

WHAT IS A TEXT?
EXPLANATION AND INTERPRETATION

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This essay will be devoted principally to the debate between two basic attitudes which one can adopt in regard to a text. These two attitudes were summed up, in the time of Wilhelm Dilthey, by the two words "explain" and "interpret." Dilthey called *explanation* that model of intelligibility borrowed from the natural sciences and extended to the historical sciences by the positivistic schools, and he took *interpretation* as a derived form of *understanding* in which he saw the basic approach of the "human sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaften*), the only one which can do justice to the basic difference between these sciences and the "natural sciences." I would like here to examine the outcome of this opposition in the light of the conflicts between contemporary schools. The notion of explanation has, indeed, shifted positions; it no longer stems from the natural sciences but from strictly linguistic models. As for the notion of interpretation, it has, in modern hermeneutics, undergone deep transformations which set it off from the psychological notion of understanding, in Dilthey's sense of the term. It is this new situation of the problem perhaps less contradictory and more fruitful, which I would like to explore. But before entering into the new concepts of explanation and interpretation, I would like to devote some time to a preliminary question which in fact will determine all the rest of our investigation. The question is this: What is a text?

I. WHAT IS A TEXT?

Let us call a text every utterance or set of utterances fixed by writing. According to this definition, the fixation by writing is constitutive of the text itself. But what is fixed by writing? We have said: every utterance or group of utterances. Is this to say that these utterances

must have been previously enunciated physically or mentally, that all writing has been, at least in a potential way, first of all speech? In short, how does it stand with the relation of the text to speech?

The psychological and sociological priority of speech over writing is not in question. *Psychological priority*: if by speech we mean the production of a particular discourse by a particular speaker addressing himself to a hearer who may or may not understand what the first speaker means, this kind of human experience precedes that of writing. *Sociological priority*: the need for a preservation of spoken language by the means of some kind of fixation, inscription or recording may be assigned to a rather late stage of economical and political development. One can however wonder if the late appearance of writing has not provoked a radical change in our relation to the very utterance of our discourse. That which is fixed by writing is a discourse which certainly one could have spoken but *which one writes precisely* because one does not speak. The fixation by means of writing occurs in the plan of speech itself, that is, in the plan where speech could have arisen. One can then wonder whether a text is not truly a text when it is not just limited to recording a prior speech, but when it invites directly in written words the meaning of the utterance.

That which could give insight to this idea of a direct relation between writing and the meaning intended by the utterance is the function which reading plays in regard to that which is written. Indeed, a written text calls for a reading which later will allow us to introduce both concepts of explanation and interpretation as specific kinds of reading. For the time being, let us say that the reader takes the place of the listener, just as writing takes the place of speaking. Indeed, the writing – reading relation is not just a particular instance of the speaking – answering relation. It is not an instance of dialogue. Whereas dialogue is an exchange of questions and answers, there is no exchange of this sort between the writer and his reader; the writer does not answer the reader. Rather, the book introduces a shift between the act of writing and the act of reading, between which two acts there is no communication: the reader is absent from the writing of the book, the writer is absent from its reading. In this way the text produces a double effacement (occultation) of reader and writer; it is in this way it gets substituted for the relation by means of dialogue which immediately binds together the voice of the one and the ear of the other.

This substitution of reading in the precise place of a dialogue which does not occur is so evident that when we have the occasion of meeting

an author and of speaking with him (about his book, for instance), we experience a kind of disturbance in that very special relation which we have with the author in and through his work. I like to say sometimes that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead and the book as posthumous. Indeed, it is when the author is dead that the relation to his book becomes complete and, in a way, intact. The author can no longer respond; it only remains to read his work.

This difference between the act of reading and the act of dialogue confirms our hypothesis that writing is a process similar to speech, parallel to speech, an operation which takes its place and in a way intercepts it. This is why we were able to say that writing is a direct inscription of this intention, even if, historically and psychologically, writing began as a graphic transcription of speech signs. This liberation of writing whereby it gets substituted for speech is the birth of a text.

