Literary Hermeneutics

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From Methodology to Ontology

By

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INTRODUCTION

> Understanding is the existential Being of Dasein's own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable of.
> —Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time.*

Contemporary literary theory regards hermeneutics as a somewhat obsolete realm of critical studies. A progenitor of deconstruction and post-structuralist criticism, the art of understanding outlived its usefulness and value. The name "hermeneutics" is often associated with the essentialist treatment of interpretation, a hermetic methodology whose task is to unveil the concealed message of the text through a laborious analysis of symbolism and allegories. Confronted with pragmatism, reader-response theory, or ideological criticisms, hermeneutics appears as depository of outdated, archaic notions which promote hegemonic uniformity of reading and a fundamentalist idea of one true interpretation.

These opinions are partly correct. It would be, however, a gross overgeneralization to attribute these qualities to all theories to which the common umbrella term of hermeneutics had been assigned. The etymology of the name, its clear affinity with Hermes, the messenger of the Greek pantheon, points to a venerable origin of this school of thought and its long-standing philosophical career. Indeed, hermeneutics features in the works of Aristotle, and flourishes in the writings of such Renaissance scholars as Vives or Clericus. The Enlightenment witnesses a revival of the hermeneutic tradition, manifest in the works of Christian Wolff and Johann Martin Chladenius, to name but two of the most prominent philosophers of interpretation. Contemporary hermeneutics, however, truly begins with the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, who correlate the dissociated scriptural, judicial, and philological hermeneutics into an "art of understanding," which is to become the foundation of modern humanities. From that moment, which is also the point of departure for the present book, hermeneutics undergoes numerous metamorphoses which pertain to the character of its methodology and fundamental presuppositions. The result of these

changes is a philosophy which bears little resemblance to its original essentialist, conceptual ancestor.

The aim of this work is to present and analyse the most significant aspects of this evolutionary process. At heart, hermeneutics is a study of texts. Yet, the conception of what the text represents, and therefore, of what is uncovered during the act of exegesis has significantly changed throughout the development of the art of understanding. From *intentio auctoris*, the intention and message of the author, to internal semiotic structures of the text, the object of literary analysis undergoes a number of important transitions. Thus, the concept of textual *meaning* will be the first of the primary issues of this study. The gradual mutation of the idea of meaning is consequently accompanied by a change in outlook as to the shape of the hermeneutic methodology. If the essence of the text is stable and definite, then the hermeneutic act will take form of a recovery. If, on the other hand, meaning is perceived as an indeterminate entity then interpretation will assume a different mode, far removed from a mere reconstruction of an existent content. Therefore, the second focal point of the present argument is the character of the *hermeneutic processes* which are put into play in the act of interpretation. Understanding, explanation, judgement, and appropriation are only a few examples of the changing faces of the hermeneutic methodology. Finally, the different notions of meaning and different ways of dealing with these meanings necessitate various definitions of what constitutes a correct and valid interpretation. The criteria for an assessment are thus grounded upon various foundations, whose spectrum stretches from the notion of truth as correspondence to the relevance of interpretation to the reader's self. Consequently, the third key notion of the forthcoming analysis is the idea of *correctness* or *validity* of reading.

The detailed analysis of the combined issues of meaning, interpretation, and validity ultimately leads to the primary aspect of the aim of this book: a demonstration of a change in the mode and *purpose* of hermeneutics. I will attempt to describe how the evolution of the aforementioned three theoretical aspects of hermeneutics results in a correlative metamorphosis of utmost significance: the art of understanding changes from being a *methodological* discipline to becoming an *ontological* instrument for a redescription of the interpreter's self. Such understanding of hermeneutics belies its supposedly anachronistic character, and through a permanent departure from the essentialist views and categories finds its place on the map of contemporary literary theory.

The evolution of hermeneutics is best seen on the example of theories where the displacement of the character of the concepts of meaning,

interpretation, and validity is either most radical or most substantial. Thus, the first philosopher to be discussed is Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of the so-called Romantic tradition in hermeneutics. The choice of this particular scholar over his equally influential disciples and followers such as Dilthey, Boeckh, or Droysen is dictated by two reasons. First, Schleiermacher laid the foundations for contemporary hermeneutics, and the study of his thought is most beneficial for the understanding of the future changes in the paradigm of this discipline. Secondly, philosophers who developed his ideas into systems which, as one could argue, were more advanced in terms of coherence, also failed to take into account the full spectrum and depth of his arguments. For instance, as Kurt Mueller-Vollmer argues (Mueller-Vollmer 1986), Dilthey distorted and reduced Schleiermacher's contribution to hermeneutic studies by ignoring his theories on the relation between language and interpretation. The analysis of Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics and Criticism* and *General Hermeneutics* is a return to the roots of the study of interpretation.

E. D. Hirsch, who, as Frank Lentricchia observers "stands pretty much by himself in the landscape of contemporary critical theory" (quoted after Lundin 1999, 37), is the second scholar analysed in this work. Lentricchia's remark is symptomatic of Hirsch's resistance against relativist approaches to interpretation and his theoretical battles with such scholars as Stanley Fish or Gary Madison. Hirsch is the most widely recognised devoted supporter of a traditionalist stance in hermeneutics, a critic whose essentialist views are an epitome of its author-centred version. The citation above is not entirely accurate, as Hirsch's stance is vehemently championed by P.D Juhl of Princeton University, whose *Interpretation: an Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism* was largely written as a defence and development of Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*. Nevertheless, it is Hirsch who presents the best-argued and most coherent investigation, which is also the most controversial in the epoch of the relativity of meaning and values. Hirsch's views, while adopting some of ideas of Schleiermacher and rejecting others, provide the distilled essence of positivist hermeneutics, and at the same time, as I will try to demonstrate, prove the argumentative failure of this school of thought.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's impact on contemporary philosophy and literary theory is difficult to overestimate. My analysis of his work will be confined to *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*), which is, next to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, the most influential text of the 20th century hermeneutics. In this text, and in particular in "Part Two: the extension of the question of truth to understanding in the human sciences," Gadamer performs a radical critique of the tradition of epistemology and

hermeneutics and, inspired by Heidegger's thought, institutes the ontological perspective into the art of interpretation. Although preceding Hirsch's work by several years, the work is developed in a completely different vein, which instead of amplifying and extending the Romantic tradition in hermeneutics conducts its shattering critique. Thus, Gadamer's views stand as juxtaposition to Hirsch's writings and represent a revolutionary development in place of theoretical exhaustion.

