

Literary Theory: A Historical Survey

Part 2: Foundations

Lecture 3: Hermeneutics

1) Historical Background

a) Beginnings

b) Romantic Hermeneutics

2) Wilhelm Dilthey: Natural vs. Human Sciences

3) Hermeneutics in the 20th Century

4) Later Developments:

Reception Theory and Cognitive Literary Studies

Hermeneutics

[C 18: from Greek *hermeneutikos* expert in interpretation, from *hermeneuein* to interpret, from *hermeneus* interpreter, of uncertain origin]

- 1 the science of interpretation, esp. of Scripture
- 2 the branch of theology that deals with the principles and methods of exegesis

[cf. Hermes, the messenger of the Gods and guardian of roads, and herms (hermae), square stone pillars with Hermes' head and frequently phallus marking crossroads in ancient Greece]

1) Historical Background

a) Beginnings

- Catholic dogma monopolizing the interpretation of Scripture vs. Protestant insistence on the self-sufficiency of the holy text (Luther: 'sola scriptura')
 - > Reformation
- understanding parts of the bible is framed by meaning of whole
 - > hermeneutic circle (a part of something is always understood in terms of the whole and vice versa)
- prerequisite: unified meaning of the whole ('God's word')
 - > the problem of temporal/historical distance is avoided



- What about Greek or Latin Texts?
- Friedrich Ast (1778-1841):
the fundamental unity of all things spiritual and intellectual / the whole is not the sum of its parts, but the parts unfold and reveal the whole / understanding as a process of unfolding which can be concluded

b) Romantic Hermeneutics

- Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834):
a theory of human understanding which eliminates problems and misunderstandings by means of strict methodological reflection (i.e. a general theory of interpretation)
- modes of inquiry:
 - a) grammatical/philological (comparison)
 - b) psychological (divination)("vergleichende Erhellung und kongenialer Nachvollzug")
- congeniality as prerequisite of 'true' understanding
- understanding as a deliberate and intentional process of reconstruction which enables the reader to know a past author better than the author could know him- or herself because of access to a broader historical context than previously available

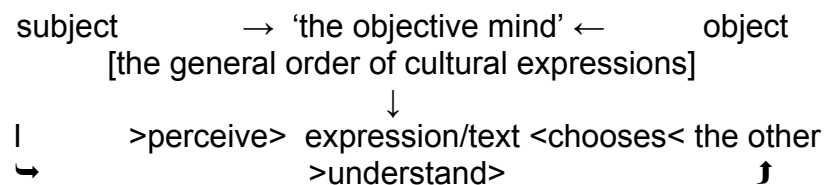
2) Wilhelm Dilthey: Natural vs. Human Sciences

- Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911):
'founder' of the human sciences ('Geisteswissenschaften')

Problems:

- to understand the human, one must be human
- both subject and object are historically bound (historicism)
- natural sciences: observing and describing external facts → establishing laws
[nomothetic approach aiming at *explanation*]
- human sciences: understanding internal realities → describing ideas
[ideographic approach aiming at *understanding*]
- internal reality is directly accessible as experience and evolves into a meaningful whole in time (autobiography: understanding of life as a necessarily incomplete process which establishes meaning retrospectively)
- 'Nacherleben' as the highest form of understanding and model for the process of historical understanding:
experience/perception as the root of knowledge
▼
external phenomena can best be understood by means of analogy plus induction (experience > general conclusion)

Model of Understanding:



The Generalization of Hermeneutical Knowledge:

- the problem of temporal distance: 'types'/'human nature'
- experience(s) → historical consciousness → knowledge
- 'objectivity' can be achieved through a complete acknowledgement of subjectivity which results in a distancing
- complete understanding is possible

Basic Problems of the Hermeneutical 'Method':

- 1) Epistemological Optimism: the hermeneutic circle presupposes the results of its operation → who guarantees the meaningfulness of the whole?
- 2) Epistemological Relativism: how exactly do scientific method and creative imagination go together?