At present, what happens now to the utterance itself when it is directly inscribed instead of being pronounced? Emphasis has always been placed on the most striking characteristic of writing, that it preserves discourse and makes of it an archives available for individual and collective memory. Added to this is the fact that the linearization of symbols allows for an analytic and distinctive translation of all the successive and discrete traits of language and thus increases its efficiency. Is this all that it does? Preservation and efficiency still only characterize the transcription of oral language into graphic signs. The liberation of a text from vocal existence results in a veritable upheaval as much in the relations between language and the world as in the relation between language and the different subjectivities involved, that of the author and that of the reader.

Let us call reference or referential relation the relation between language and the reality (whatever it may be) *about* which something is said in a sequence of discourse; to speak is to say something *about* something *to* somebody; let us put aside for a moment this relation of discourse to somebody else, in order to focus on the relation “*about*” something; this “*about*” designates the referent of the discourse. This referential relation is, as one knows, borne by the sentence, which is the first and simplest unity of discourse. This referential function is so important that it compensates, so to say, for another characteristic of language which is the separation of signs from things: by means of the referential function language “*returns*” so to say, to reality, which it tries to grasp, to represent, to express. What we call the symbolic function of language is a kind of balance between a process of *difference*

which separates the world of signs from the world of things and a process of *reference*, which "pours back" language into the universe. It is this subtle balance between *difference* and *reference* which speech preserves and which writing destroys.

In speech the function of reference is linked to the role of the *situation of discourse* within the exchange of language itself: in exchanging speech, the speakers are present to each other, but also to the circumstantial setting of discourse, not only the perceptual surroundings, but also the cultural background known by both speakers. It is in relation to this situation that discourse is fully meaningful; the reference to reality is in the last analysis reference to that reality which can be pointed out "around" the speakers, "around," so to speak, the instance of discourse itself. Language is, moreover, well equipped to insure this anchorage; the demonstrative articles, the spatial and temporal adverbs, the personal pronouns, the tenses of the verb, and in general all the ostensive indicators of language serve to anchor discourse in the circumstantial reality which surrounds the instance of discourse. Thus, in living speech, the *ideal* meaning of what one says bends towards a *real* reference, namely to that "about which" one speaks; at its limit this real reference tends to get confused with an ostensive designation wherein speech joins up with the indicative gesture, that of pointing out.

This is no longer the case when a text takes the place of speech. The shifting of references towards ostensive designation (showing) is intercepted, at the same time that dialogue is interrupted by the text. I say indeed intercepted and not suppressed; it is here that I will shortly take up my distance from what I shall call the ideology of the absolute text which is based on an undue hypostasis of the rightful remarks we have just made. A text, we shall see, is not without reference; it will be precisely the task of reading, as interpretation, to actualize the reference. At least, in this suspension wherein reference is deferred, in the sense that it is postponed, a text is somehow "in the air," outside of the world or without a world; by means of this obliteration of all relation to the world, every text is free to enter into relation with all the other texts which come to take the place of the circumstantial reality shown by living speech.

This relation of one text to another, in the disappearance of the world about which one speaks, engenders the quasi-world of texts or *literature*. Such is the upheaval which affects discourse itself, when the movement of reference towards designation (showing) is intercepted by a text,

words cease to efface themselves in front of things; written words become words for their own sake.

II. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS AS "EXPLANATION"

We are now prepared to introduce the opposition between explanation and interpretation as a consequence of the autonomous status of the written text as regards speech. What we called masking (occultation) of the surrounding world by the quasi-world of texts gives rise to two possibilities. As readers, we can remain in the suspense of the text and treat it as a worldless and authorless text, in which case we explain it by means of its internal relations, its structure. Or else we can remove the text's suspense, accomplish it in a way similar to speech, returning it to living communication, in which case we interpret it. These two possibilities both belong to the act of reading, and reading consists in a dialectical interplay of these two attitudes.

