

Lecture 10: The Persistence of the Author

1) From Positivism to Psychoanalysis

2) Hermeneutics

1) From Positivism to Psychoanalysis

- Positivism emerged in the first half of the 19th century against the background of fundamental social change (feudal and agrarian → industrial and capitalist society) (stratificational → functional differentiation)
- social tensions, hopes and fears went hand in hand with the rise and increasing success of the natural sciences which resulted in accelerated technological development
→ social criticism + belief in progress
- 'positif, -ve' (French):
 - the real (vs. the imagined)
 - the useful (vs. the meaningless)
 - certainty (vs. uncertainty)
 - the constructive (vs. the destructive)

Auguste Comte (1798-1857),

French mathematician and philosopher, founder of positivism and sociology

- 1822 *Prospectus des travaux scientifique nécessaires pour réorganises la société* ('Plan of Necessary Scientific Works for Reorganizing Society')
> influence of Henri de Saint-Simon, the social reformer
- 1830-42 *Lectures Cours des philosophie positive* (6 vols)
- 1844 *Discours sur l'esprit positive*
- 1851-1854 *Système de politique positive* (4 vols)

Theory:

- strictly anti-metaphysical orientation in the tradition of the European enlightenment (French encyclopedists/Diderot)
- observation and examination of given facts
- classification according to the principle of similarity/resemblance in order to find out and establish the 'unchangeable laws' of the world (motto: 'see to foresee'); reliance on causality principle
- inductive and deductive dimensions, scientific monism

Positivistic Approaches to Literature:

- art as a social and historical fact
- causal relationship between art and society (determinism)
→ artistic creations can and should be explained without drawing upon such fuzzy concepts as 'genius', 'creative freedom' etc. (anti-hermeneutical stance)

Fields of Interest:

1) How does the literary work come into being?

basic model: society → author → work

e.g.

Hippolyte Taine (1828-93): race/milieu/moment

Wilhelm Scherer (1841-86): das Erlernte/Ererbte/Erlebte

classic study:

John Livingston Lowes,

The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination (1927)

biographical facts → the poet's mind → poems
(‘raw materials’) (‘elements of beauty’)

Problem: status and accessibility of ‘facts’!

2) How does the text mirror reality?

→ content, fictional worlds

Problem: literary texts do not necessarily mirror reality, they might as well distort it, especially for the sake of idealization and compensation (↔ Marxism)

3) What features does the text as an object have? (↔ formalism)

→ examining the text, comparison, classification

→ critical editions, establishing authorship

Problem:

meaning emerges from interpretation of ‘objective facts’ (↔ hermeneutics)

Positivism in Literary Studies Today:

- widely accepted without further reflection in schools, encyclopedias, traditional scholarship etc. as the 'normal' way of dealing with literature
- a strange fusion of biographical approaches and hermeneutics results in a wide-spread fixation on the notion of authorial intention ('What the author really meant is ...')
- the positivistic belief in the facticity of textual features seems to underlie many projects in computer philology
- positive aspects: de-mystification of literature; inauguration of a sociology of literature; good applicability in the teaching of literature

Problems:

- scope of enquiry is frequently narrowed to author biography ('Biographismus')
- scope of enquiry frequently narrowed to content level of texts
- neglect of the 'literariness' of literature
- epistemological naivety (Do 'raw facts' 'exist' in an uninterpreted state? How is 'objectivity' possible?)
→ negative connotations of the terms 'positivist' and 'positivistic'

Psychoanalysis and Literature:

- 'scientifically' upgraded version of 'biographism'
- not particularly interested in the text or work in itself, but rather in its status as a symptom of author pathologies (cf. Wimsatt/Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy": "There is criticism of poetry and there is author psychology.")
- implicit reference to cultural pathologies (e.g. Freud, "Das Unbehagen in der Kultur" 1930; Jacques Lacan's poststructuralist version of psychoanalysis)
- Freud frequently draws upon literary texts and addresses questions of artistic/literary creativity

Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1907)

We laymen have always been intensely curious to know [...] from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. Our interest is only heightened the more by the fact that, if we ask him, the writer himself gives us no explanation, or none that is satisfactory; and it is not at all weakened by our knowledge that not even the clearest insight into the determinants of his choice of material and into the nature of the art of creating imaginative form will ever help to make creative writers of *us*. [...]

The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously – that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion – while separating it sharply from reality. [...]

As people grow up [...] they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure which he has once experienced. Actually, we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. [...] In the same way, the growing child, when he stops playing, gives up nothing but the link with real objects; instead of *playing*, he now *phantasies*. He builds castles in the air and creates what are called *day-dreams*. [...]

We may lay it down that a happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one. The motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes, and every single phantasy is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of unsatisfying reality. [...]

So much for phantasies. And now for the creative writer. May we really attempt to compare the imaginative writer with the ‘dreamer in broad daylight’, and his creations with day-dreams? Here we must begin by making an initial distinction. We must separate writers who, like the ancient authors of epics and tragedies, take over their material ready-made, from writers who seem to originate their own material. We will keep to the latter kind, and for the purposes of our comparison, we will choose not the writers most highly esteemed by the critics, but the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes. One feature above all cannot fail to strike us about these story-writers: each of them has a hero who is the centre of interest, for whom the writer tries to win our sympathy by every possible means and whom he seems to place under the protection of a special Providence. [...] It seems to me [...] that through this revealing characteristic of invulnerability we can immediately recognize His Majesty the Ego, the hero alike of every day-dream and every story. [...]

We are perfectly aware that many imaginative writings are far removed from the model of the naïve day-dream; and yet I cannot suppress the suspicion that even the most extreme deviations from that model could be linked with it through an uninterrupted series of transitional cases. [...]

