

THE LIMITS OF PHILOLOGICAL READING – SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE INTERNAL LIMITS IN THE HUMANITIES

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Abstract. The article deals with the problem of the boundaries in contemporary humanities – if “everything is a text” and the process of assimilation and interpretation of new meanings is fundamentally open and infinite, then do we have any grounds to distinguish between different kinds of understanding of the cultural phenomena surrounding us? The central thesis of the article is that precisely those claims that are theoretical in nature should be read and discussed in a way that is alien to the philological perspective. However, this is not necessarily a problem – the internal heterogeneity of humanitarian thinking may be an advantage considering the point of development reached in the “camp” of the natural sciences.

Keywords: humanities; philology; theory; Hegel; Michel Foucault

Philology, being the humanitarian discipline par excellence, is not simply concerned with the study of natural languages and with situating written works in the relevant historical and cultural context that made their emergence possible, but is primarily interested in reconstructing meanings, as they are embedded in texts. In the words of Sergei Averincev, the meaning in question should be thought of as holistic (Averincev 1990, p. 545), i.e. it cannot be separated from the cognitive and axiological, and perhaps also from the aesthetic horizon of its author. In reading and understanding a text, the interpreter should gain insight into the way the world looked in the eyes of the writer, into her worldview, into the “web” of concepts, beliefs and value judgments, and this is a task that by default can never be solved once and for all – reading will always remain open to the identification of new and novel elements to be integrated into the whole. From here it is a small step to the famous formula identifying the text with culture in general, introduced as we know into use by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, founder of the so-called “interpretive” ethnology (Bachmann-Medick 2008, p. 90). According to this view, culture is much more than a set of discrete artifacts, social practices, or forms of ritualized behavior – it is in fact an intrinsically coherent picture of the world,

orienting and shaping the perception and thinking of members of a given social group. It is the deeper (Kohl 1993, p. 165) meanings that need to be deciphered by the external observer/researcher in order for her to set the process of intercultural communication in motion¹.

Every culture's inherent view of the world naturally changes over time, so no perspective should claim to be absolute and universal. This is also the main lesson of the historical reconstruction of the emergence of the single text and of the meanings it carries. It is no coincidence that the encounter with the "other", i.e. with the alien, initially incomprehensible-sounding (written) speech, and therefore with the resisting meaning that only seemingly lies on the surface, waiting to be identified and assimilated, occupies a central place in the theory of the humanities. Reflection on the disjuncture between one's own and others' thinking should illustrate the limits of one's own cultural and axiological perspective on the world, alienating in a way first the other and then oneself from beliefs and behavioral forms traditionally considered unshakeable. This process of historization and, consequently, relativization constitutes the basis not only of the pursuit of philology but of philological thinking as such, again according to S. Averincev, who defines the profile of philology not in terms of a particular, clearly delineated subject area, but as a specific relation to the object of study (Averincev, *Ibid.*). In a number of theoretical papers the German historian Thomas Nipperdey traces the history of this research perspective, which has been known since the 19th century as "historicism". Nipperdey argues for a revision and rethinking of some of the basic tenets of historicism, defending it from the criticisms of a number of theorists, including among others Jürgen Habermas, who accuse historicist thinking of neglecting ethical issues relevant to contemporary society, which has experienced catastrophes such as World War II and the Holocaust (Nipperdey 1976, pp. 67 – 68). It is not possible to reconstruct this debate in detail here, except to point out that it deals with issues similar in some respects to those that accompanied the establishment on the scene of Clifford Geertz's "interpretive" ethnology as presented earlier in this paper.

In the pendulum-like process where the familiar and the foreign progressively come into contact, and this in turn moves understanding (including of the self) forward, it does indeed seem as if culture and text function as synonymous concepts. Somehow naturally, the humanities' approach to the world step by step overcomes local, mental and historical limitations and becomes inevitably universal: every cultural manifestation can be perceived as a carrier of meaning, inviting us to read, understand and interpret it.

To begin with, I wish to state that I do not wish to subject to further discussion the peculiarities of humanitarian thinking thus presented, unfortunately only in a schematic form. The interest in culture and the awareness in general of the existence of an "insider's" view of the world around us, which, as has already been said, should be conscious of its historical provinciality, play a central role within

the academic pursuit of philology (here I continue to use this term as equivalent to “humanities”), but of course bear a universal human character. It is the capacity to be aware of the historical conditioning of much of our own thinking that distinguishes ours from other biological species; this appears to be a fundamental anthropological feature that is *de facto* enshrined in the concept of so-called “philosophical hermeneutics”, which as is known has constituted one of the major trends in philosophy for the last hundred years or so.

