Texts and their Interpreters: The Enterprise of Philology

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Establishing Meaning

A LITERARY PHENOMENON can usefully be studied in itself, like one intellectual product among others, and in its specificity. The nature of literary understanding is inseparable from a hermeneutic effort which, in the following consideration of classical texts, is conceived as a direct critical approach to the text and a direct confrontation of the history of its reception. This is conjoined with more specifically theoretical approaches connected with the structure and formulations of the text, related to experience acquired in the course of working towards an understanding of a text.

The classical texts I commonly research pose immediate problems of intelligibility—this is true of Aeschylus, where there is a well-recognized degree of difficulty, but it is also true of Homer, where it has been less well-recognized; letter and meaning cannot be considered in isolation from the process of composition. The gradual discovery of the technical or aesthetic conditions surrounding the writing of the text corresponds to stages in the hermeneutical interpretation of the work, considered as a text not yet understood, accepted in its degree of difference as an example of a genre and as an individual realization of a form. The result could be the same for a text reputed to be difficult, encoded, occult, or divinely-inspired, like the chants of the chorus in Aeschylus's Oresteia, or for a seemingly more accessible narrative, like Homer's Iliad.

The determination of meaning leads to a deeper understanding of the text. Its texture and meaning provide insight into the preconditions and method of its construction, as well as into the modes of operation appropriate to the linguistic material used. The text's complexity is clarified as it is elucidated; its mystery is dispelled in the process of analysis, while its simplicity gains an unexpected complexity in the system of relationships uncovered.

These principles applied to the canonical authors of the classical tradition are valid for contemporary works, provided that we consider the
complex historical setting in which these works actively or passively inscribed themselves.

Over the last few years, I have worked to develop modern methods of understanding texts (prehistoricist, romantic, recent) and modern exegetical traditions, whether theoretical or applied. I have put these methods to the test in readings of contemporary literature, centering on the poetry of Paul Celan. This has allowed me to approach in a different way the fundamental problem of the rapport between the reading of readings of the text and the reading inherent to the text per se. This relationship determines all subsequent approaches, so long as each approach encounters in the text a fully-developed interpretable dimension in respect to inherited themes or to the state of the language, and along with that, sufficient possibilities for reflecting critically on it, and some internal support for developing an internal perspective on it. The relation between the creative act and the potential for criticism is clearly shown by the continuity of the critical tradition and by its present state of radicalization.

We cannot underestimate the element of freedom in the mastering of techniques, the autonomy linked from earliest times, in all societies, to the professions and to their learned and distinctive languages. We must recognize the importance of institutionalized places for mediation and transformation, and thus construct a system of three poles, where the actuality of a production, in its separate domain, would be first judged by its competency in and knowledge of the art it implies. Technical mastery is inseparable from this cultural memory, even before its subject matter has been fully developed. A large part of essential intertextuality is implicit in poetical techniques; thus it is less actually present in the text than it is a virtual or minimal potentiality. Other aspects of the text comprise a system of identifiable references and constitute the "cultural tradition;" but first this must be thought of as a horizon to be specified by knowledge, within the limits of art.

The project is ambitious, with its all-encompassing content, but restrained by the limited degree to which it can be delegated and by the need to be coordinated with other tasks with their own languages and formalities of production, and, in Archaic Greece, with other more independent intellectual endeavors. It is important to distinguish (even abstractly and artificially) among those domains—juridical, political, theological or philosophical, etc.—the better to evaluate the limits within which they have developed, independent of the dominant literary tradition, which could at any time integrate them into its universe. To make the distinction is to mark the degree of integration and to detect all forms of
transfer from one universe of discourse to another, as in Athenian tragedy. They have been observed as early as the fifth century in an author who, like Heraclitus, notes and analyzes existing forms of discourse. The use of these forms appears, in the course of their integration, as a secondary use, as a specific import, which (in the case of poetry) poetic technique can incorporate into its own universe, while keeping it outside and using it to enlarge and enhance itself. This move toward openness, and the tension created between the closed space of literary tradition proper, and the breaking down of the strong barriers between genres presupposes that the literary work is situated in its own particular historic moment, and that the distance between the two horizons is exploited in order to determine it. Meaning is construed through an act of accommodation. A single element—debate or diatribe—having a meaning in one context, takes on another in the structure into which it is reintegrated, thanks to a transfer of meaning that could not have been anticipated except within the cultural context in which it took place.

If we closely inspect texts to discover the weight of their cognitive content (arbitrarily excepting technical texts), we would have to distinguish between 1) the exoteric uses of language and the different levels of understanding that their handling presupposes, and 2) the mental dispositions that the public perception of their reproduction and transmission for public consumption presupposes, when we turn to the categories of aesthetic convention and to an appreciation of the complications of such a transfer.

Philological work focuses on those points of intersection where meaning results from an encounter between internal transformational power and integrated ensembles of meaning.