Paul Ricoeur's literary theory is primarily postulated through the works *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* and *From Texts to Actions*. His hermeneutics constitutes the final stage in the evolutionary process: taking inspiration from Gadamer's philosophy, reaching into the tradition of Romantic hermeneutics and adopting modes of analysis from semiotic and structuralist thought. Ricoeur's theory at the same time consolidates and revolutionises; the views presented therein stand in a diametrical opposition to Schleiermacher's vision of hermeneutics but share its conceptual origin. Ricoeur draws upon traditional concepts and redefines them so as to present the reader with a hermeneutic theory which is above all else a theory of the development of the self.

Each chapter of the present book is devoted to one philosopher. Chapter One initiates the discussion by an analysis of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic theory. It begins with an exposition of the idea of pervasive misunderstanding and the resultant necessity for a dependable and universal hermeneutic method. The discussion proceeds to an outline of Schleiermacher's complex and frequently misapprehended or simplified taxonomy of tasks and methods. This is conducted with particular regard to Schleiermacher's treatment of the subject/object dichotomy and the ensuing ideas of projection and abandonment of the self. The second part of the chapter deals with the philosopher's often ignored thoughts upon the relationship between language and the authorial intention, and progresses to conclusive remarks about the notions of meaning, understanding and validity.

Chapter Two proceeds in a reverse order, and begins with an extended analysis of Hirsch's distinction between meaning and significance, the two facets of textual essence. This dichotomy is criticised from several perspectives and, as I try to show, ultimately artificial and false. The conclusions reached through this argument also pertain to the doubtful nature of the hermeneutic process advocated by Hirsch. These processes are outlined in detail and argued to be inherently misleading and insufficient. The discussion ends with a criticism of Hirsch's essentialist idea of validity of interpretation.

Chapter Three signals the ontological turn in hermeneutics. To provide sufficient background for the analysis of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, this chapter begins with an exposition of Heidegger idea of Dasein's fore-structure of understanding. It proceeds to the analysis of Gadamer's version of hermeneutic circle and the concept of prejudices, crucial for his theory. The question of meaning is discussed in the light of the notions of temporal distance and the fusion of the horizons. The closing part of the analysis concerns the ideas of true understanding and the treatment of validity as an ontological awareness.

Chapter Four analyses the relation between Paul Ricoeur's identification of hermeneutic functions and the resultant ideas of meaning and validity. It begins with an exposition of Ricoeur's innovative reconstitution of Dilthey's dichotomy of understanding and explanation, and analyses its consequences for the hermeneutic theory. This account is followed by a reconstruction of the reasoning towards appropriation, the final stage in Ricoeur's process of interpretation. The chapter ends with a presentation of the validity of appropriation as an ontological instrument of change.

The conclusion of the book summarises the analysis from the four chapters, and presents a consolidated account of the evolution of the concepts of meaning, interpretation, and validity. It addresses potential criticism from relativist schools of thought, and comments upon the intrinsic value of thus envisioned hermeneutics for theoretical studies.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ABANDONMENT OF THE SELF

1. Understanding and Misunderstanding

> The more strict practice assumes that misunderstanding results as a matter
> of course and that understanding must be desired and sought at every point.
> (Schleiermacher 1998, 22)

The quotation with which I open the present discussion may be viewed as the foundational motto of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and said to postulate a purpose which guides the philosopher throughout his investigations. The certainty of the authoritarian tone of Schleiermacher's sentence may strike one as unusual, considering in particular the fact that it is possible for hermeneutics to encompass both the spoken and the written word. In the context of historical or literary studies, some plausibility may be immediately given to the thought of misunderstanding by default, based on the experience of frequent interpretative difficulties, but if set against the notion of ordinary conversation, the idea appears outlandish. Its connotations seem to suggest that every discursive encounter is predestined to become a communicative failure. Yet to accuse Schleiermacher of such naivety would be precisely to actively and willingly provide a blatant confirmation of the idea rendered by the very statement in question. For either the motto is nonsensical or its significance is prone to misreading, the latter perhaps because Schleiermacher's sense of ideas of understanding and misunderstanding is different from its conventional, everyday usage. Naturally, if Schleiermacher is to be given the benefit of doubt here, then the second option seems worthy of further examination.

It is difficult to overestimate Schleiermacher's role in the ascent of interpretation studies. His postulate of the persistence of misunderstanding elevates hermeneutics from its supplementary role of clarification of possible obscurities, to a metascience whose application in all cases of textual interpretation becomes not an option but a necessity. In the words of Jean Grondin, Schleiermacher abandons the "loose," supplementary

sense of hermeneutics, in favor of the "strict" sense, which metamorphoses the art of interpretation into a general *Künstlehre*, whose absence or neglect in communicative acts yield the danger of constant misunderstanding (Grondin 1995, 5-6). This shift of perspective functions as an ominous (yet certainly convenient from the point of view of hermeneutics itself) reminder of the fact that every instance of communication is always burdened with a potential risk of going awry, and, as such, theoretically supported, practical measures must be undertaken to ensure its success. Grondin's commentary in *The Sources of Hermeneutics* seems to suggest that all communication is hermeneutic by nature, a conclusion relatively easy to accept, yet one which ultimately reduces the significance of Schleiermacher's methodology. What Grondin sees in Schleiermacher's postulate is a magnification or intensification of the commonsense action of understanding – the shift is quantative rather than qualitative. The pervasiveness of misunderstanding enforces such changes as the increase in frequency, a stricter practice or a more detailed procedure; an extension rather than a complete transformation of cognitive faculties. That the latter is actually the case will hopefully become apparent in the course of this chapter.