3) Hermeneutics in the 20th Century

Emil Staiger, *Die Kunst der Interpretation* (1955)

- representative of German literary studies in the 1950s
- emphasizing the role of emotion and intuition for dealing with literature, even in an academic context
- interpretation a matter of talent and vocation
- truth as emotional agreement → plurality of interpretations
→ the inexhaustibility of art
- completion of knowledge as the sum of all human beings' experience
- method is replaced by Romantic 'Wesensschau'

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960)

- hermeneutics as a universal aspect of philosophy which reaches beyond scientific aspirations
- aesthetic model of realizing truth
- the hermeneutic circle is not a method but an ontological structural feature and thus the form of understanding
(Heidegger: "Existenzial" = "ursprüngliche Vollzugsform des Daseins")
- three dimensions: prejudgements ↔ text
 part ↔ whole
 subject ↔ object
- understanding as conversation ('Gespräch'):
openness as prerequisite, unity in the process of understanding, the text as a 'partner' in conversation, albeit of different make-up
- works of art realize themselves ('vollziehen sich') time and again in the process of understanding, there is no 'final' interpretation
- temporal distance is not a problem, but enriches the possibilities of understanding
- tradition as a normative mediating element which helps to avoid solipsism
- the merging of horizons (of text and reader)
- understanding art as play and experience

[Reception of Gadamer in the English speaking world:

E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967)
The Aims of Interpretation (1976)

→ approach focused on authorial intention as a yardstick for determining meaning as opposed to significance (vs. general shift towards reception theory)]

Critical Points:

- there is no autonomous sphere for the human sciences
- dangerous subjectivization of thinking
- conservative/affirmative approach which simply confirms time-honoured modes of seeing the world
- social influences on language and knowledge are ignored

(vs. 'Kritische Theorie', esp. Jürgen Habermas:
conversation bound up in language as a medium of power, critique of ideology
is necessary to uncover systematically distorted communication
→ 'kritische Tiefenhermeneutik' following the lead of psychoanalysis)

▶ fundamental change of attitudes in the 1960s

The Hermeneutic Method:

- 1) Reflect upon your presuppositions, prejudgements and prejudices
- 2) Formulate your expectations explicitly
- 3) Check your expectations against the text, but be open for modifications ('Gespräch!')

4) Later Developments: Reception Theory and Cognitive Literary Studies

The Lake Constance School of Reception Aesthetics:

- Hans-Robert Jauss: a history of reception is to replace the customary history of 'great works'; changing horizons of expectation
- Wolfgang Iser: 'work' = artefact + reception; reception = countering indeterminacy vs. guidance by text which establishes an implied reader; hermeneutics + structuralism

Reader Response Criticism (US):

- David Bleich: 'subjective criticism' trying to illuminate the subjective structure of interpretations in author/reader-experiments
- Norman N. Holland: the structure of reader behaviour (identity theme/cognitive and neurological processes; psychoanalytical models
↔ personal reader reactions)

Affective Stylistics/Interpretive Communities:

- Stanley Fish: the temporal dimension of reading as the experience of unfolding meaning (affective stylistics) and the social/cultural frames within which texts are realized (*Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* 1980)

→ the text is not a 'given' stable entity, and neither is its meaning (moving towards poststructuralist/deconstructivist assumptions)

Cognitive Literary Studies (cf. Zunshine 2010)

- *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Richardson 2001)
- *How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art* (Armstrong 2013)
- Anglistentag 2015 Paderborn:
Panel "Brain Drain or Brain Gain: The Future of Cognitive Literary Studies"
Paper titles:
"What Cognitive Narratology Can Do: From Cognitive to Cultural Studies and Back" (Marcus Hartner/Ralf Schneider) / "Could Do Better: Why Cognitive Literary Studies Have Failed to Live Up to Their Promises (and What May Be Done About It)" (Anja Müller-Wood)

Bibliography Lecture 3:

Armstrong, Paul B., *How Literature Plays with the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013.

Bode, Christoph, *Lyrik und Methode. Propädeutische Arbeit mit Gedichten*. Berlin: CVK, 1983: 98-144.

Richardson, Alan, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.

Warning, Rainer, Hrsg., *Rezeptionstheorie*. München: Fink/UTB, 1975.

Zapf, Hubert, *Kurze Geschichte der anglo-amerikanischen Literaturtheorie*. München: Fink/UTB, 1991: 166-188.

Zunshine, Lisa, ed., *Introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.