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THE RANGE OF INTERPRETATION

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Marketplace of Interpretation

For a long time, interpretation was taken for an activity that did not seem to require analysis of its own procedures. There was a tacit assumption that it came naturally, not least because human beings live by constantly interpreting. We continually emit a welter of signs and signals in response to a bombardment of signs and signals that we receive from outside ourselves. In this sense we might even rephrase Descartes by saying, We interpret, therefore we are. While such a basic human disposition makes interpretation appear to come naturally, however, the forms it takes do not. And as these forms to a large extent structure the acts of interpretation, it is important to understand what happens during the process itself, because the structures reveal what the interpretation is meant to achieve.

Nowadays, there is a growing awareness of the effective potential of interpretation and of the way this basic human impulse has been employed for a variety of tasks. The very world we live in appears to be a product of interpretation, as had been suggested in books such as Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking* or Günter Abel's *Interpretationswelten*.¹ I will

1. See Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Hassocks, U.K.: Harvester, 1978); Günter Abel, *Interpretationswelten: Gegenwartsphilosophie jenseits von Essentialismus und Relativismus*, stw 1210 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995).

therefore briefly glance at what is currently on offer in the marketplace of interpretation.

Spotlighting dominant trends is the starting point in what might be called an anatomy of interpretation. Anatomy—though a somewhat overworked term—is a better guideline for this enterprise than is “interpreting interpretation,” because it designates an endeavor to make procedures transparent, whereas “interpreting interpretation” implicitly entails a transcendental stance that, irrespective of its presuppositions, must inevitably lie outside interpretation. A study of what happens in interpretation can only proceed by unfolding interpretation.

A survey of the marketplace reveals three basic trends, one of which has already turned into a dead end. It may even be due to this dead end that inspection has become an issue at all. What are the trends or types that still hold sway?

First of all, there have been and still are types of interpretation that claim universal validity for their assumptions, thus pretending to provide an overall explanation of everything. A case in point is Marxism, which, in its heyday, claimed nothing less than a monopoly of interpretation. This type is now on the wane, in part because of the reification of its presuppositions. Such reifications occur in almost all forms of what has come to be known as ideology critique, Marxist or otherwise. The various brands of ideology critique elevate their presuppositions to the status of reality, just as do the ideologies they combat. Monopolies of interpretation thus present themselves as transcendental grandstand views, and although they see themselves as frameworks for the reality to be grasped, they actually seek to shape that reality according to their presuppositions. This is why we must refrain from interpreting interpretation, for to do so would be to fall into the same trap as Marxism and all the other ideology critiques.

Even William Elford Rogers, who with the title of his book *Interpreting Interpretation: Textual Hermeneutics as an Ascetic Discipline* claimed to provide a “theory of interpretation,” finds himself in a similar predicament. Although he quite rightly and repeatedly maintains that “to understand an interpretive system from the inside . . . is the only way to understand it,”² he nevertheless tries to assess interpretation by developing a specific textual hermeneutics that verges on becoming a stance outside interpretation.

This is also borne out by his heavy dependence on Peirce’s semiotics to underpin his approach (11–18).

Simultaneously, Rogers senses that interpreting interpretation moves him into a position outside what can only be understood from inside, and therefore he tries to resolve the dilemma by subjecting his semiotically fashioned stance to a drastic “asceticism”: “But now I want to suggest that *textual hermeneutics can be looked at as an ascetic discipline*. Of course, one need not look at textual hermeneutics that way. But one way of describing what goes on in interpreting a text is to say that the interpreter tries, so far as possible, to become totally absorbed in the signs of the text, such that the interpreter purges from consciousness purely private feelings and awareness of the separate ‘I’ of the ‘I think’ ” (135). This semiotically conceived stance requires self-effacement of the interpreter to mitigate what an outside stance would superimpose on what is to be assessed.