Turning towards the possible reasons of the pervasive misunderstanding, Schleiermacher notes that

> [m]isunderstanding is either a consequence of hastiness or of prejudice. The former is an isolated moment. The latter is a mistake which lies deeper. It is the onesided preference for what is close to the individual's circle of ideas and rejection of what lies outside it. In this way one explains in or explains out what is not present in the author. (Schleiermacher 1998, 23)

By and large, a statement that postulates the predominance of misunderstanding over naturally expected comprehension is radical enough to demand persuasive justification, especially if it involves an equally radical transformation of the character of hermeneutic procedures designed to remedy the suggested situation. The one provided by Schleiermacher distinguishes two responsible factors:

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Hastiness is an affair relatively easy to avoid and does not constitute an error of methodology but should rather be attributed to an individual's lack of appropriate diligence, an issue rather immaterial for the present analysis. The second reason, prejudice, constitutes, on the other hand, the cornerstone of Schleiermacher's theory; as I hope to demonstrate, his methodology and its consequent implications are, in fact, ultimately nothing but derivatives of this initial assumption. Paraphrasing the quotation, the most disruptive factor in any exchange of thought is the participants' prior individualised conceptions that stand in the way of seamless, smooth communication. If freed from this hindrance, the idealised version of communication would apparently involve a successful projection of oneself into another's thought, so as to understand perfectly the original sense and meaning behind the written or uttered words.

The above fragment is significant not only because it dictates the direction in which Schleiermacher's theory further develops, but also because it distinctly illuminates the stark difference and extreme presuppositional dissonance between hermeneutic paradigms of Schleiermacher and of Gadamer. Though we are running a little ahead in our discussion since the latter's philosophy will come under closer scrutiny in Chapter Three of this book, where the contrast and its consequences will be discussed in detail, it is worthwhile to distinctly mark this moment as a reference point for future analysis. The presently discussed treatment of the prejudices and preconceptions by Schleiermacher is an excellent contrastive illustration of the radicalism of Gadamer's project of *Horizonverschmelzung*, which entails a diametrically opposite treatment of the notion of prejudice.

If, as Schleiermacher claims, misunderstanding, perceived in the manner of an error caused by an imposition of one's own judgement, occurs "as a matter of course," then understanding in its idealised state, requires an act of will. It follows then, that this act of will should be accompanied by certain awareness, and prompted by a conscious effort directed towards a specific purpose. Such an effort we may term as an *opening* of oneself towards another, an opening whose chance of success is dependent solely upon a parallel and simultaneous act of abandoning, sacrifice or withdrawal of one's own preconceptions.[1]

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[1] It may be worthwhile to investigate just how much modern ethical philosophy of Encounter and Otherness is indebted to this pre-Heideggerian thought. For instance, Ewa Borkowska sees within the thought of Emanuel Levinas a relation towards the Other which always precedes other relations and obligations. The relation with the Other is [...] non-intentional, without an objective, object-less. It is a communicative "contact" based on self-

It is thus a no mean task that Schleiermacher sets before the potential interpreter. The interpreting subject must become ready to fulfil three correlated prerequisites that can be described as opening, suspension and abandonment. While designed with an epistemological aim in mind, those states are, of course, beyond mere epistemology in implications. If, as Schleiermacher suggests, misunderstanding takes place when the reader fails to suspend to a necessary degree his/her preconceptions towards the text and the author, then the particular way in which concept of understanding is used means above all a non-intrusive analysis of a discursive statement. Correct understanding may occur only from a position of a listener who chooses to withdraw him/herself into an improbable state of non-selfhood. What is thus required is, in fact, such an augmentation of subjectivity that is, as I hope to demonstrate, an example ontological impossibility brought about by the strain of cross-purpose intentions. It remains a matter of speculations, however, to what extent Schleiermacher realised the impossibility of such an undertaking and posited misunderstanding not only as natural but, in fact, unavoidable. This would naturally mean that understanding is a platonic ideal and, as such, unreachable: this issue will also be addressed in the later parts of my argument. So far, we can establish that understanding and misunderstanding necessarily entail the ideas of openness and abandonment of the self on the part of the interpreter. As Schleiermacher writes "if the task is indeed completely to understand the thoughts of another as their product we must free ourselves from ourselves" (Schleiermacher 1998, 135). The apparently transcendental requirement already hints at the trace of the metaphysical which we will later uncover in the philosopher's methodology.