Let us take them up separately, before considering their connections. We can make the text into a first kind of reading, a reading which acknowledges, so to speak, the text's interception of all the relations with a world which can be shown and with subjectivities who can converse. This transfer into the "place" where the text stands constitutes a special project in regard to the text, that of prolonging its suspension of the referential relation to the world and the reference to the author as the speaking subject. By means of this special project, the reader decides to stay within the "place of the text" and within the "enclosure" of this place. On the basis of this choice, the text has no outside; it has but an inside; it aims at no transcendence, as would speech which is directed to someone, *about* something.

This project is not only possible but legitimate. Indeed, the constitution of the text as text and the system of text as literature justifies the interception of this double transcendence of speech towards a world and another person. On this basis an explanatory attitude in regard to the text becomes possible.

Now, unlike what Dilthey thought, this explanatory attitude is in no way borrowed from an area of knowledge and an epistemological model other than that of language itself. It does not rely on a naturalistic model extended only secondarily to the human sciences. The natural-mind opposition is not even operative here. If something is borrowed, it takes place inside the same field, that of semiology or semiotics. It is

indeed possible to treat texts according to the explanatory rules which linguistics successfully applied to elementary systems of signs which constitute language (langue) in opposition to speech. As is known, the language – speech distinction is the basic distinction which furnishes linguistics with a homogeneous object; whereas speech belongs to physiology, psychology, sociology, language, as the system of rules of which speech is the exception, belongs only to linguistics. As is also known, linguistics considers only systems of entities which possess no absolute meaning and which are defined only by their difference from all the other unities. These unities, which are either merely distinctive like those of phonological articulation or significant like those of lexical articulation, are oppositive entities or unities. It is the interplay of oppositions and their combinations on the basis of an inventory of discreet unities which defines the notion of structure in linguistics. It is this structural model which furnishes the type of explanatory behavior which we are now going to see applied to a text, mainly by French structuralists.

Even before beginning this undertaking, it might be objected that laws which are valid only for language as distinct from speech could not be applied to a text. Is not a text, one might say, while not being speech still in the same position as speech in regard to language (langue)? Is it not necessary to oppose in an overall way speech as a succession of utterances, that is, in the last analysis, as a succession of sentences, to language? Is not the speech – writing distinction secondary in regard to this language – discourse distinction, language and speech occupying the same position as discourse? These remarks are perfectly legitimate and permit us to think that that explanatory model characterized as structural does not exhaust the field of possible attitudes in regard to a text. But even before saying what the limit of this explanatory attitude is, it is necessary to grasp its fruitfulness. The working hypothesis of all structural analysis of texts is this: in spite of the fact that writing occupies the same position as speech in regard to language, namely that of discourse, the specificity of writing in regard to actual speech is based on structural characteristics which may be treated as analogies of language within discourse. The working hypothesis is perfectly legitimate; it consists in saying that under certain conditions the larger unities of language, that is to say, the unities of higher order than the sentence, are organized in a way similar to that of the small unities of language, that is, the unities of an order lower than the sentence, those precisely which belong to the domain of linguistics.

