

A “Better” or Just “Another” Understanding? Sommer Remarks on the Creative Character of Interpretation

The philosophical hermeneutics Hans-Georg Gadamer arose from a generalisation of the considerations and results of the specific hermeneutical theories elaborated in jurisprudence, theology and classical literature. A mile stone in its development was without any doubt the general hermeneutics of Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher. It was him he who extended the area of what could - and sometimes even should - be interpreted from the texts on every speech act, including a press article, a speech or a conversation. Belonging to the romantic movement in the German philology of the 19th century he was sure that the object to be interpreted is the idea born in the head of a writer or a speaker. It is born spontaneously, in an unconscious way. That is why its creator does not understand its full range and meaning. The interpreter is in another position: he analyses this spiritual product using the full power of his consciousness and methodological cleverness. Because of that it is possible for him to understand the author better than the author understood himself.

H.-G. Gadamer accepted in his hermeneutical theory some important results of the romantic hermeneutics, like quitting the difference between understanding and interpretation. This difference was usually understood as the difference between a spiritual understanding and linguistical articulation of what was understood. Also Gadamer came to the conclusion that even a simple understanding act needs a language, and insisted that there is not any essential difference between interpreting and understanding. But he never accepted the idea that it is reasonable to speak about a better understanding, also in the sense that we can understand an author better than he understood himself. In the well known fragment of the *Truth and Method*, his major work, he writes:

“Nicht nur gelegentlich, sondern immer übertrifft der Sinn eines Textes seinen Autor. Daher ist Verstehen kein reproduktives, sondern stets auch ein produktives Verhalten. Es ist vielleicht nicht richtig, für dieses produktive Moment, der im Verstehen liegt, von Besserverstehen zu reden. Denn diese Formel ist (...) die Umsetzung eines Grundsatzes der Sachkritik aus dem Zeitalter der Aufklärung auf der Basis der Genieästhetik. Verstehen ist in Wahrheit kein Besserverstehen, weder im Sinne des sachlichen Besserwissens durch deutlichere Begriffe, noch im Sinne der grundsätzlichen Überlegenheit, die das Bewußte über das Unbewußte der Produktion besitzt. Es genügt zu sagen, daß man anders versteht, wenn man überhaupt versteht“.¹

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, GW B.1, S. 301-302

The following remarks try to reconsider the arguments of Gadamer, joining them with his own interpretative practice and comparing with considerations of Albrecht Wellmer. The result is that even according to Gadamer it seems to be possible to speak about a better understanding. But it does not mean Schleiermacher was right. He was wrong about what is the proper object of interpretation.

The assumption of the pre-romantic hermeneutics (Chladenius and others) was that the work of interpretation (a hermeneutical act) begins with a sudden break in understanding of a text, with so-called "dark place" in it. Interpretation is an occasional activity, required only in cases when understanding stops to be immediate. The romantic perspective of Schleiermacher changed it completely by going out from the assumption that misunderstanding, not understanding, is automatic and natural. What needs an explanation is understanding. Trying to explain it he came to the conclusion that understanding is always mediated by interpretation, so it is hardly possible to divide them.

Romantic hermeneutics fuses understanding and interpretation into a unity. But, on the other hand, it has to accept a division between a nearly automatic, linguistically mediated interpretation, and a carefully elaborated kind of interpretation called "Auslegung". Because the profound aim of interpreting is to understand the act of the creation of sense, and this act is never fully consciously controlled, it is possible through a methodologically controlled interpretation to understand a creator of meaning better than he understood himself. By the way – a similar idea was explicitly held by Kant and Fichte, according to the philosophical texts, what means – it was common for the thinking on the threshold of 18th and 19th century.

