

HERMENEUTICS NEED AND THE INEVITABILITY OF COMPARING

Reingard Nethersole

Department of Philosophy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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Summary

Since its inception as independent field of study at the beginning of the 19th century, Comparative Literature has devoted itself to dialogue with literatures that originate beyond the limits of one particular language-literature and culture. Focusing on boundaries and liminality, comparatists who have traditionally inhabited perilous border regions *in-between* autochthonous and extraneous territories, constantly cross borders between, at least, two different and diverse linguistic cultures, identities and vocabularies. To render productive the encounter with other and often disparate writings from different corners of the world has been the task of a discipline that always sought recourse to literary theory besides criticism. A strong reflexive trait thus has enabled Comparative Literature to investigate links between symbolic systems such as speech, writing, musical composition and the fine arts, all of which contribute to the intelligibility of the life-world of individuals and communities.

Since the emergence of print culture the world has often been compared to a book in which the world – and each of us within it – write ourselves as a many layered narrative

that we spend our lives reading and seeking to comprehend. The question is how to understand and to interpret this enormous “library of Babel”, as the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges calls the “universe” that, in the absence of an Adamic language, demands inexhaustible reading. Such reading in the broad sense of understanding and interpretation is provided by hermeneutic theory, a historically evolved theory whose method opens paths into the many past and present texts that the world holds in store and that we exchange with each other when communicating. Comparing and understanding are vital for transnational and transcultural border crossings that have become defining features in a globalizing world.

1. Understanding and Comparing as Basic to the Human Condition

Comparing means placing one thing in relation to another by way of analogy and juxtaposition. Grammatically comparisons function on two planes: (1) on the plane of analogy ($x = y$) they establish similarity suggesting equivalence; (2) as middle part in a three-element series the comparative, by yielding its position to the superlative, operates on an axiological plane. Finally, propositional analytics, utilizing two juxtaposed comparisons of the first kind (syllogism) commonly serve as logical proof. By maintaining only first level comparisons of equivalence while seeking, in a gradual process of understanding (the hermeneutical circle) to accommodate alterity, comparative hermeneutics aims at making sense by way of tentatively phrasing and rephrasing the vocabulary that enables genuine dialogue. Only in dialogical openness are new understandings able to emerge, understandings that are not simply a yielding of one position to another, but a genuine preservation of the insight contained in either.

Understanding and comparing, as mental activities that we engage without necessarily being aware of them as cognitive behavior, are linguistic acts. Language is the medium in which and through which human beings relate to the world and to each other. It is through language that the world is opened up for us. We learn to know the world by learning to master a language. Language thus is both the vessel in which experience articulates itself and the vehicle for its communication. As sign receiving and producing human beings, as speaking and spoken subjects we are enmeshed in communication with others in particular localities and situations, and across the temporal trajectory of past, present, and future. Moreover, language, understood in a broad sense as ensemble of varying signs, “games” (Wittgenstein’s language games) or “discursive formations” (Foucault), is the primary medium for communicating and sharing meanings. Neither can we make sense of phenomena in the world nor can we really understand ourselves unless we understand ourselves as situated in a linguistically mediated, historical culture. We are, according to Heidegger and Gadamer, beings in language. Discursivity characterizes our life-world as one that is always already semantically organized and charged by experience. We are not Adam and Eve naming creation but we live in a man-made world determined by earlier human activity and its manifold traces that, broadly speaking, as texts we are potentially capable of reading. By reading the author means here making sense in so far as “reading” that is synonymous with interpretation is predicated on understanding.

Understanding is not only about symbolic communication that enables us to share objective reality through common signs. For contemporary philosophy understanding

has become the touchstone of human life and existence as such. As an interrogation into the deepest conditions for symbolic interaction and culture in general, the art of understanding: hermeneutics is providing the critical horizon also for rethinking transnational and transcultural forms of knowing otherness and practicing planetary togetherness in an increasingly globalizing world.