In his *Anthropologie structurale*,¹ Claude Levi-Straus formulates in the following way this working hypothesis in regard to one category of texts, that of myths: "Like every linguistic entity, the myth is made up of constitutive unities; these constitutive unities imply the presence of those which generally occur in the structure of language, namely phonemes, morphemes, semantemes. Each form differs from the one which precedes it by a higher degree of complexity. For this reason we will call the elements which properly belong to the myth (and which are the most complex of all): large constitutive unities." By means of this working hypothesis, the large unities which are at least the same size as the sentence and which, put together, form the narrative proper to the myth will be able to be treated according to the same rules as the smallest unities known to linguistics. It is in order to insist on this likeness that Claude Levi-Strauss speaks of mythemes, just as one speaks of phonemes, morphemes, etc. But in order to remain within the limits of the analogy between mythemes and the lower level linguistic unities, the analysis of texts will have to operate on the same sort of abstraction as that practiced by the phonologist. For the latter, the phoneme is not a concrete sound, in an absolute sense, with its acoustic quality; (it is a function defined by commutation which resolves itself into its oppositive value in relation to all the others). In this sense, it is not, to speak like Saussure, a "substance" but a form, that is to say, an interplay of relations. Similarly, a mytheme is not one of the sentences of a myth but an oppositive value attached to several individual sentences forming, in the terminology of Levi-Strauss, a "bundle of relations": "It is only in the form of a combination of such bundles that the constitutive unities acquire a meaning-function."² What is here called meaning-function is not at all what the myth means, its philosophical or existential content or intention, but the arrangement, the disposition of mythemes, in short, the structure of the myth.

I would like to recall here briefly the analysis which, according to this method, Levi-Strauss offers of the Oedipus myth. He separates into four columns the sentences of the myth. In the first column he places all those which speak of an over-esteemed parental relationship (for example, Oedipus weds Jocasta, his mother, Antigone buries Polynices, her brother, in spite of the order not to); in the second column are to be found the same relations but affected with the opposite

¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*. Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958, p. 233.

² *Ibid.*, p. 234.

sign, and under-esteemed or devaluated parental relationship (Oedipus kills his father, Laios, Eteocles kills his brother Polynices); the third column is concerned with monsters and their destruction; the fourth groups together all the proper names whose meanings suggest a difficulty to walk straight (lame, clumsy, swollen foot). A comparison of the four columns brings out a correlation. Between one and two what we have are parental relationships by turns overesteemed or underesteemed; between three and four we have an affirmation and then a negation of man's autochthony (aboriginal, indigenous): "It would thereby result that the fourth column holds the same relation with column three as column one does with column two. . . ; the overestimation of the blood relationship is, in regard to its underestimation, like the attempt to escape from the autochthonous situation and the impossibility of therein succeeding." The myth thus appears as a sort of logical instrument which draws together contradictions in order to overcome them: "the impossibility of connecting groups of relations is thus overcome (or, more exactly, replaced) by the affirmation that the two contradictory relations are identical between themselves to the degree that each, like the other, is self-contradictory."³ We will return shortly to the conclusion of the formal analysis; let us limit ourselves (now) to stating it.

We can indeed say that we have explained the myth, but not that we have interpreted it. We have, by means of structural analysis, brought out the logic of the operations which relate the four bundles of relations among themselves; this logic constitutes "the structural law of the myth under consideration."⁴ It will not fail to be noticed that this law is pre-eminently an object of reading and not at all of speaking, in the sense of a reciting where the power of the myth would be actualized in a particular situation. Here the text is but a text; and reading inhabits it only as a text, thanks to the suspension of its meaning for us, to the postponement of all actualization by present speech.

I have just taken an example from the field of myths; I could take another from a neighboring field, that of folklore narratives. This field has been explored by the Russian formalists of the school of Propp and by the French specialists of the structural analysis of narratives, Roland Barthes and Greimas. The same postulates as those of Levi-Strauss are to be found in these authors as well: the unities above the sentence have the same composition as the unities below the sentence; the mean-

