize the fact convention and to expand their action potential beyond the criteria of true/false and useful/useless; instead, they orient themselves toward aesthetically relevant categories;

- (b) to designate communicative actions intended as literary with appropriate signals during production, or to follow such signals during reception;
- (c) to select as a frame of reference for the referring expressions in the text not primarily (or not exclusively) the socially established model of reality, but other frames of reference as well» (Schmidt 1982: 87).

In the quoted hypothesis Schmidt delimits the aesthetic convention from the fact convention where the distinction true/false and useful/useless as well as the established model of reality are the prevailing frames of reference.

The remarkable change of perspective which transpires from Schmidt's definition is the shift from textual properties to the agreement of human beings: not literary works but authors and readers are the constituents of the literary system. Not the structure of the literary text, but the capability and willingness of human beings to agree upon a rule of conduct (a convention) is the decisive factor of what is called literariness.

Without casting doubt on the respect paid to the aesthetic convention by participants of the literary system, I believe that the relation between this convention and the fact convention must be explored empirically in distinct investigations (as Schmidt himself indicates when speaking about the *hypothesis* of the aesthetic convention). What is more interesting than the mere existence of an aesthetic convention is the interaction and competition between the fact convention and the aesthetic convention. Recalling literary history and having a look on the contemporary literary scene it seems reasonable to assume that the delimitation of the two conventions can be maintained in spite of serious complications. Empirical research should provide material for hypotheses about the various conditions responsible for either respect or disregard of the separability of the fact convention and the aesthetic convention.

One of the assumed effects of the aesthetic convention is a greater tolerance for states of affairs presented in literature than for states of affairs in the «real» world given the convention of the unimputable truth-value in the former case. In literature, a norm contrary to the accepted «real» world norm would thus have a greater chance of acceptance than if it were presented in an expository text. From an empirical investigation in the Netherlands (Schram 1985, German translation 1991) it appeared, however, that there are conditions which refute the assumed effect: in texts with homosexual and pedophilic themes, dogmatism as a reader's variable was manifest in such a way that the differentiation between literary and expository texts almost disappeared. There was no evidence that the literary treatment of these themes resulted in a greater tolerance.

It is a more plausible assumption, in my opinion, that a reader, confronted with a literary text whose thematic structure is closely related to the thematic relevance of his real world will receive and judge this text more on the basis of the fact-convention than on the basis of the aesthetic convention. In the debates in the Federal Republic

of Germany and in the Netherlands about the performance of Fassbinder's *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod*, the critical clash between both conventions was very clear. The disinterested tolerance of the aesthetic convention was represented by those whose personal involvement with the representation of the stereotypical Jew is less direct. For the Jewish communities in Frankfurt and Amsterdam, however, involvement led to referential-semantic testing and to a judgement on the basis of the fact-convention.

In 1988 we were witness of the disregard of the aesthetic convention in Vienna theater-life, when conservative patriotism led to demonstrations against Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*, a drama which was felt to be an affront to bourgeois innocence.

The extreme abominable reaction of Islamic leadership to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* — a reaction which disregards human rights — shows the consequences of a cultural conflict: the Western culture which respects the tradition of the relative autonomy of the artistic and the religious systems and the Moslim culture in which the religious system is the dominating one.

The Rushdie-conflict differs from the other conflicts I mentioned in two important aspects: there is no liberty of dispute among the participants, there is only the decision of a powerful leadership and — the second difference — the kind of punishment it threatens with is unknown in Western communities.

I mentioned a second convention which, following Schmidt, is prevailing in the literary system. It is called the polyvalence-convention and it is more or less deductable from the aesthetic one. To quote Schmidt once more: «Hypothesis about the *Literary Polyvalence Convention*: All participants intending to realize a surface text as a linguistic aesthetic communicative text are presupposed in our society to be willing and able to operate their processing predominantly through polyvalence rather than monovalence» (1982: 95).

The polyvalence convention requires empirical validation as well. A pilot study which I executed in 1988 urged me to qualify the conceptualization of polyvalence. The empirical investigation took place in two stages. During the first one, informants were asked to attribute meaning to 5 poems; during the second, they were confronted with different meaning attributions (interpretations) of the same poems (three for each poem). The task of the informants was to indicate the meaning attribution(s) they were willing to accept and those they felt inadequate and by consequence wanted to refuse. A significant difference appeared to exist between the behavior of the informants attributing themselves meaning to the poems (a) and judging the meaning attributions of other interpreters (b).

In the first case the need of a monovalent interpretive decision clearly predominated (only 3% of the informants realized more than one interpretation); in the second case almost 41% acceptance of polyvalence with respect to interpretive decisions of others could be observed (Ibsch 1988).

The qualification I propose runs as follows: we should distinguish between the *generation* and the *acceptance* of polyvalence. While the convention of polyvalence

is only weakly respected in the first case and superseded by a need for coherence (intra-individually), it is by far stronger respected in the latter case (inter-individually). I will not go into the details of the experiment which is only a first attempt to get some insight into processes of interpretation — much has still to be done to improve its explanatory potential. I only want to emphasize the necessity of validating our hypotheses about how the literary communication system functions, especially when we are not focusing our attention exclusively on highly socialized literary critics. But even with respect to such experts, I assume that the disposition to generate more than one interpretation of a given text is less developed than the willingness to accept interpretations produced by others and differing from one's own.

One aspect of the polyvalence convention I want to underline: polyvalence in our conception is — in the same way as literariness — not conceived of as a textual property but as a reader's variable manifesting itself in the process of understanding and depending on the reader's personality, experiences, and cognitive skills.

In American reader-response criticism, for example, in Norman Holland's *The Brain of Robert Frost* (1988) the cognitive approach to literature is rigorously maintained, more rigorous than in the «Rezeptionsästhetik» of Iser and Jauss. «The meaning of a text is in the mind of the reader» (162) — is the outcome of research in cognitive psychology. This would imply that literary theory has to be changed. I quote Holland: «Turning the literary process around, making the reader the active one instead of the text, marks a profound change in literary theory» (134). I do not go into the details of Hollands theoretical proposal, I only want to mention that he deduces his explanatory hypotheses about meaning attribution from the interplay of «bodies, codes, and canons» (172) — «body» referring to the neurophysiological apparatus, «codes» to shared linguistic knowledge, and «canons» to a culture's repertoire from which we can make our choices.

To conclude, I have to admit that I did not pay attention to literary history. The historical domain forms a very interesting realm between cultural participation on the one hand, and explanatory literary studies on the other hand. Douwe Fokkema and Eva Kushner reflected upon this difficult intermediary position in their contributions to the First Congress of the Associação Portuguesa de Literatura Comparada (Fokkema 1990; Kushner 1990). I hope to have been unambiguous with respect to my proposal: whatever we choose — sense making or offering explanations in literary studies —, what is needed is a fully reflected decision, including the awareness of the required attitude, courage, and skills.

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