Gadamer accepts the results of the romantic hermeneutics what concern the unity of understanding and interpretation, but – as already said – he refuses to accept any possibility of a better understanding. The reason for that is that he adds a third element to the above mentioned unity, forgotten – in his opinion – by Schleiermacher and his followers. He calls it "application". According to him, it is not an additional moment in the process of interpreting that can be separated from a real, full understanding, or relegated to an ancillary position. For him the hermeneutical act is the triunion of understanding, interpretation and application. He himself, as well as his critics, show that this important change is connected with the including in his theory the hermeneutics of law and holy scriptures, in which the element of application plays a very distinctive role.

By Gadamer the role played by the application has also some existential features. Every interpretation occurs from some individual perspective, from a hermeneutical situativeness or – speaking with Heidegger – established by "givenness" of the Human Being (Dasein). Because every interpretation contains a moment of application and we can not assume or prove the identity of two hermeneutical situations, it is impossible to say, one can understand better than the other. It is enough to say that one understands differently when he understands at all.

This statement, although we understand its origin and ground, seems to be counter-intuitive, against any evidence in our experience. Even in Gadamer's own work it is possible to show that he does not act according to that principle. Why should we, for instance, accept his hermeneutical theory as a proper description of understanding if it is not better than the one developed by Dilthey, Betti or Schleiermacher? It is a kind of an implicit argument. But there are also explicit arguments by Gadamer against this statement. He criticizes, for example, some Heidegger's analysis of Greek philosophy or German poetry, saying they are not totally wrong, but not good enough, and proposes instead his own, better interpretations.²

The problems with the better vs. different interpretation are purely evident. It is not easy to find and establish a criterion for a comparison of interpretations. But still it seems, against Gadamer, to be useful not only to keep the distinction between understanding and interpretation but also to insist that despite of the comparison problem it is in principle possible to speak about better and worse interpretations.

The existential moment of understanding by integrating the application in the unity of understanding and interpretation is a specific Gadamerian transformation of the Heidegger's topic from *Being and Time*. In his *opus magnum* Heidegger introduces a completely new notion of understanding, that for him means a kind of "know-how". Knowing how to deal with something is the origin form of understanding in the life world. It is also a kind of applying something given to a situation. But also in this case it seems to be evident that if we have two persons, a master and his pupil for instance, dealing with the same instrument we will be even able to foresee who of them "understand it" better. Why should it lose its validity for "things" like texts, films, theatre performances?

Gadamer is of course right when he says that the object of interpretation are not the spiritual states or ideas in the mind of the author of text but his work, as it stays in the intersubjective world, open to any kind of understanding. The author has not any authority about his creature. In interpreting his work he is one of many in principle equal interpreters.

One can understand the reasons that led Gadamer to leave the differentiation between understanding and interpretation. It is true that every interpretation is directed by something Heidegger called prestructure of understanding (*Vorstruktur des Verstehens*). But it is not true that every understanding is connected with elaboration of an explicit and linguistically articulated interpretation. There are automatic understandings, especially in banal cases of every day communication. And it is useful to distinguish between interpretation and understanding, by presuming that a formulation in words of a common language is a condition *sine qua non* to speak about an interpretation. It forbids us to compare between an understanding and an interpretation and permits it in the case two interpretations, in the above defined sense. And we are allowed to assume that there is something like a quality of interpretation.

² See: Hans-Georg Gadamer und Silvio Vietta: *Im Gespräch*, München 2002, Wilhelm Fink Verlag

The phenomenological evidences show us very often that we can talk about better or worse interpretation. Presume we go to a theater to watch a piece by Pirandello. Dramas or texts of that range demand interpretation. Without it they can be sometimes amusing but they will not build any unity of sense. And not every possible interpretation is a good one. What is decisive here?

In the seventies, during the long debate on Gadamer's theory of understanding, Habermas and Apel elaborated their own transcendental hermeneutics. Especially Karl-Otto Apel defended the possibility of a better interpretation. Developing Apel's arguments and trying to mediate between him and Gadamer the Berliner philosopher Albrecht Wellmer devoted an important text³ to this subject. Let's have a look on the line of his argumentation.