³ Levi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, p. 239.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

ing of an element is its ability to enter into relation with other elements and with all of the work. These postulates together define the enclosure of the narrative; the task of structural analysis will then consist in operating a segmentation (the horizontal aspect) and then establishing various levels of integration of the parts in the whole (the hierarchical aspect). But the unities of action, which are segmented and organized in that way have nothing to do with psychological traits susceptible of being lived or with behavioral segments susceptible of falling under a behaviorist psychology; the extremities of these sequences are only switching points in the narrative, such that if one element is changed, all the rest are different. One recognizes here a transposition of the commutative method from the phonological level to the level of narrative unities. The logic of action consists then in a linking together of action kernels (*noyaux d'action*) which all together constitute the narrative's structural continuity; the application of this technique results in a "dechronologizing" of the narrative, so as to make apparent the narrative logic underlying narrative time. Ultimately, the narrative is reduced to a combination (*combinatoire*) of a few dramatic unities: promising, betraying, hindering, aiding, etc., which would thus be the paradigms of action. A sequence is thus a succession of action kernels, each one closing off an alternative opened up by the preceding one. These elementary unities fit in with larger unities; for example, the encounter embraces elementary actions such as approaching, summoning, greeting, etc. To explain a narrative is to get hold of this symphonic structure of segmental actions.

To this chain of actions correspond relations of the same sort between the "acting character" of the narrative. By this we do not at all mean psychological subjects, but formalized roles correlative to formalized actions. The acting characters are defined only by the predicates of action, by the semantic axis of the sentence and narrative: the one who does the act, the one to whom, with whom, etc. the action is done; it is the one who promises, who receives the promise, the giver, the receiver, etc. Structural analysis thus brings out a hierarchy of acting characters correlative to the hierarchy of *actions*.

It remains then to assemble the narrative as a whole and to put it back into narrative communication. It is then a discourse addressed by the narrator to a receiver. But, for structural analysis, the two interlocutors must be looked for in the text and nowhere else; the narrator is designated only by the narrative signs which themselves belong to the very constitution of the narrative. There is no longer any-

thing beyond these three levels (level of actions, level of acting characters, level of narration) which belongs to the semiologist's science; there is but the world of the users of the narrative which itself eventually falls under other semiological disciplines (social, economic, ideological systems), but which are no longer ones of a linguistic sort. This transposition of a linguistic model to the theory of the narrative perfectly verifies our initial remark: explanation today is no longer a concept borrowed from the natural sciences and transferred into a different field, that of written monuments; it proceeds from the same sphere of language, thanks to an analogical transfer of the small unities of language (phonemes and lexemes) to the large unities subsequent to the sentence, such as narrative, folklore, myth. As a result, interpretation will no longer be confronted with a model foreign to the human sciences, a model of intelligibility, borrowed from a science, linguistics, belonging to the same field of human sciences. As a result, it will be on the same ground, inside of the same sphere of language that explanation and interpretation will dispute each other.

III. TOWARDS A NEW CONCEPT OF INTERPRETATION

Let us now consider the other attitude which one can adopt in regard to a text, that one which we have called interpretation. It is first of all by opposing it to the preceding one, in a way similar to that of Dilthey, that we can introduce it. But it will be possible to gradually reach a relation more closely complementary and reciprocal between explanation and interpretation.

Let us start off once again from the act of reading. Two ways of reading, we have said, are offered to us. By reading we can prolong and reinforce the suspension affecting the text's reference to the environment of a world and the audience of speaking subjects; this is the explanatory attitude. But we can also bring an end to this suspension and complete the text in actual discourse. It is this second attitude which is the genuine aim of reading. The other sort of reading would not even be possible if it were not first of all apparent that the text, as writing, waits and calls for a reading; if a reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but open out onto something else. By any supposition reading is a linking together of a new discourse to the discourse of the text. The linking reveals, in the very constitution of the text, an original capacity of being reenacted, which

is its *open* character. Interpretation is the concrete result of this openness and of this linking together. How?

Our first concept of interpretation will still be close to that of Dilthey. We may characterize it, in general terms, as *appropriation*. Truth to tell, this meaning will not be abandoned, it will only be mediated by explanation itself, instead of being opposed to it in an immediate and rather naive way.