And yet, the theory of the humanities, crystallized in this way about two centuries ago, sets only the abstract framework against which we should orient ourselves when reflecting on the specific type of knowledge thus outlined. What happens in the course of the concrete reading of a particular text is a question to be considered in each individual case, and independently of the generalities listed so far – for a very simple reason. No text is accessible in itself without the need for a second-order reflection, whose aim is to encompass both its origin and the logic of the thought it presents. In modern scholarship, the illusion that understanding can be arrived at in an immediate way has long since been overcome; on the contrary, meaning becomes accessible thanks to a whole set of theoretical assumptions and presuppositions pertaining to the relevant subject area in which we situate the individual artifact. The process of interpretation should therefore conform to an abstract conceptual framework, without, however, being able to know in advance whether and to what extent a given theoretical perspective is capable of fulfilling the task we set for it, i.e. of producing conclusive results in the particular case. The central thesis of this paper is that theorizing in the humanities is that part of the whole that resists systematic reconstruction using the methods described above or the heuristic tools of philology in general.

Let us, as a next step, consider some examples, chosen in this case quite arbitrarily, which might help to illustrate the methodological problem just outlined. Historically situating what Hegel claims about art will surely lead to interesting results, allowing us, for example, to gain insight into the genesis of his ideas, to learn how and under what conditions they arose, why Hegel arrived at them, and what their influence has been on later thinkers in the field of aesthetics. We have not yet, however, in any way approached the formulation of a pertinent judgment of the adequacy of the German philosopher’s claims. The question of whether his views “work”, whether anything he said can be relevant today, given that both contemporary art and our understanding of it are fundamentally different from the era of 200 years ago, is unanswered. It is a well-known fact, for example, that according to Hegel, the essence and purpose of the fine arts consist in the creation of a visual representation of reality – in his philosophical system, art represents a particular, materially embodied form of thinking and therefore of knowing, one of the steps in the course of the “development of the absolute spirit”². Is then abstract painting, which has become a stable part of the art world almost a century after Hegel’s

death, a problem for this theory? Although we are far from reaching a final point in this debate, one thing is clear: the question of the origin of a theoretical claim and that of its validity should obviously not be conflated.

It turns out that while the outer limits of the modern humanities are already hard to grasp, since everything is a text, on the “inside” it certainly makes sense to distinguish between different kinds of texts, as well as between different kinds of readings of them (and therefore between different kinds of understanding). Michel Foucault’s famous critique of the “author’s institution” is, among other things, a paradigmatic illustration of the limits of the philological approach, which are unfortunately far from always being realized, let alone respected, by the professional community. Not only the insight into the meaning of what the French philosopher said, but the question of its applicability is the problem that is to be solved before we “use” Foucault in reading and interpreting one or another work of fiction (or non-fiction). If the attribution of completeness and wholeness to a text, drawing its legitimacy from the stipulation of an “authorial function”, is indeed only and solely an ideological construct, which suffocates the “free play of meanings” of fictional language, then how should we explain the intuition which is common to professionals and amateurs alike, according to which even the most innovative and experimental literary manifestations do not arise spontaneously, but with a definite purpose – itself in turn only realizable thanks to the awareness that in literature (and in art in general) the new is not born in a vacuum, but fits, albeit sometimes in the form of a radical negation, into the existing network of aesthetic, historical, etc. categories, i.e. in an institutional framework with which the public by necessity already operates?

In other words, Foucault is important not just for having formulated one or another theoretical (i.e. general, with respect to a given social practice) statement. The discussion of what the French philosopher said is intended, among other things, to shed light on the discrepancy between his views and certain aspects of the practice of reading and reception of literature that arose long before the emergence on the scene of his theory. Of course, it should immediately be added that here too things are far from simple. Already more than thirty years ago the British philosopher Peter Lamarque made a nuanced and highly insightful reconstruction of the “death of the author” debate, in the course of which, for example, he distinguished between a reading in which Foucault’s anti-intentionalism comes to the fore, on the one hand³, and talk of authorship as a social convention virtually identical with the literary institution, on the other (Lamarque 1990, p. 324).

Let it be stressed again at this point that the purpose of the present paper is not to enter into an argument with Foucault, much less to debunk the French thinker. Instead, I would like to emphasize that the axiomatic postulation of the thesis of the “death of the author” and its further instrumentalization for the interpretation of all sorts of literary and extra-literary phenomena (a practice that is particularly beloved

of quite many Bulgarian colleagues...) unfortunately does not help in the search for an answer to objections such as the above. Moreover, the existence and importance of the latter is in most cases not even realized.