Rogers certainly does not claim a monopoly of interpretation, but total self-effacement is impossible when interpretation is interpreted; a stance still has to be adopted in order to explain what only can be grasped from inside itself. Thus we shall refrain from interpreting interpretation, and instead of asking “What is interpretation?” (13), we shall ask: Why is interpretation? If we can unfold an answer to this question, it will serve as a pointer to possible reasons for this unceasing human activity. But in order to do so, we must first lay bare the mechanics of interpretive procedures.

Another trend to be observed in the marketplace of interpretation is what Ricœur once termed “the conflict of interpretations.”³ This manifests itself as competition, with each type trying to assert itself at the expense of others in order to demonstrate its respective importance and the depth and breadth of its insights and range. What the conflict reveals, and what makes it interesting, is the inherent limitation of all presuppositions. The greater the awareness of such limitations, the more the conflicting discourses of interpretation begin to appropriate one another.

There is a kind of cannibalization going on among Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, poststructuralism, and so on in their attempts to compensate for their various deficiencies. The offshoot is a magma of interpretive discourses, which Derrida once characterized as follows: “You can imagine to what kind of monsters these combinatory operations must

2. William Elford Rogers, *Interpreting Interpretation: Textual Hermeneutics as an Ascetic Discipline* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 93.

3. See Paul Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

give birth, considering the fact that theories incorporate opposing theorems, which have themselves incorporated other ones."⁴ Such an amalgamation of interpretive discourses reveals that none is able to establish a monopoly of interpretation. As they vie with one another, their premises can only be taken as heuristic in character, and thus they have to be evaluated in proportion to the success they achieve. This holds true irrespective of whether they admit to the heuristic nature of their presuppositions or not. At any rate, the conflict of interpretations, the reciprocal appropriation of interpretive discourses, and the common need for support from outside themselves prevent each of these types from fulfilling its inherent claim to be all-encompassing.

The third trend prevalent on the marketplace of interpretation is represented by what has been called "oppositional discourses," ranging from minority to postcolonial. Oppositional insofar as they set out to subvert or dispute the standards of what they consider to be the hegemonic discourse, they are developed by social groups for the purpose of asserting their objectives, of gaining recognition for their agenda, and of striving for power. They face a problem, however, in that a great many of them use the very procedures developed by the hegemonic discourse; indeed, they have to do so in order to achieve the persuasiveness necessary to advance the group interest. Borrowing from the discourses they seek to subvert can turn out to be a structural handicap: in trying to gain validity for their objectives, they develop a frame of reference that, in the final analysis, is not far from being logocentric itself, because a certain rationality is required if an agenda is to be accepted. Logocentrism, however, is the hallmark of the hegemonic discourse, which, though dismantled by deconstruction and thus giving the green light to the rise of oppositional discourses, makes these latter discourses indirectly dependent on what they intend to discard.

Such dependence is double-edged. On the one hand, it certainly helps to promote the agenda, but, on the other, it may just compensate for a shortfall in persuasiveness. Even monopolies of interpretation need some corroboration from outside themselves, as evinced by the Marxist claim to provide a scientific interpretation of reality, wherein science

4. Jacques Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms," in *The States of "Theory": History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 67.

and politics are evoked to furnish necessary self-endorsement of their respective objectives.

What we may conclude from the current state of the marketplace of interpretation is the following: Starting out from presuppositions—irrespective of whether they are reified or taken heuristically—is certainly one approach, but it cannot be equated with what happens in interpretation. In view of the growing interpenetration of cultures and the newly emerging concerns of cultural studies, interpretation can no longer be exclusively conceived as a subsumption of what is to be grasped under a presupposition. Instead, we have to remind ourselves of what interpretation has always been: an act of translation.