To escape the dilemma between a "better" and a "different" understanding A. Wellmer makes a distinction between two in principle different types of interpretation. He names the first one an "intern" or "immanent" interpretation. It is irreducible to the second one that he calls "extern" or "productive". According to him their difference is phenomenologically evident. The best example for the first one is a philologically faithful, immanent reconstruction of the sense of a text. The example of the second one would be a new, very critical reading of this text, in the manner of Heidegger's or Adorno's productive (mis)readings of the classical works of philosophy.

Both kinds of interpretation demand intellectual activity of the interpreter and his creativity. The type of creativity and the conditions of it differ according to the different aims of them. The first one is captured by its text. It does not question the truth of the text. Instead of that it tries to discover this truth, to participate in it. The second kind of interpretation tries purposefully to be critical about the truth of the analyzed text, hoping to discover its deeper meaning through a kind of deconstructing of the text.

"Also here – says Wellmer – we can speak about understanding, namely if the interpreter succeeds in transcending the text according to his own authority (Massgabe), in the direction his truth claims (Wahrheitsanspruch), it means – when the truth and untruth of the text can be seen through the horizon and the language of the interpreter in a new, sharper light".⁴

If we agree with Wellmer we can also accept the idea of a relative progress in understanding, against the explicit formulation of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. This progress is a relative one because the pure existence of the above mentioned two profoundly different types of interpretation – and we can not be sure that there is not a third or fourth one – shows us that any comparison of interpretation is possible only in the frames of a given type. It would be hardly possible to compare an interpretation that is looking for a message of a text with the one that is seeking to disclose its unconscious element or structural features, conditioning the place of it in the universe of meaning. That's why it is not easy

³ A. Wellmer, „Zur Kritik der hermeneutischen Vernunft“, in: *Lingua ac Communitas* No.5, Warszawa/Poznan 1995.

⁴ Wellmer, op.cit., s. 22.

– also for Gadamer – to accept a separate existence of the short, existentially motivated, hermeneutical way of Heidegger and the long, methodologically mediated way of Ricoeur. They need to be integrated.

We can assume that Gadamer's plea for the domination of the hermeneutics over the aesthetics could be enlarged also on the subject we discuss here. He would probably say that a scientifically supported interpretation is acceptable only as an enrichment of the "normal", message searching interpretation. That was exactly what he meant by saying the role of psychoanalysis is the return of the patient to a society and its communication.

Resuming we can say that it is safer for the philosophical hermeneutics to speak about different understanding, and not about the better one. But it is possible, against Gadamer, to argue for a principal possibility of a better interpretation. This does not break the back of Gadamer's conception. Both types of understanding work in accordance with his metaphor of fusion of the horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*). But every one makes it in a different way.

In the internal interpretation dominates the horizon of the text. The interpreter has to awake in himself the prejudices (*Vorurteile*) that enable him to reach the message of the text. His creativity relies on a kind of subordination of his own subjectivity to the possible truth of the text. The positive result of it is something Gadamer calls "Zuwachs am Sein", enriching of the being, of the interpreter's world experience, also through questioning his previous prejudices.

The second type of interpretation assumes the domination of the horizon of the interpreter. He critically questions the truth of the text's message, trying to dig out the unknown dimension of its origin, its meaning and cultural position. This will be so long an interpretation of a given text – and not a free creation of a critic – as long it will keep in touch with the different fragments of the text and helps us to understand its unexpected aspects.

There are no winners in the controversy between Schleiermacher and Gadamer about the right to speak about a better understanding. Schleiermacher was right about the general possibility of speaking about it, but he was wrong in his thinking about the genuine object of the interpretation. Only in special cases the subjective intentions of the author are the object of interpretation. Gadamer stresses it fully correctly. On the other hand, interpretation is determined and expressed in language, and as such, can be intersubjectively discussed and compared in a conversation, making an agreement about a better or worse interpretation possible. The reason why Gadamer overlooked this possibility lies in the starting point of his analysis of understanding and interpretation: it is not the Heideggerian understanding of instrument (*das Zeug*) in every day life but the never ending interpretation of so-called eminent works of literature.