As it turns out, the mere identification of problematic implications arising from a – at this point it is probably fair to say: from any – theoretical thesis, as well as the systematic search for their solution, hardly fits into the philological perspective as I have described it above, since it aims not to criticize but to “see” through others’ eyes. It is well known that in literature and art, new interpretations do not override previous ones, but complement them – it is no coincidence that in contemporary literary studies the fundamental similarity between literary and musical (and also theatrical) interpretation is often discussed. No amount of knowledge about Foucault’s intellectual biography, however, will help us form an independent judgment about the instrumental adequacy of what he said, and about the possible counterarguments that can and should be formulated from an analytical point of view.

A not insignificant part of the texts that appear to be an integral part of, but also an object of, the humanities can indeed be read philologically, which, however, does not bring a fruitful result, at least not if the interest is of a critical nature and not directed towards the reconstruction of a particular slice of the history of ideas. This specific – theoretical – understanding cannot happen “from within”. It is interesting in itself that the philologist can do without Hegel (or without Foucault – however sacrilegious such a claim may appear to a significant part of the contemporary Bulgarian humanities community...) in his research on specific texts and the historical relations between them. Yet one important point remains unclear. No matter how one feels about theory – and the attitude is very often polar, leading either to an unconditional adoration or to a fierce resistance to the very process of theorizing – somehow intuitively every modern humanities scholar is aware that she cannot simply ignore without further argument what various theorists say about art, literature, or culture. In this case we are dealing with what I think is a very profound problem concerning the very nature of humanitarian knowledge. It is not a question of whether, why and what we should “use” what Hegel or Foucault said for, but of asking about the relationship between theory and practice in the humanities, against the background of the degree of development and self-awareness these academic disciplines have reached in our own day.

Looking over the fence, at other sciences, is a tried and tested recipe, which I will resort to in the present case. It is obvious that the philosophy of physics is not physics, but a different endeavor, aimed, among other things, at analyzing the concepts that constitute the practice of scientific research. The same is true of many other areas of scientific knowledge – law, for example, has its own philosophy, which however is not concerned with solving legal cases. It is a familiar dilemma that the propositions formulated by a given “philosophy of...” most often never

become the subject of sustained interest on the part of scientists: the ordinary physicist may not even have heard of what the philosopher of physics has to say, without this in the least preventing him from being more than successful in his respective scientific field.

This is not the case in philological disciplines, or at least with those of them that deal not with research on language but with its various realizations in the form of a text. The philosophy of literature appears to be part of literary theory and hence of literary studies, so there is no way that a literary scholar and hence a philologist will not get in touch with it sooner or later, although, as we have seen, a purely philological training will not be of any use to him in solving the specific theoretical problems here. But why is this so?

Since the 19th century, many attempts have been made to draw a clear dividing line between the humanities and the natural sciences. The place and role of the researcher has traditionally been seen as an element of the subject area of the humanities. Referring to the latter many thinkers have used definitions such as *representational sciences* (Danto 1989, p. 272), in which the researcher's perspective forms part of the object of study⁴, or *actional sciences* (Krüger 2005, p. 223), whose subject area defies mathematical modeling precisely because of the open and unpredictable nature of human actions and deeds. I believe that these certainly true claims can be supplemented with the following observation. Literature, art, culture, precisely because of the circumstance (which, by the way, has become common knowledge thanks to the progress of contemporary philosophical research in these fields) that they are not just a set of artifacts, but extremely complicated social practices, are the object of simultaneous study by disciplines located at the "first" and respectively "second" order of conceptualization of their subject matter. The philological and philosophical views of literature are interested in the same phenomenon and operate on the same system of concepts, which obviously leads to the conflation of both types of discourse and to the reading of theoretical texts as literary, which was discussed above.

However, the focus of interest of theory is fundamentally different from the study of the historical development of the literary practice or of individual examples from it. The logic of the concepts, with which we operate when we interpret and contextualize fictional texts, is subject to clarification and codification within the theoretical discourse, the main goal being to cover and explain the empirical material we apply a given concept to. This is why theoretical debates are built on discussing issues of a normative nature that, as a rule, do not appear within the horizon of regular philological understanding, which, as we have seen, is democratic and open to adding new and novel meanings to those already established. Referring to Hegel's or Foucault's claims for the sake of a new reading of a fictional text can maybe lead to an insightful new interpretation, but it does not contribute to the critical development of theorizing in the field of literary studies.