With the primary requirement in mind, we can now address the details of Schleiermacher's methodology. In relation to both spoken and written

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deprivation, selflessness and opening beyond the boundaries of cognition. It is ethics of betrayal, exile and anxiety, ethics of sacrifice of the subject to the Other, of givenness to responsibility without the possibility of the return to the Self. [trans. mine] (Borkowska 2001, 153)

Levinas' philosophy is clearly permeated with the concept of opening of oneself towards the Other. Levinas' "radical passivity," to use a term coined by Thomas Carl Wall (Wall 1999), entails an abandonment of selfhood in the face of the Other, a relation which is primarily ethical. Discussing Wall's work, Borkowska notes that the perception of art is not based on *participation* but primarily on *distancing*. The question of distance towards the object, though treated here largely in ethical terms, becomes also fundamental for the approximation of the status of the reader as an interpreter in Schleiermacher's work.

texts, the scope and the goal of understanding is clearly explained by the philosopher in the following frequently quoted passage:

> The task is also to be expressed as follows, to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author. For because we have no immediate knowledge of what is in him, we must seek to bring much to consciousness that can remain unconscious to him, except to the extent to which he himself reflectively becomes his own reader. (Schleiermacher 1998, 23)

The above quotation reveals the target of interpretation, and as such also the source of meaning in the text. But this issue is not without a certain ambiguity. It seems initially, and this is in fact the most commonly held opinion of Schleiermacher's philosophy, that since understanding is directed at the author of the utterance, then the text's meaning will be primarily instituted by *intentio auctoris*, the authorial intention. While we are as yet unprepared to extrapolate in precise categories the notion of meaning, we may, however, note that the attribution to Schleiermacher of *intentio auctoris* as the only source of textual signification would not give the full justice to his philosophy. It appears true that the author is the central figure in meaning production (although this too may prove to be a simplification, as I will later try to show), but it would be a mistake to correlate the causal factor purely with the author's intentionality. Since Schleiermacher distinctly states that one must attain understanding of the author on a level higher than the creator's own, it becomes obvious that meaning extends beyond the conscious intention. Let us therefore emphatically reiterate that although the author becomes the focus of an interpretative objective, *intentio auctoris* understood as a conscious placement of meaning into the text is neither the prime nor the only facet of this objective.

Instead, the task of interpretation is essentially holistic in its telos as it encompasses both the conscious intention of the author and his/her unrealised meaning. It thus follows that to understand the author better than he does him/herself is to supply an interpretation broader, more complex and as such inherently *different* to the one supposedly attributed to *intentio auctoris*. By contrast, Hirsch, the main protagonist of the next chapter of this book, reduces the notion of understanding the author to the painfully literate conscious intention represented by what he calls "verbal meaning." That this cannot be the case with Schleiermacher is obvious from both the above quotation and the intricacies of his interpretative method. If the reader's understanding is to exceed the author's then one cannot by any means equate *intentio auctoris* with the meaning of the text.

This of course does not exclude it from the scope of meaning; such a perspective perceives *mens auctoris* merely as a constituent, a component which, while perhaps dominant, is not at all a solitary one.

Such a perspective on the hermeneutic tasks seems to complicate the status of the reader if considered in the light of the previously discussed requirement of the abandonment of the self. It could seem that this demand of the dispossession or withdrawal of selfhood may, at least in the practical sense, equal the internal metamorphosis into the author. Yet this sort of transmutation would represent a naive intentionalist perspective and would essentially strip the reading subject of his interpretative faculties. To examine closely the reader's role in Schleiermacher's writings, let us focus on another fragment from the section of his introductory remarks.

> Before the application of the art one must put oneself in the place of the author on the objective and the subjective side.
>   On the objective side, then, via knowledge of the language as he possessed it, which is therefore more determinate than putting oneself in the place of the original readers, who themselves must first put themselves in his place. On the subjective side in the knowledge of his inner and outer life. (Schleiermacher 1998, 24)

The above quotation helpfully reduces (at least temporarily) the quasi-mystical notion of the abandonment of the self, to coherent methodological guidelines for the interpreter. This does not, however, prevent a certain tension from emerging as a result of the juxtaposition of these two demands: what we have earlier termed as an opening towards the text must also be accompanied by a full extension of investigative faculties. What may appear a paradox in Schleiermacher's writings can be categorised from a perspective characteristic of our epoch of self-conscious criticism as an absence of awareness of the difficulties raised by the dichotomy objective/subjective. Tracing the elements of the rational Cartesian legacy in Romantic hermeneutics, Roger Lundin writes:

> Romantic hermeneutics in particular drew upon its resources in rationalism and intuitionism and became, as a result, an odd amalgam of methodological study and creative illumination, as the romantic theorists employed procedural means to suggestive, intuitive ends. (Lundin 1999, 22)

Rationalism and intuitionism are not necessarily mutually exclusive: an

intuitively gained insight may be rationalised logically.[2] A greater inconsistency on the part of Schleiermacher is, however, the exclusion of the scientific, objective reason from the paradigm of prejudices, which one must abandon in interpretation. The evidently superior position of Reason within conceptual hierarchy will once again become apparent in the description of hermeneutic methodology. Lundin further remarks that

> Hermeneutics is the "art of avoiding misunderstanding" but it must be practised with both the rigor of science and the subtlety of an art. This is so because of the isolation inherent to the condition of the post-Cartesian self. That self is isolated within its own consciousness so dramatically that all communication appears to be a case of translation fraught with peril and difficulty. (Lundin 1999, 23)

Consequently, in Schleiermacher we find the tension brought about through the desire for methodological objectivity set against the mystical projection of intuitive faculties. Schleiermacher's implicit intention seems to be to establish the interpreter as a subject in the spirit of *Naturwissenschaften* based on the transparent dichotomy of objective/subjective. The absence of direct remarks on this idea induces an impression that the philosopher automatically assumes a certain implicit premise, an ideal character which the role of the reader is supposed to have. The subjective element embodies the "prejudices" which impede proper interpretation, being responsible for misunderstanding. Objective, on the other hand, is the intellectual faculty which recovers, researches and assimilates the knowledge of the language, the author, and the epoch. Since the objective element is what must become dominant in exegesis, a theoretical perspective demands that the reader be treated as a being of an epistemological focus, where epistemology equals the traditional, scientific recovery of factual truth. We will deal with this dilemma in the following section.