1.1. Hermeneutics, a Definition

Hermeneutics is the ancient, albeit historically modified, art of understanding and interpretation of texts. All cultural products are “texts” (understood here as any phenomena that is subject to interpretation) and must be interpreted as such because language is not a transparent medium in which the world is given unequivocally. For the sign, consisting of signifier (a word) and signified (what the word denotes), depends for its meaning on the usage to which it is put by speakers and writers over time. Moreover, semantic and semiotic meaning are never identical in creative representation that, unlike numerical renditions in unambiguous formal language where $1+1=2$, depend on the dual intervention of producer (maker, speaker, writer, artist, author) and receiver (interpreter, reader). A glance into a dictionary confirms what every translator knows: the instability of the meaning and significance of signs. Moreover, producer and recipient of natural language and creative representation do not necessarily share the same context. This is of particular concern when it comes to making sense of texts from cultural contexts that are different to our own, and especially of making sense of texts handed over to us from the past. It is here that Hermeneutics as the development and study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts provides a method for reading and equitable communication.

The etymology of the term encompasses the Greek verb *hermeneuo*, the nouns *hermeneia* (understanding, exegesis) and *hermeneutice* (the agent who practices understanding). The Latin verb *interpretari* comes closest to the Greek *hermeneuo*. Etymologists do not agree as to the origin of the word *hermeneutice*. Related to the name of the Greek god Hermes in his role as the interpreter of the messages of the gods, the word thus bears the connotation of one who transmits meaning and makes it clear. Plato, for example, called the poets the *hermeneutice* of the gods. It is certain, though, that *hermeneuo* refers to the verbs meaning “to express”, “to explain” and “to translate”. As a Latinized version of the Greek *hermeneutice*, the term *hermeneutics* has been part of common language (in the West) from the beginning of the 17th century as evidenced, for instance, in J.C. Dannhauer’s treatise *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrum litterarum* of 1654.

2. Brief History of Interpretation

Despite its decidedly modern (Renaissance) coinage the link between understanding and interpretation dates back to the history of hermeneutics beginning with ancient Greek philosophy. Addressing the understanding of religious intuitions, Plato used this term in a number of dialogues, contrasting hermeneutic knowledge to that of *sophia*. Religious knowledge is knowledge of what has been revealed or said and, in contrast to *sophia*, does not involve knowledge of the truth-value of the utterance. Aristotle carried this use of the term a step further, naming his work on logic and semantics *Peri hermeneias*, which was later rendered as *De interpretatione*, thus somewhat blurring the distinction

between understanding and interpretation that was to become important for 20th century Continental Philosophy. For Aristotle words spoken are symbols or signs (*symbola*) of affections or impressions (*pathemata*) of the soul (*psyche*); written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs (*semeia*), are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects (*pragmata*) of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies (*homoiomata*) (*On Interpretation*, 1.16^a4).

More concerned with a typology of knowledge and language, Platonic and Aristotelian hermeneutics arguably lack a methodological awareness of the problems of textual understanding. It is only with the Stoics, and their reflections on the interpretation of myth that we encounter a hermeneutic method of reading texts. This suggests that temporal, spatial and cultural distance occurring through written transmission, rather than proximity of interlocutors in direct verbal contact call for a hermeneutics that are outlined below under the headings: reconstruction, construction, and deconstruction of meaning.

Common to all textual reconstruction is the notion that interpretation is a rule governed practice capable of yielding, unequivocal valid interpretation. Construction emphasizes not the product (*interpretandum*) but the recipient's or reader's perspective and experience in the act of interpretation, acknowledging that the process of understanding is interminable. Deconstruction, by foregrounding the crucial constructedness of all meaning, seeks to break down sense configurations that have been encrusted over time and now appear as true meanings although they are mere insinuations (e.g. Derrida's critique of ontological presence) or ideological cover ups for underlying interests of power (e.g. Habermas' notion of ideology critique).

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Biographical Sketch

Reingard Nethersole is Honorary Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, Honorary Professorial Research Fellow in the Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, and Adjunct Professor of English at the University of Richmond, Virginia, USA. In 1983 she established the first Department of Comparative Literature in South Africa which she chaired until 1999. She published extensively on literary history, criticism, and theory in Africa, Europe, and the US, concentrating in her most recent work on questions of Globalization, Cosmopolitanism, and the oeuvre of JM Coetzee.