We usually associate translation with converting one language into another, be it foreign, technical, vocational, or otherwise. Nowadays, however, not only languages have to be translated. In a rapidly shrinking world, many different cultures have come into close contact with one another, calling for a mutual understanding in terms not only of one's own culture but also of those encountered. The more alien the latter, the more inevitable is some form of translation, as the specific nature of the culture one is exposed to can be grasped only when projected onto what is familiar. In tackling such issues, interpretation can only become an operative tool if conceived as an act of translation. In Harold Bloom's words: " 'Interpretation' once meant 'translation,' and essentially still does."⁵

Interpretation as Translatability

Each interpretation transposes something into something else. We should therefore shift our focus away from underlying presuppositions to the space that is opened up when something is translated into a different register. "Translation, then," Willis Barnstone writes, "as all transcription and reading of texts, creates a difference,"⁶ as evinced by the division between the subject matter to be interpreted and the register brought to bear. Its intent will be realized through the manner in which that difference is to

5. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 85.

6. Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 18.

be coped with. We shall call this difference a liminal space, because it demarcates both the subject matter and the register from one another, as it does not belong to either but is opened up by interpretation itself. Caused by interpretation, the liminal space is bound to contain a resistance to translation, a resistance, however, that energizes the drive to overcome it. Thus interpretation also turns into an attempt to narrow the very space it has produced.

The register into which the subject matter is to be transposed is dually coded. It consists of viewpoints and assumptions that provide the angle from which the subject matter is approached, but at the same time it delineates the parameters into which the subject matter is to be translated for the sake of grasping. This duality is doubled by another one. As the register is bound to tailor what is to be translated, it simultaneously is subjected to specifications if translation in its "root meaning of 'carrying across'" (15) is meant to result in a "creative transposition" (11).

This two-way traffic is due to the fact that the register does not represent a transcendental consciousness from which the subject matter is to be judged; if it did, translation would be redundant, as the subject matter—instead of being transposed—would just be determined for what it is. Therefore interpretation as translatability has its repercussions on the register by diversifying the framework into which the subject matter is transposed. For this reason the registers not only change but are also fine-tuned in each act of interpretation. Such reciprocity indicates that interpretation takes place within historical situations⁷ that we cannot get out of. Whenever we translate something into something else, the register is nothing but the bootstraps by which we pull ourselves up toward comprehension.

If interpretation is primarily a form of translatability, it clearly depends on what is translated. Interpretation is therefore bound to be different:

1. when certain types of text, such as holy or literary ones, are transposed into other types, such as an exegesis of canonical texts or cognitive appraisals of literary texts;
2. when cultures or cultural levels are translated into terms that allow for an interchange between what is foreign and what is familiar, or when entropy is controlled, or when "reality" is to be conceived in terms of interacting systems;

3. when incommensurabilities such as God, the world, and humankind—which are neither textual nor scripted—are translated into language for the purpose of grasping and subsequently comprehending them.

In each of these three types—which will form the framework for this discussion—the interpretive intent regarding the subject matter to be translated will be exposed to change. This implies that the liminal space will have to be handled differently, from which we may conclude that *the* interpretation does not exist. Instead, there are only genres of interpretation, marked off from one another according to the manner in which translatability is executed. Such a process varies not only in relation to the subject matter but also in the way in which the liminal space is coped with in every interpretive act. Therefore interpretation is basically genre-bound, and the salient features of the respective genre are marked not least according to how the liminal space is negotiated.

This awareness of generic divisions is of recent vintage. As long as commentary on either holy or secular texts was deemed to be the only preoccupation of exegesis, it was identified with what has since been called interpretation. The idea that interpretation can only be conceived in terms of genres only arose after interpretation had become self-reflective. Self-reflection in terms of monitoring the interpretive activity reveals that the latter is dependent not only on the subject matter to be grasped but also on the different parameters of continually changing registers.

Furthermore, if interpretation has to cope with the liminal space resulting from something being transposed into something else, then interpretation is primarily a performative act rather than an explanatory one, although more often than not performance is mistaken for explanation. Whenever this happens, the mistake is one of category: for an explanation to be valid, one must presuppose a frame of reference, whereas performance has to bring about its own criteria. The self-generation of criteria in interpretation allows us first and foremost to participate in whatever is highlighted rather than to validate the results achieved.