2. Reason and Intuition

The argument presented so far gives an indication of Schleiermacher's engagement with the Romantic tradition, which occurs against a background of a significant shift, a restructuring of balance extant in the

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[2] For example, intuitive insight is said to be one of the most important ways in which great discoveries of modern science are made. For Charles S. Peirce, a certain form of intuition, which he called "abduction" was an instance of inferential reasoning.

predominance of the three "tasks" of hermeneutics: *subtilitas intelligendi*, *subtilitas explicandi*, *and subtilitas applicandi*. The connection between these processes, present in hermeneutics since the writings of Johann August Ernesti in the 18th century, is based on what may be termed a thematic correspondence: the subject matter as well as their difference of purpose. The episteme of *subtilitas intelligendi* is a dormant, silent, internalised knowledge of understanding related to the sphere of consciousness. The techne, both *subtilitas explicandi* (the task of explanation) and *applicandi* (the task of application) are a methodological experience of externalisation of this knowledge, directed expressly at the outside world. For Schleiermacher, however, as Richard Palmer writes,

> [t]he art of explanation, which had constituted a large part of hermeneutic theory, was held [...] to fall outside of hermeneutics [...] Explication imperceptibly becomes the art of rhetorical formulation instead of the art of "understanding." In the conditions of dialogue, it is one thing to formulate something and bring it to speech; it is quite another and distinct operation to understand what is spoken. Hermeneutics, Schleiermacher contended, deals with the latter. (Palmer 1969, 85-86)

Kurt Mueller-Vollmer agrees with Palmer with respect to the specifications of the definition of Scheleiermacher's vision of the art of exegesis:

> Schleiermacher viewed hermeneutics as the "art of understanding" where understanding is elevated to the art of a scholarly discipline. He thought hermeneutics should not, however, concern itself with the specific body of rules found in the hermeneutic treatise of the theologians or jurists. Nor should it include the presentation of what one has understood to others. The latter was relegated to the sister discipline of rhetoric. Schleiermacher argued that presentation amounted to producing another text which itself would become an object of hermeneutic concern – but which was not a part of hermeneutics. (Mueller-Vollmer 1986, 12)

The task of hermeneutics thus becomes synonymous only with *subtilitas intelligendi*. The semantic sphere of the concept of interpretation (*Auslegung*) is reduced to understanding (*Verstehen*). Significant is the fact that Schleiermacher, as Mueller-Vollmer notes, treats these two concepts synonymously (Mueller-Vollmer 1986, 12). Such an approach from his perspective is completely justified. Since hermeneutics is the art of interpretation and ought to consist purely of understanding, then the two terms may be used interchangeably. In the following chapters, we will witness those two concepts separate, albeit not always in a constant and

regular manner. As this eventual split will considerably contribute to the evolutionary theme of this book, hence the present need for a clear verbalisation of the observation that for Schleiermacher, to interpret (*auslegen*) and to understand (*verstehen*) remain a couple of mutually substitutable concepts.

Most sources categorise Schleiermacher's methodology as consisting of two main types of interpretation: grammatical and psychological (technical). While not overtly inappropriate, this division is first of all not entirely accurate, and secondly, through a definite caesura between the two tasks, it diverts one's attention away from the emphasis that Schleiermacher places on the interdependence of those two types. This may consequently lead to ignoring the fact that any hierarchical ordering between them is, strictly speaking, absent. Richard Palmer attributes this division to the mature period of Schleiermacher's thought. According to him, the separation occurs

> [i]n Schleiermacher's later thinking [where] there is an increasing tendency to separate the sphere of language from the sphere of thought. The former is the province of "grammatical" interpretation, while the latter Schleiermacher first called "technical" (*technische*) and then later "psychological." (Palmer 1969, 88)

I largely disagree with Palmer on the issue of chronology of this tendency, which supposedly occurred after Schleiermacher had outlined the most prominent features of his theory. As it will hopefully become clear at the end of this section, some of the most illuminative remarks concerning the relation language/thought were written by this philosopher after the detailed methodology of the psychological interpretation had already been constructed. Thus if such split has occurred at all, it was clearly prior to the development of the specifics of his theory, even though the terminology assumed by the philosopher in his famous dichotomy of psychological and grammatical may be semantically misleading. For the present, however, let us focus on what is suggested by Palmer, and, in fact, generally recognised to be the most important of Schleiermacher's contributions to hermeneutics – the psychological interpretation.

Rarely is full justice given to the subtleties of the taxonomy of this particular section of his work. For instance, Josef Bleicher writes that Schleiermacher "complemented grammatical exegesis with psychological interpretation, which he referred to as 'divinatory'" (Bleicher 1980, 15). Even Palmer, a scholar of a well-deserved reputation for scrutiny and conscientiousness, unfortunately overgeneralises in the already quoted sentence "[the task] first called 'technical' (technische) and then later

'psychological'." To clarify this confusion, let us clearly distinguish the individual items in this conundrum of terminology. Firstly, Schleiermacher designates two basic *tasks* or types of interpretation: *grammatical* and *psychological*. Within the psychological task, there exists a separate division into the *purely psychological* and the *technical*. These concepts should be differentiated from what Schleiermacher discusses as two *methods*: the *comparative*, applicable both to the grammatical and psychological tasks, and *divinatory*, applicable to the psychological task only. In order to arrive at a coherent vision of Scheleiermacher's concepts of meaning and the act of interpretation, it is necessary to closely scrutinize each of these elements in turn.