The careless and limitless appropriation of all kinds of objects of reading and interpretation does not take into account the methodological peculiarity in question, which in turn is the cause of the problem discussed above. In short: there are many ways to “understand” Michel Foucault, and the philological approach represents only one of them, but it would be grossly unfair to regard it as the only and absolute one. In its case, critical thinking based on systematic analysis does not play a central role its place is taken by exegesis. One common, though far from obligatory, result of this whole process is that the reception of thinkers like this same Foucault has a canonizing character. The acceptance of his claims and theses as axiomatic too quickly goes beyond academic discourse and begins to be applied everywhere, functioning, among other things, as a marker of belonging to the intellectual avant-garde of a given community of scholars. Numerous examples from contemporary Bulgarian humanities, to which, however, I shall not resort in this place, could perfectly illustrate what has just been said...

What is to be done in view of this confused situation? The American philosopher Noël Carroll recommends that humanities scholars ought to learn to think like philosophers – respectively like sociologists, etc. – when they discuss the underlying assumptions on which they build their theories and their concrete work on the conceptualization of the cultural phenomena they are interested in (Carroll 2003, pp. 188-189). Agreeing wholeheartedly, I would add that an awareness of the intrinsic heterogeneity of humanistic thinking can in turn become the starting point of a more adequate legitimation of the latter against the backdrop of the triumphant superiority of the natural sciences – at least in the eyes of the general public – for about the last 200 years. The preoccupation with culture, the basic, if in many cases deceptive, accessibility of meaning, which is not reserved only for professional philologists, the apparent absence of specialized language – all these features of so-called *soft science* are compensated for by the fact that the modern humanities require the mastery of different, irreducible methods of analysis and understanding. This, in turn, implies the need for a longer and more difficult process of becoming self-aware and insightful about the limitations of one’s own disciplinary framework, which, however, is also an advantage: the humanities scholar would have a harder time becoming a mere “craftsman”, i.e. the type that is all too common among representatives of the natural sciences during the phases of their so-called “normal” (in Thomas Kuhn’s parlance) development. The pathos of the endless appropriation and absorption of new and novel texts should certainly not be taken uncritically; instead, an awareness of the intellectual challenge posed by the pursuit of the humanities should come to the fore, especially in the light of the contemporary understanding of how they should function – an understanding that we have arrived at thanks to the achievements of the philosophy of science.

NOTES

1. Like any theoretical postulate in contemporary scholarship, Geertz's claims are open to criticism. The identification of cultural belonging with an internally homogeneous "picture" of the world leads to the problematic implication that cultural identities are to be thought of as self-contained realities, as "objectified" entities, so to speak, which control the behavior of members of the relevant ethnic community, who are left with no choice but to realize in a quasi-automatized way the symbolic structures embedded in their unconscious. For obvious reasons, it is impossible to address this discussion here (for details, see Rapport 2014, pp. 123 – 124), which plays a fundamental role in the development of social and cultural anthropology as an academic discipline. I will say only this much: awareness of the fundamental "otherness" of the object of study, be it a foreign ethnicity, a culture, or behavioral practices, should not undermine faith in the fundamentally rational character of scientific inquiry. The latter, often at the cost of fundamentally rethinking its own methodological postulates and assumptions, is nevertheless able to move forward and achieve a more adequate understanding of the phenomena of interest. It is the existence of a scientific paradigm in which such cognitive interests are inscribed that makes understanding possible. The absence of scientific thinking also means the absence of reciprocity – the representatives of a traditional ethnic community are unable to study the European researcher in the way he studies them, regardless of any, admittedly fair and important, political considerations that should be kept in mind in this place.
2. A detailed and extremely useful reconstruction of Hegel's views on art can be found in (Guyer 2014, pp. 119 – 144), which also contains a discussion on some possible objections that can be formulated from a posterior perspective.
3. In the case when the relevance of the author's strategies and intentions in reading a literary work is rejected theoretically, the problem of so-called "categorical intentions" immediately arises – it sounds completely unconvincing, and not only in the eyes of professionals, to suppose how Ivan Vazov was not aware that with "Under the Yoke" he was writing a novel and not, for example, a poem. I intend this to serve only as an example of how multidimensional and complex the debate waged over Foucault's claims is precisely from a systematic point of view.
4. A similar claim can also be found in (Berlin 2013, pp. 169 – 170), where the process of constructing explanatory models for human behavior – contrasting it with explanations in the natural sciences – is described as "fitting fragments of reality into the single all-embracing pattern that I presume to hold for others besides myself [...]".

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