By appropriation I mean several things. I mean first that the interpretation of a text ends up in the self-interpretation of a subject who henceforth understands himself better. This completion of text understanding in self-understanding characterizes the sort of reflective philosophy which I call concrete reflection. Hermeneutics and reflective philosophy are here correlative and reciprocal: on the one hand, self-understanding provided a round-about way of understanding of the cultural signs in which the self contemplates himself and forms himself; on the other hand, the understanding of a text is not an end in itself and for itself; it mediates the relation to himself of a subject who, in the short circuit of immediate reflection, would not find the meaning of his own life. Thus it is necessary to say just as strongly that reflection is nothing without mediation by means of signs and cultural works and that explanation is nothing if it is not incorporated, as an intermediary stage, in the process of self-understanding. In short, in hermeneutical reflection – or in reflective hermeneutics – the constitution of *self* and that of meaning are contemporaneous.

The term appropriation entails two further characteristics. One of the aims of all hermeneutics is to fight against cultural distance; by cultural distance I mean not only the temporal distance but the kind of estrangement in regard to the system of values to which the cultural background of the text belongs. In this sense, interpretation "brings together," "equalizes," – all of which is to genuinely render *proper* (one's own) that which was previously foreign.

But, above all, the characterization of interpretation as appropriation is meant to draw attention to the kind of *actuality* which belongs to the process of interpretation. Reading is like the performance of a musical score: it betokens the fulfillment, the actualization of the semantic virtualities of the text. This third trait is the most important; for it is the interpretations with self-interpretation, the overcoming of cultural distance; this character of actualization reveals the decisive function of reading, namely that it achieves the discourse of the text in a dimension similar to speech. Speech too is an event; speech is dis-

course as event; speech is the instance of discourse, as Benvenuto says; in speech and by speech, the sentences which constitute the discourse as discourse signify *hic et nunc*. Reading – as the actualization of the text – gives to writing a similar achievement: the actualized text finds at last an environment and an audience, a world and an intersubjective dimension. In interpretation, we shall say, reading becomes like speech. I do not say, becomes speech, for reading never equals an exchange of speech, a dialogue. But reading is concretely accomplished in an act which is, in regard to the text, what speech is in regard to language, namely, an event and instance of discourse. In explanation the text had only internal relations, a structure; in interpretation it has now a significance, that is, an accomplishment in the subject's own discourse. By means of its structure the text had only a semiological dimension; by means of the actualization, it now has a semantic dimension.

Let us pause here. Our discussion has reached a critical point: interpretation, understood as appropriation, still remains exterior to explanation in the sense of structural analysis. We keep opposing them as two attitudes between which it would be necessary to choose.

I would like now to overcome this non-dialectical opposition and make apparent the inner connections which render structural analysis and hermeneutics complementary. For this it is necessary to show how each of the two attitudes which we have opposed refers back to the other by means of characteristics which are proper to it.

Let us return to the examples of structural analysis which are borrowed from the theory of myth and narrative. We tried to hold ourselves to a notion of sense (or meaning) which would be strictly reducible to the arrangement of the elements within the text. As a matter of fact no one remains with a conception as formal as this of the sense (or meaning) of a narrative or myth. For instance, what Levi-Strauss calls a "mytheme," and which is in his opinion the constitutive unity of the myth, is expressed in a sentence which has a meaning, in the sense of a referential intention of its own: Oepidus kills his father, weds his mother, etc. Is one to say that the structural explanation neutralizes the meaning proper to these and those sentences as merely to retain their positions in the myth? But the bundle of relations to which Levi-Strauss reduces the mythemes is still of the same order as the sentence, and the interplay of oppositions which is instigated at this very abstract level is still of the same order as the sentence. If one speaks of "overevaluated" or "under-evaluated blood relationships," of man's "autochthony" or "non-autochthony," these relations can still be