Since we will discuss the psychological task first, it is essential that we elaborate upon the two methods according to which this aspect of interpretation is meant to occur. Schleiermacher characterises his methodological couplet in the following way:

> The *divinatory* method is the one in which one, so to speak, transforms oneself into the other person and tries to understand the individual element directly. The *comparative* method first of all posits the person to be understood as something universal and then finds the individual aspect by comparison with other things included in the same universal [...] Both refer back to each other, for the first initially depends on the fact that every person, beside being an individual themselves, has a receptivity for all other people. But this itself seems only to rest on the fact that everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themselves, and divination is consequently excited by comparison with oneself [...] Both may not be separated from each other. For divination only receives its certainty via confirmatory comparison, because without this it can always be incredible. But the comparative method does not provide any unity. The universal and the particular must penetrate each other and this always only happens via divination. (Schleiermacher 1998, 92-93)

The above passage reiterates two ideas which have been discussed so far: the opening of oneself towards another (the author), and the paradoxical feat of balance on the line of the subjective/objective dichotomy, envisioned by Lundin as a concoction of Cartesian rationality and "divinatory" intuitivism. It must be duly noted that Schleiermacher perceives the two methods not as separate, independent exercises, but as actions in a constant interplay with one another. The interpretative task is carried out as a ceaseless movement of abandonment of oneself, projection into another and a backward referral to oneself as a point of reference. It appears difficult to reconcile one's own prejudices, which, in fact, means

one's own personality as an interpreter, with the suggested fluidity of interpretation.

This concept of projection requires to be clarified on two primary points. Firstly, one must address the matter of the implicit logical premises. Acknowledged must be what surely lacks credibility from our contemporary perspective: the objectification of the inquiring subject, or to phrase this in accordance with the terminology used so far, the ability to precisely separate the harmful, intrusive, and procrastinating individual prejudices from the "scientific," inquiring faculties of the interpreter's mind. Some aspects of this treatment of the subjective/objective dichotomy are rather peculiar. It appears that the faculties of reason are responsible for objective, universal observations which lead to an establishment of equally universal and objective truths. As potential means of acquiring these truths, the logical faculties are consequently excluded from the paradigm of the '"prejudices," and as such from the sphere of the self. Thus when one speaks of the abandonment of the self, this withdrawal of selfhood is not inclusive of those faculties which one is supposed to smoothly separate from individual harmful prejudices.

On the other hand, Schleiermacher distinguishes a certain array of universal qualities, independent of an individual experience; a set of features which he believes to be a foundation for a general structure of human existence. This notion is, unlike in the case of Wilhelm Dilthey and *Erlebnis*, the lived experience, rather implied than overtly elaborated upon. As Hans-Georg Gadamer comments on this underlying principle: "it depends on a pre-existing bond between all individuals" (quoted after Lundin 1999, 24). The belief in the universality of human experience is of course hardly unexpected of Schleiermacher and perfectly in line with the Romantic tradition of hermeneutic *Auslegung*. The common human denominator is given priority in the divinatory act of exegesis as a ground upon which interpretation occurs. Due to the presence of this denominator, Schleiermacher is able to distinguish a category of intuition, to complement that of methodological reason. It would seem that this faculty belongs neither to the realm of the subjective prejudices nor to the objective investigation, but is composed of, and owes its existence to both spheres. In terms of its essence, origin and character, it is affiliated with the individual subjective element and the common human denominator. In terms of its employment, it is to be extended forth, not unlike the force of reason in a scientific inquiry. The greatest weakness of this presumption is the necessity of a conscious segregation of the individual prejudices from legitimate intuitive insights. It is, at the same time, precisely what is most difficult to accept by a modern reader, who is well-versed in the manifold

aspects of the 20th century critique of a self-knowing, self-containing and self-critical human subject. Some manifestations of this critique, will, in fact, become the cornerstones for the treatment of the theme of the relation between meaning and understanding presented in this text.

Nevertheless, the reciprocal relationship between the divinatory and the comparative methods may be regarded as advantageous and theoretically quite alluring, since from the perspective of the reconstruction of meaning, it constitutes an internally complete and legitimate system of verificative procedures of interpretation. This assumes, of course, the acceptance of the aforementioned premises. The divinatory and comparative methods are in a constant state of flux, seeking confirmation in one another. Of the comparative method Schleiermacher writes:

> Looked at from the point of view of the hermeneutic task it is not possible to consider the object in isolation. The object must first be considered in the total domain of the literary life of the people and of the age, then in the domain of the manner of composition, and finally in the total domain of the peculiarities of the individual writer. This is the comparative procedure. (Schleiermacher 1998, 144)

But as we have seen in one of the earlier quotations, the results of the comparative method on its own lack the unity necessary for a complete and coherent interpretation. That is why the ideas reached through the comparative procedure are verified through the divinatory and vice versa. One encounters here a far more complex and far better grounded system of interpretative verification than the ones present in the methodologies of Hirsch or Madison, for instance. Those theories (both addressed in Chapter Two of this book) base interpretation upon meaning understood as purely *intentio auctoris* and as such, as will be demonstrated later, deprive themselves of any concrete validation reference. In case of Schleiermacher it is perhaps difficult to speak of any amount of verificative certainty; nevertheless, the fluctuating movement of the comparative and divinatory procedures bears a strong resemblance to the classic notion of the hermeneutic circle, but one which has been doubled. In case of the conventional hermeneutic circle, confirmation is sought within the already acquired knowledge. A part is a reference to whole and vice versa. In this particular instance, one could imagine the movement of divinatory and comparative procedures as a rotation of two overlapping circles. They are both affixed within the studied text, yet one considers it from a textual angle (comparative), the other from the "reader's perspective" (divinatory).

This circular duality of the hermeneutic movement brings us to the third point to be clarified; this verificative procedure is naturally linked

with and accordingly augments the role of the reader in the process of interpretation. This role, previously determined through the opening towards another, accompanied by a paradoxical requirement of objectivity, is now endowed with a new kind of responsibility. Due to the play of the comparative and divinatory methods, the reader acts not only through the recovery of meaning, but also, due to his link with the author on the grounds of the common human denominator, he becomes one of the two factors (next to the general context) which partake in the action of meaning verification. This action entails more than just ordinary, expectable decision making. Rather, something which we may call a "reader's paradigm" is inscribed into the process of interpretation. The paradigm excludes from its scope the individual prejudices, but contains a combination of the ground of the common human experience and intuition based upon that experience. Schleiermacher does not give an indication as to where we should draw the line between prejudice and the suggested paradigm itself. Nevertheless, one can find more clues as to the nature of the reader's involvement in the previously indicated subdivision of psychological interpretation into purely psychological and technical.