The Debate over Meaning

The problem of univocity can be stated in another way when one brings possible meanings into the genetic process, while keeping them separate from the decision-making process of writing. Polysemy is among the historical resources of art, and when it persists in codified form, as an expressive or enigmatic means, it forms part of the structure of the text. The whole gamut of associated resources, including those internal to the language, occupy an important place in the apprentice techniques of composition; construction of meaning presupposes them, but may not be confused with them.
We can imagine forms of careless abandon inspired by a methodical verbal creativity, in which the game is played for its own sake, taking its cue from games where the study of the means outweighs the complexity of what is said. Examples of this can be found everywhere, but ordinarily the first choice is subordinated to the principles of composition, so that it would be arbitrary, even absurd, to seek to abolish these systems by reversing decipherable choices already made within the dynamics of an undetermined subject matter.

Different devices have different uses. If difference is effaced, it is because one postulates, following one or another romantic tradition, that language speaks itself in the speaker, even when he composes it. If he composes in the spirit of the language, it will be truthful. If he composes from his own knowledge or will, it will be artificial. The procedures of hermeneutics are opposed on the same principles. The text will be imprinted by author and structure—the structure inherent in the language. Modern interpretations, structuralist or psychoanalytic, depend on a romantic conception—the sacredness of tradition; but the givens that historians and anthropologists deduce from the text are often tributaries to it, even when the point of view has not been made explicit.

One then moves from a piece of writing that is innovative or presents a particular point of view—perhaps questioning, doubting, or rejecting something—to the process of composition, to matters that for interpretation are both multiple and subject to change. It is not the historic fact marking the object itself that we retain, but that other tradition of the critical object, established over the centuries. It is the same for Aeschylus, for Epicurus, for Baudelaire, and for Celan. Interpretive traditions appeared as soon as the first book appeared; if the written work is of sufficient stature to transform the literary or cultural tradition, interpretations are capable of profoundly transforming its meaning. Extreme reactions correspond to the power of the reaction contained in the text.

Over time, a written work, by its literalness, defends itself from the successive interpretations of its readers. In this way, the fertility of language is rediscovered. In modern art, the frontiers fixed by the traditional concept of what a text is have been effaced, but this only affects a form already situated within the history of literature. Literal interpretation will continue to impose itself in the same way, and to keep its power when the shattered elements of abstract representations are organized, as in the poems of Celan, into a semantic structure whose coherence could have been derived from the initial dissociation of the signifiers. Theoretical reflexivity will have reoccupied its former position within the sphere of

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several poetical techniques that are self-sufficient, standing quite apart from ordinary language.

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There remain the infinite numbers of diverse interpretations proposed for the sentences and paragraphs of the best-known texts, which proceed from readings made under various cultural influences. In principle, the theoretical analysis of a complex structure of meaning sets aside conflicting understandings of the text and shifts the ground of potential conflict to its own internal space.

Discussions of the meaning of texts approaches the written material as if it had not yet been written, but were still fluid and could be reshaped. Thus polysemy is well-established, the outcome of a long history of the uses of the text, and reflecting a constant openness to reinterpretation. Choice of one meaning over another has been made under cultural or mental constraints; this choice proceeds from a principle of freedom—freedom of usage; it acts by disengaging itself from interpretive constraints, themselves originally proceeding from an escape from constraints.

The transition from the raw state of uncertainty about meaning is best shown in the case of difficult or esoteric texts, where the precision of the original writing is as marked as the distance from ordinary language is pronounced. The difference can be detected in the order of the words and above all in the syntax, where the degree to which they deviate from normal usage can be seen.

Philology, like the art of reading, finds itself confronted with readings produced in different countries, which it must consider methodically as hypotheses about meanings, but which it can understand only by comparing them closely with the cultural conditions in which they were produced and by reconstructing the history of their comprehensions, miscomprehensions, interdictions, and impositions—an analysis of error as well as research into meaning.

In the monographs from which my commentary on Oedipus Rex was derived, I brought together, for each sentence of the text, the opinions expressed on it from the Alexandrian period to the present. The situation I established was one in which—as if sitting around one table—representatives of each of ten or eleven proposed interpretations confronted one another. The procedure, which is in fact an analysis of philology from the inside, was necessary, in my view, because it demonstrated that to correct
traditionally accepted meanings (to which we tend more often than we realize), we cannot rely on individual approaches. Such corrections are not arbitrary, since the work that remains to be done is so vast.

To this end, it was necessary to present such corrections as simple hypotheses about meanings, capable of being harmonized with other proposals, and to submit them to the test of exhaustive argumentation. This continuing debate transforms what were often the edicts of authority into open scientific discussion. The stakes are high if arbitrariness is to be reduced, and if the results of such an investigation are no longer to be arbitrarily disregarded.

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NOTES

1. The point of view adopted here is based on the philological study of classical texts; it is the one followed in my own work, but it applies in general to the work of the Centre de Recherche Philologique of the Université de Lille III, now under the directorship of Pierre Judet de La Combe.