A strong experience in the present awakens in the creative writer a memory of an earlier experience (usually belonging to his childhood) from which there now proceeds a wish which finds its fulfilment in the creative work. The work itself exhibits elements of the recent provoking occasion as well as of the old memory. [...]

[I]t is extremely probable that myths, for instance, are distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies of whole nations, the *secular dreams* of youthful humanity. [...]

[T]he day-dreamer carefully conceals his phantasies from other people because he feels he has reasons for being ashamed of them. [...] But when a creative writer presents his plays to us or tells us what we are inclined to take to be his personal day-dreams, we experience a great pleasure [...] How the writer accomplishes this is his innermost secret; the essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others. We can guess two of the methods used by this technique. The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. We give the name of an *incentive bonus*, or a *fore-pleasure*, to a yield of pleasure such as this, which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychological sources.

In my opinion, all the aesthetic pleasure which a creative writer affords us has the character of a fore-pleasure of this kind, and our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds. It may even be that not a little of this effect is due to the writer's enabling us thenceforward to enjoy our own day-dreams without self-reproach or shame. [...]

2) 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]

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 sth 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: grammatical/philological (comparison)
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 access to a broader historical context than previously available

c) Wilhelm Dilthey: Natural vs. Human Sciences

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

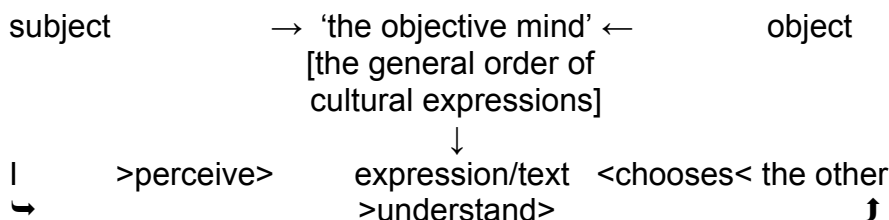
Problems:

- 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:



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?

d) 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)]

E.D. Hirsch, “Objective Interpretation” (1967)

A . The Two Horizons of Textual Meaning

[I]s it proper to make textual meaning dependent upon the reader’s own cultural givens? It may be granted that these givens change in the course of time, but does this imply that textual meaning itself changes? [...] Recalling Frege’s distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, the change could be explained by saying that the meaning of the text has remained the same, while the significance of that meaning has shifted. Contemporary readers will frequently share similar cultural givens and will therefore agree about what the text means to them. But might it not be the case that they agree about the text’s meaning ‘to them’ because they have first understood its meaning?

If textual meaning itself could change, contemporary readers would lack a basis for agreement or disagreement. No one would bother seriously to discuss such a protean object. The significance of textual meaning has no foundation and no objectivity unless meaning itself is unchanging. To fuse meaning and significance, or interpretation and criticism by the conception of an autonomous, living, changing meaning does not really free the reader from the shackles of historicism; it simply destroys the basis both for any agreement among readers and for any objective study whatever. [...]

[T]he meaning of the text (its *Sinn*) does not change anymore than the hue and saturation of the red object changes when seen against differently colored background. [...] But textual meaning is a construction, not a naked given like a red object, and I cannot relate textual meaning to a larger realm until I have construed it. Before I can judge just how the changed tradition has altered the significance of a text [its *Bedeutung*], I must understand its meaning or *Sinn*.

This permanent meaning is, and can be, nothing other than the author's meaning. There have been, of course, several other definitions of textual meaning – what the author's contemporaries would ideally have construed, what the ideal present-day reader construes, what the norms of language permit the text to mean, what the best critics conceive to be the best meaning, and so on. In support of these other candidates, various aesthetic and psychological objections have been aimed at the author: first, his meaning, being conditioned by history and culture, is too confined and simple; second, it remains, in any case, inaccessible to us because we live in another age, or because his mental processes are private, or because he himself did not know what he meant. Instead of attempting to meet each of these objections separately, I shall attempt to describe the general principle for answering all of them [...] The aim of my exposition will be to confirm that the author's meaning, as represented by the text, is unchanging and reproducible. [...]

B. Determinateness of Textual Meaning

In the previous section I defined textual meaning as the verbal intention of the author, and this argues implicitly that hermeneutics must stress a reconstruction of the author's aims and attitudes in order to evolve guides and norms for construing the meaning of his text. [...]

The interpreter's job is to reconstruct a determinate actual meaning, not a mere system of possibilities [...]

[I]t should be of some practical consequence for the interpreter to know that he does have a precisely defined task, namely, to discover the author's meaning. It is therefore not only sound but necessary for the interpreter to inquire, "What in all probability did the author mean? Is the pattern of emphases I construe the author's pattern?" But it is both incorrect and futile to inquire, "What does the language of the text say?" That question can have no determinate answer.

C. Verification

[...] To establish a reading as probable it is first necessary to show, with reference to the norms of language, that it is possible. This is the criterion of *legitimacy*: the reading must be permissible within the public norms of the *langue* in which the text was composed. The second criterion is that of *correspondence*: the reading must account for each linguistic component of the text. Whenever a reading arbitrarily ignores linguistic components or inadequately accounts for them, the reading may be presumed improbable. The third criterion is that of *generic appropriateness*: if the text follows the conventions of a scientific essay, for example, it is inappropriate to construe the kind of allusive meaning found in casual conversation. The three preliminary norms usually permit several readings, and this is by definition the case when a text is problematical. Faced with alternatives, the interpreter chooses the reading which best meets the criterion of coherence. [...]

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