In order to discuss this categorisation, we must circle back to our initial point of departure and recall the essence of Schleiermacher's idea of understanding: "[...] every understanding is the inversion of a speech-act, during which the thought which was the basis of the speech must become conscious" (Schleiermacher 1998, 7). Since, according to the philosopher, understanding is a process based primarily on reversal, the final object of hermeneutic analysis is found entangled in the actions responsible for its production in the first place. Hence, Schleiermacher attempts an analysis of the creative process itself, analysis whose result is a taxonomy that allows for an attribution of specific hermeneutic tasks:

> [...] we must draw attention to another difference, namely to the difference between the indeterminate, fluid train of thoughts and the completed structure of thoughts. In the first is, as in a river, an indeterminate transition from one thought to another, without necessary connection. In the second, in complete utterance, there is a determinate aim to which everything relates, one thought determines the other with necessity, and if the aim is achieved the sequence has an end. In the first case the individual, the purely psychological predominates, in the second the consciousness of a specific progress towards a goal predominates, the result is intentional, methodical, technical. The hermeneutic task accordingly splits on this side into the *purely psychological* and the *technical*. (Schleiermacher 1998, 102)

> The genesis is hidden [...] the former is the method of meditation, the latter the method of composition [...] so the hermeneutic task is therefore precisely to understand both acts in their difference. (Schleiermacher 1998, 103-105)

Speaking of the creative process, Schleiermacher describes the functioning of the author's mind in a methodologically productive manner. One could say that what is therefore subdivided into the indeterminate and the purposeful is the thought itself. The hermeneutic tasks attributed to this twofold mental taxonomy are, correspondingly, the purely psychological and the technical. For the sake of clarity we may turn to yet another of Schleiermacher's explanations:

> The difference lies in the fact that the technical is the understanding of the meditation and of the composition, the psychological is the understanding of the ideas, among which the basic thoughts are also to be included, from which the whole sequences develop, and is the understanding of the secondary thoughts. (Schleiermacher 1998, 104)

In several places, Schleiermacher remarks that the tasks complement one another and are conducted in a state of virtual simultaneity. The purely psychological task is perhaps the most familiar to any scholar of literature and theory, since it is still widely manifest in some school and university curricula in various parts of the world. It is no more no less than a detailed study of the author's biography in relation to the text in question. This approach, now often regarded as traditionalist or essentialist, explores the potential links between events, historical background, readings, associations and friendships, studies and journeys, etc. of the lifetime of the author with the ideas behind the produced works. Schleiermacher conscientiously delineates the precautions to be taken in such an analysis and presents a comprehensive set of guidelines, which focus in particular on such elements of the relation of life to work as unity of thought, choice making, relationship between the inner, psychological and the outer, worldly life. The knowledge acquired in these areas will provide the interpreter with clues as to the impulses and motivations behind the text itself (Schleiermacher 1998, 107-110).

The connection between the technical task and what Schleiermacher calls meditation and composition is all too frequently circumvented in the majority of the discussions of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. To reiterate the early quotation, the creative process depends on a transgression from thinking in the "loose" sense to purposeful thinking whose goal is the final act of creation of a literary work itself. It is essential to recognise that

although Schleiermacher works upon this division and attributes to it once again a separate hermeneutic task, the technical task is not focused as much on the state of authorial meditation as on the instance of transformation of meditation into composition. The state of thinking is for Schleiermacher

> in and for itself a moment, and thus transitory. But on the other hand such a state leaves something persistent behind, deposits something, and the repeatability of the original moment depends on that. If this were not the case every idea would disappear in the moment itself and our whole being would disappear every time in each moment. In the state of meditation the momentary disappears, we retain what became at one moment in another, and thence the whole thing is at the same time an act and this belonging together, which lies in the continuing decision, overcomes the momentary disappearing and should really completely overcome it. (Schleiermacher 1998, 125)

The meditative is therefore, and quite obviously, elusive to a degree that forbids direct analysis. Yet, as Schleiermacher writes, it deposits behind itself a trace and the repeatability of this trace, its persistent recurrence eventually leads to the act of composition. The task of penetrating another's thoughts appears rather naive in its metaphysical objectives. As a matter of fact, not only does it seem impossible to perform but also lacks any clear criteria according to which its success or failure may be verified. For this reason, it is more fruitful to understand Schleiermacher's meditation on mediation not as an objective in itself, i.e. an interpretation whose final task is to understand the mind of the author, but rather as a circular route which begins at the text, meanders through the analysis of the psychological act of creation and leaden with a new cargo of awareness returns to the text. Although the technical task, similarly to the purely psychological one, has as its main object of study the author of the text, within the moment of the analysis of the transition from meditation to composition, the previously highlighted role of the reader as a verificative power becomes more pronounced. One's own self stands for the interpreter as the only accessible reference in sight. We read in Schleiermacher:

> But in order to achieve the hermeneutic task in this sense one must above all seek to recognise the relationship between the meditation and composition of the writer. We begin with the general overview. But how can we understand the inner process of the writer from this? By observation. But this is based on self-observation. One must oneself be versed in meditation and composition in order to understand another's

meditation and composition. On this side one's own composing is so
essential in practice for higher studies in literary gymnastics.
(Schleiermacher 1998, 135)

The divinatory method or at least a method similar in character permeates
the gist of the technical interpretation. In trying to understand the process
of creation, the reader inevitably turns to his/her own experience as a
scholar/writer. The above passage evokes a very important observation:
not only is the individual act of interpretation different for every reader but
this difference is primarily *qualitative*.