On such a basis we are able to make the following distinctions that will delineate our concerns.

1. As long as it is a text that is to be understood, or whose understanding is to be applied, or whose hidden constituents have to be brought to light, the hermeneutic circle in all its variations from Schleiermacher to Ricœur appears to be an adequate method of dealing with the liminal space.

7. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft als imaginäre Institution: Entwurf einer politischen Philosophie*, trans. Horst Brühmann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 59f.

2. If something nontextual, open-ended, or beyond the reach of one's own stance has to be made manageable, the hermeneutic circle may no longer be adequate. Translating open-endedness into graspability, or entropy into control, is different from translating a text into understanding, or from turning understanding into its application, or from deciphering what its disguises may either hide or reveal. Recursive looping therefore becomes a procedural necessity when it comes to charting open-endedness or controlling entropy; it operates as an input/output interchange or as systemic recursion that allows us to account for the self-maintenance of autonomous systems, particularly living systems such as those of the human organism.
3. A different problem poses itself when there are no longer any definable positions but only experiences of something whose existence appears incontrovertible but that exceeds knowability, such as God, the world, or humankind. Translating something immeasurable into language and even into terms of cognition—as undertaken by Franz Rosenzweig in his *Star of Redemption* (1921)—requires a different mode of translation from those mentioned so far. If the space between the immeasurable and cognition is to be coped with, the traveling differential appears to be an adequate mode for grasping infinity in finite terms.

These different modes point to the fact that each genre of interpretation focuses on a specific task regarding the translatability to be realized. In hermeneutics the circle is employed to interrelate the explicit with the implicit, the hidden with the revealed, and the latent with the manifest. It basically sets out to recover what an author has not been aware of when writing, or what lies beyond the historical material to be observed in the present, or what went awry in the human subject on the way to itself. Penetrating behind what is given in order to recuperate what is lost—that is, the author's subconscious, a historical past, or the buried telos of the fractured self—is what structures this type of interpretation.

While hermeneutics can be qualified by this excavatory tendency, cybernetics, operating in recursive loops, is a means of controlling entropy, elucidating the individual self-maintenance of autonomous systems, and configuring the structural coupling of systems. Its focus is on phenomena that emerge from coping with contingency, from the reciprocal "perturbation"⁸ of systems, and from their being bracketed together.

er. Recursivity operates either by an input/output relationship, when control is to be achieved, or by processing noise, randomness, and perturbation, when the self-organization of systems is to be conceived.

If cybernetics is concerned with grasping emergence, the differential method is designed to translate incommensurability into perception. Its operational mode is a traveling differential, because incommensurabilities can only be made tangible if unfolded from inside themselves. There is no external stance that would, for instance, allow us to grasp continuity, which posed itself as a problem for Leibniz, who developed the differential calculus. Consequently, the traveling differential operates as a mode of realization inside what it intends to unfold; it dissects incommensurabilities into a sequence of scissions, thus permitting access to what cannot be grasped from any external position.

These diversified tasks show clearly that interpretation is genre-bound, and they also reveal that interpretation has a history, which gains its salience through the way in which the problems that have cropped up have been coped with. Circularity became prominent when the authority of the text was on the wane; recursivity was developed when emergence had to be accounted for; and the differential—originally a mathematical operation—was reactivated when all the umbrella conceptualizations of immeasurabilities had broken down. Such a history does not proceed as a linear development toward a distant goal. Instead, it is nonlinear insofar as these modes of interpretation are responses to the ever-increasing open-endedness of the world, thus focusing on what appears to be pressing in the situation of the moment. This makes interpretation into a process of mapping the open-ended world, and such mapping is dependent on the here and now, which means new maps may be developed, or old ones reactivated, according to requirements. Although this activity unfolds as a history, it is in the end not so much the history itself that is of interest but rather what it might indicate. Hence interpretation, though primarily a technique, raises an anthropological question with regard to its necessity.