written in the form of a structure: the blood is not as high as the social relationship, for instance the prohibition of incest, etc. In short, the contradiction which according to Levi-Strauss the myth attempts to resolve, expresses itself in meaningful relationships. Levi-Strauss admits it, in spite of himself, where he writes: "the reason for these choices becomes apparent if it is recognized that mythical thought proceeds from the becoming aware (de la prise de conscience) of certain opposition and tends towards their progressive mediation."⁵ And again: "the myth is a sort of logical root destined to achieve a mediation between life and death."⁶ In the background of the myth there is a question which is a highly meaningful one, a question about life and death: "Is one born from one or from two"? This question expresses anxiety and agony concerning the origin: whence does man come? Is he born of the earth, is he born of his parents? There would be no contradiction, and no attempts to resolve the contradiction, if there were not meaningful questions, meaningful conjectures concerning the origin and the end of man. Is it possible to put within brackets this function of the myth as a narrative of the origins? I do not think so. In fact, structural analysis does not succeed including this function: it merely postpones it. If the myth is a logical operation, it does not play this role between any proposition whatsoever, but between utterances which point towards border-line situations: birth and death, sexuality and suffering, origin and end. Structural analysis, far from getting rid of this radical questioning, restores it at a level of even higher rationality. Would it not then be the function of structural analysis to put into question a superficial semantics, that of the apparent narrative, so as to make manifest a depth-semantics, which is the latent narrative, or, if I may say so, the live semantics of the myth? I readily believe that if such were not the living function of structural analysis, it would be reduced to a sterile game of combinations; the myth would be robbed even of the function which Levi-Strauss himself recognizes it to have where he says that mythical thought proceeds from the awareness of certain oppositives and tends towards their progressive mediation. This awareness is that of the enigmas of existence and end which mythic thought generates. To eliminate this meaningful intention would be to reduce the theory of myth to a necrology of the meaningless discourses of mankind. If, on the contrary, one considers structural analysis as a stage – and a necessary one –

⁵ Levi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, p. 248.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

between a naive interpretation and a critical interpretation, between a superficial interpretation and a depth interpretation, then it would seem possible to locate explanation and interpretation at two different stages of a hermeneutical arch and to integrate the opposed attitudes of explanation and understanding within the unique concrete act of reading.

We will take a step further in the direction of this reconciliation between explanation and interpretation by submitting to a parallel critique our initial concept of interpretation. To interpret, we said, is to appropriate *hic et nunc* for ourselves the intention of the text. In saying that, we remained within the enclosure of Dilthey's "understanding." Now, what we have just said concerning the depth-semantics of the text to which structural analysis refers is an invitation for us to understand that the intended meaning is not the supposed intention of the author, the vivid experience of *the writer*, into which we should have to transport ourselves, but rather that which *the text* wants to say. Not the psychological intention of the author, but the *injunction* of the text. What the text wants, is to orient our thought according to it. The sense of the text is the direction which it opens up for our thought.

This concept of sense as direction for thought leads us to a new definition of interpretation which would be less a subjective operation than an objective process; less an act *on* the text, than an act *of* the text. This process of interpretation has something to do with the depth semantics of the text delivered by structural analysis; it is this depth semantics which is to understand in dynamic terms; whereas the structure constitutes the statics of the text, the depth semantics is itself a process of meaning; it requires a fresh interpretation because it is itself an interpretation, this interpretation which I called the act of the text.

I will take an example in the field of biblical exegesis. Werner H. Schmidt has shown the account of creation according to Genesis 1-2, relies on the interplay of two narratives, a *Totbericht*, in which creation is expressed merely in terms of action: "God made..." and a *Wortbericht*, in which creation proceeds from the word: "God said, and there was..." The first narrative plays the role of tradition and the second that of interpretation. Within the same text, therefore, tradition and interpretation constitute the two poles of the meaning as process. To interpret the text is follow the pattern of thought opened by this process. In that way, interpretation is the act of the text, before

being an act of exegesis; it is like an arrow borne by the text itself, indicating the direction for the exegetical work.