When postulating differences between various interpretations made
possible by Schleiermacher's philosophy, I will not go as far as to suggest
a mirroring of the potentiality and instability of meaning found at the
foundations of the reader-response theories of, for instance, Wolfgang Iser
or Stanley Fish. [3] That this is not the case is strongly reinforced every time
Schleiermacher invokes the authorial figure as the prime source of
meaning. In spite of this, there are some implications in the above
quotation which suggest that Schleiermacher's methodology attributes
more importance to the reader's role than the philosopher himself would
have cared to admit. Schleiermacher explicitly states that a necessary
degree of proficiency is required for a correct interpretation; this naturally
means that depending on the skill of the reader, an interpretation may be
shallow or profound, good or bad. A reader well versed in meditation and
composition will be in possession of better faculties than a less skilful or
knowledgeable one, and as such his interpretation will be superior. This
fact is significant for two primary reasons. First, from the methodological
point of view it clearly sets out the criteria for an exegesis valid from a
hermeneutic perspective: one which is performed by a sufficiently
competent scholar. Secondly, it is strongly reminiscent of a far more
modern concept, a term which has comfortably settled into the modern
literary theory: the "model reader." An abstract projection by the text of a
virtual existence of a model reader, a concept used for example by
Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading* or Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula*,
an improbable entity which would conceive a perfect and complete
interpretation, is in fact a pure analogy of Schleiermacher's model
interpreter, whose skill (and a method of meditation) would correspond to
the author's so completely as to produce a reversal of the act of creation of
a literary work.

The notion of competence thus becomes of paramount significance in
Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Interpretation is not an egalitarian task:

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[3] With the full awareness of the differences between those two theories, of course.

some readers are more aware of the process of creativity and of the content of the common ground of experience than others. What is particularly discordant, however, is that this awareness must be maintained in the action of opening towards the text and its author. One's skills as a writer and therefore as an interpreter are essentially placed outside the paradigm of prejudices and into the sphere of the investigative faculties constituted by reason and logic. Once again the paradoxical nature of Schleiermacher's request becomes apparent; somehow a clear separation must be conducted within oneself in order to productively separate the harmful, intrusive selfhood from its objective, logical counterpart. The hazards of this problem will be fully addressed in the discussion of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* in Chapter Three of this book. For Schleiermacher, the difficulties of the demand "to free ourselves from ourselves" remain unsolvable. On the one hand, it is necessary to reject one's own preconceptions in order to empathise with the mind of the author. On the other, this action must be conducted not only from a remote, distanced point of view, which within the scheme of this hermeneutics is not part of the interpreter's subjectivity, but also with a highlighted awareness of the participation in common human experience. Yet, according to Schleiermacher, the only place where one can confirm the unity of experience is the interpreter's own way of being, thus ultimately the understanding of one's own selfhood.

It would appear then, that Schleiermacher's methodology is, at heart, an impossible interplay of processes which involve both the subjectivity of the author and of the reader. Though the task of projection and opening is the primary mode of understanding, the verification of what has been understood occurs against the background of the self which one has been earlier asked to abandon. Reader's competence is defined against a criterion which combines objective reason and human experience whose exact correspondence to the spheres of either objectivity or subjectivity cannot be precisely established. The persistence of these paradoxical relations poses difficulties in terms of an unambiguous definition of both meaning and textuality in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. The category of meaning is certainly characterised by its essentially recoverable quality. For Schleiermacher, understanding is a reconstructive process, focused on meaning as a product of the authorial mind. Yet, as we have established, it cannot be merely truncated to the authorial *intention*, as the telos of interpretation is to "understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author." Meaning therefore transcends *intentio auct*oris in the sense that it encompasses content which extends beyond the author's awareness. This content cannot, however, be reduced to exposed relations between the author and his/her contextual world, as the process which is

responsible for the recovery of meaning and its subsequent verification is nested in the figure of the interpreter. Still, such an approach excludes the individualistic, self-dependent sphere of the reader's consciousness, as this is precisely what must be abandoned in the act of opening which constitutes the most decisive manoeuvre in understanding.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny the importance that Schleiermacher attaches to the readerly competence. The qualitative difference in interpretation, dependent upon the faculties of an individual reader, without doubt influences the overall outcome of interpretation. The criterion does not seem to be merely that of correctness or of scope. If, as the philosopher writes, the elucidation of the relation between meditation and composition in the author's work is based on self-observation on the part of the reader, then certainly those aspects of this relation will be brought out which are considered important and productive for the reader him/herself. Even if one maintains the feasibility of the idealistic objective approach postulated by Schleiermacher, the hierarchical approach cannot remain unacknowledged. The recovered textual meaning will therefore consist of content to which a given reader gave priority based on individual experience. The less significant content will be undervalued or even passed over. The positioning of the reader as one of the elements in the verificative procedure results in an occurrence of value judgements which establish individual preferences, if not as criteria of correctness then at least as standards according to which the importance is assessed. The opening combined with an abandonment of the self can only be taken so far, because in the advanced movement of the hermeneutic circle Schleiermacher's methodology necessitates a return to the previously disregarded selfhood.

3. Language

As the discussion so far focused on the psychological aspect of interpretation, it may misleadingly appear to the reader that this particular type of exegesis should be given priority over the grammatical one. The impression may be reinforced by the fact that Schleiermacher's heritage lies primarily in the development of the humanistic science precisely from the angle of the psychological task. The intricacies of the grammatical interpretation, which focuses largely upon the linguistic and stylistic aspects of the studied text, are of lesser interest in terms of the thematic scope of this book. As a matter of fact, the grammatical interpretation receives very little attention from the contemporary scholars. In his hermeneutic analysis Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: "we shall pass over