The paradigms used to unfold interpretation have all been chosen because they are instances in which interpretation is either expressly thematized or explicitly reflected on. The hermeneutic tradition is

8. See Francisco J. Varela, *Principles of Biological Autonomy* (New York: Elsevier North Holland, 1979), whose ideas are discussed in the second section of chapter 4.

represented by Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, Johann Gustav Droysen, and Paul Ricœur, who—all in their different ways—elucidate the workings of hermeneutic procedures. Those who advocate cybernetics as the infrastructure of interpretation—again all in their different ways—from Norbert Wiener through Clifford Geertz to Francisco Varela, practice their variegated interpretations by constantly reflecting on the efficacy of their underlying interpretive principles, which they sometimes analyze at length. The same applies to Franz Rosenzweig, who explicitly sets out the terms according to which he conceives of the traveling differential and the way in which he intends to make it operative. The very fact that paradigms of interpretation lead to thematization of, or reflection on, what is to be undertaken, indicates that there is no overarching reference for such activity; at best there are “routes of reference” that, when established, result in a reconditioning of both register and procedure.⁹ The following discussion does not imply that the paradigms of interpretation to be examined represent the whole range of interpretive genres. What makes them conspicuous, however, is their attempt to develop changing mechanisms to cope with the liminal space that interpretation itself opens up.

Viewing interpretation from such an angle raises the question of its limits, as suggested by the title of one of Umberto Eco's books.¹⁰ Whenever limits of interpretation come under scrutiny, two viewpoints seem to become prominent. First, the main focus tends to be on textual interpretation, and, second, limits do not apply so much to interpretation itself as to the frames and parameters that are brought to bear. This is apparent in Eco's wide-ranging analysis of interpretation, in which he explicitly states that the kind of limits he is going to examine are those intimately tied to a semiotic frame that he himself has developed, guided by Peirce's basic principles (12). He starts out by detailing three types of textual interpretation that provide the necessary orientation for the interpretive act: *intentio auctoris*, *intentio operis*, and *intentio lectoris* (22). Each of them, of course, has its limits, and therefore in reading a text one must take all of them into consideration.

Eco shows the implications of this in another context:

It is clear that I am trying to keep a dialectical link between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*. The problem is that, if one perhaps knows what is meant by the “intention of the reader,” it seems more difficult to define abstractly what is meant by the “intention of the text.” . . . Thus, more than a parameter to use in order to validate the interpretation, the text is an object that the interpretation builds up in the course of the circular effort of validating itself on the basis of what it makes up as its result. I am not ashamed to admit that I am defining the old and still valid “hermeneutic circle.”¹¹

Now, the more “parameters” there are to be “dialectically” interlinked, the more liminal spaces are bound to emerge that have to be negotiated by circularity. If, however, only a single frame is privileged, interpretation, according to Eco, ceases, because the text is used for a certain purpose, which marks the limit of interpretation.¹² Consequently, the more rigid the frames, the more obvious the limits. Hence interpretation in itself is not limited; rather, it is the parameters chosen that impose restrictions. This does not mean, however, that frames or parameters can be dispensed with, because interpretation is an undertaking that has to produce its own frameworks in order to assess what it intends to elucidate.

This tendency is spotlighted in Eco's penetrating analysis of interpretation as well as in Patrick Colm Hogan's book *On Interpretation: Meaning and Inference in Law, Psychoanalysis, and Literature*, which starts out by criticizing Eco for attributing “meaning not to texts and dictionaries but to authors or to members of the linguistic community [because Eco] sees meaning as defined by a reader's intuition . . . thus shifting from authorial to individual readerly intent.”¹³ In the end, however, Hogan might be closer to Eco than he actually thinks he is, because what he calls “inference” is not very far from the “conjectures” Eco had spoken of. And “meaning” (let alone an entity such as “true meaning” [10])—being the “first concern of an

9. For what the notion “routes of reference” implies, see Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 55–71.

10. See Umberto Eco, *I Limiti dell' Interpretazione* (Milan: Bompiani, 1990).

11. Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64.