This concept of objective interpretation, or, if we may say, of intra-textual interpretation has nothing unusual about it – it even has roots in an older tradition than the concept of subjective interpretation which is definitely modern. Aristotle called *hermeneia* (interpretation) the very act of language on things; unlike the hermeneutical technique of the augurs and interpreters of oracles, which announces the hermeneutic of romanticism, *hermeneia* designates the process of language; for Aristotle, to interpret is not what one does in a second language as applied to a first language; it is already what the first language does in mediating by signs our relation to things. Interpretation is thus, according to the commentary of Boethius on Aristotle's *Peri Hermeneias*, the very work of the *vox significativa per se ipsam aliquid significans, sive complexa, sive incompleta*.

Indeed, interpretation in Aristotle's sense does not cover over concepts of interpretation which imply some kind of dynamic relation between several layers of meaning within the same text (tradition and interpretation in the sense of Werner H. Schmidt); for Aristotle, interpretation means the semantic dimension of the noun, of the verb, of the sentence, in a word, of the discourse as such. Nevertheless, we may retain from Aristotle the idea that interpretation is interpretation *by* language before being interpretation *on* language.

The closest author which we may invoke for founding our concept of "objective" interpretation is Charles Saunders Peirce. According to Peirce, the relation of a "sign" to an "object" is such that another relation, that of a series of interpretants to the "signs" can graft itself onto the first. What is important for us here is that the relation of sign to interpretant is an open relation, in the sense that there is always another interpretant capable of mediating the first relation. This triangular relation between object, sign and interpretant, with the character of openness of the series of interpretants provides us with the best model for rebuilding our initial concept of interpretation. Indeed, it is with a great deal of caution that one should apply Peirce's concepts of interpretant to the interpretation of texts. This interpretant is an interpretant of signs, whereas our interpretation is an interpretation of utterances, of sentences, of discourse. Nevertheless this extension of Peirce's interpretant to texts is neither more nor less analogical than the transfer, with the structuralists, of the organized laws of unities from a level inferior to the sentence to unities of an equal or superior

order than the sentence. In the case of structuralism, it is the phonological structure of language which serves as model for coding the structures of higher level. In our case, it is a characteristic of lexical unities – the triangular relation between object, sign and interpretant – which is carried over to the order of utterance and texts. If, therefore, one is perfectly aware of the analogical character of the transposition, it can be said: the open series of interpretants which grafts itself onto the relation of a sign to an object brings to light a triangular relation, object-sign-interpretant, which can serve as a model for another triangle at the level of the text. In that new triangle, the object is the intended meaning of the text, the sign is the depth-semantics, unearthed by structural analysis, and the series of interpretants is the chain of interpretation produced by the interpretative community and incorporated into the dynamics of the text. In this chain the first interpretants serve as a tradition for the last interpretants which constitute the interpretation in the true sense of the term.

Enlightened in this way by the Aristotelian insight of interpretation and above all, by Peirce's concept of interpretant, we are in a position to "depsychologize" as much as possible our action of interpretation and to tie it up with the process which is at work in the text. As a result, for the exegete to interpret is to place himself in the direction initiated by this interpretative relation included in the text. The idea of interpretation, understood as appropriation, is not for all that eliminated; it is only postponed until the end of the process. It is the other end of what we have called the *hermeneutical arch*: it is the last pillar of the bridge, the anchor of the arch in the soil of lived experience. But the entire theory of hermeneutics consists in mediating the interpretation as appropriation by the series of interpretants which belong to the work of the text on itself. The appropriation poses then its arbitrariness to the degree that it is the recovery of what is at work, in labor, in the text. What the reader says is a re-saying which reenacts what the text says by itself.

At the end of this investigation it appears that reading is that concrete act in which the destiny of the text is accomplished. It is at the very heart of reading that explanation and interpretation are independently opposed and reconciled.

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