12. Richard Rorty, in Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, 100, voices reservations about Eco's distinction “between interpretation and use,” which might in itself be a frame according to which limits of interpretation are highlighted.

13. Patrick Colm Hogan, *On Interpretation: Meaning and Inference in Law, Psychoanalysis, and Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 2.

interpretive theory" (1)—is not a given but has to be arrived at by way of inferences. Focusing on meaning, however, is already a stipulation, for which again frames have to be conceived, so that "rational inferences" (93) can be made as to intent.

At this point an interesting turn occurs in Hogan's argument. There are "limits to stipulation," which are not to be taken for limits of interpretation, because the "intentional meaning . . . [of a] legislators's policy aim, speaker's unconscious beliefs, or author's aesthetical intent" (92) is an "ideolectal intent" (93), and therefore any conception of meaning presumed to be nonintentional does not exist. If meaning is only "ideolect or intent" (47), then all kinds of semantic essentialism, such as the assumption of social meaning or autonomous meaning as advocated by both analytic philosophy and structural linguistics, are invalid stipulations for assessing the semantic ideolect. This convincing criticism leveled at social, philosophical, and linguistic essentialism notwithstanding, Hogan makes one stipulation for interpreting the intent of the ideolect: it is the "Principle of Minimal Interpretation" (14), which is governed by "the ordering principle [of] simplicity" (15).

Whereas Eco combines different frames in order to stretch the limits of interpretation, Hogan excludes overarching frames in order to prevent encroachment on interpretation. Eco's basic stipulation is that interpretation proceeds as semiosis of the text, whereas Hogan's "stipulative view of meaning" (32) proceeds by inferences that are guided by the principle of simplicity.¹⁴ The more restricted the initial objective of interpretation turns out to be, the more limited are the frames stipulated for interpreting basic intent. The more frames are combined, the more unmistakably their limits are meant to be overcome. If the assembly of frames is connected in a circular movement, liminal spaces begin to loom large. Therefore interpretation as translatability, proposed as a frame in the following chapters, proves to be a minimalistic stipulation, in consequence of which the liminal space and ways of negotiating it reveal themselves as a basic concern of interpretation.

14. When Hogan details the interpretive practice in law, psychoanalysis, and literature, however, he stipulates a great many frames as the basis for "rational inference."

CHAPTER TWO

The Authority of the Canon

Canonization and Midrash

Interpretation as we have come to understand it in the West arose out of the exegesis of the Torah in the Judaic tradition. Its inception is intimately tied to the canonization of holy texts, which itself reveals constitutive features of interpretation insofar as the canon is not established for its own sake. Broadly speaking, canonization is a process of choosing the texts that will become the object of interpretation, which simultaneously elevates them into a position of censorship over other texts, whose study and interpretation may even be forbidden, because the cancellation of their claims to validity helps to stabilize the authority of the texts that are chosen. Just as the canon does not exist for its own sake, the ascription of authority requires a negative foil to underpin its authenticity.

Endowing a text with authority may entail two things: (a) endowing itself can be a unique and unrepeatable act; (b) the authority attributed may be supplemented, augmented, broadened, specified, and so on. Each of these possibilities pertains to the Old Testament as conceived in Judaism. Consequently there is both a sealed and an open canon. The sealed canon is considered unique, as its canonization has been established; the status of the textual elements is exclusive, and no new text can be added to it. The Pentateuch is a case in point. The open canon, however, does allow for other texts to be added and hence canonized. The Book of Laws is an example, as it permits the addition of new laws whose legal status is as binding as those already included.