

## THE ART OF LITERARY INTERPRETATION: THE HERMENEUTIC TRADITION

### Summary

The book *The Art of Literary Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Tradition* seeks to answer the questions “What is the art of literary interpretation?” and “How is it related to the broader hermeneutic tradition of theorizing about the act of interpretation?” The field of hermeneutics is broad and encompasses all questions related to the understanding of linguistic and non-linguistic forms of life expression: “[H]ermeneutics is not only a method for understanding different kinds of written texts and written language, but deals with all forms of expression related to life, to human existence.”<sup>1</sup> The art of literary interpretation (*ars interpretandi*) is related to *ars rhetorica* and *ars poetica*, and can therefore be seen as part of the entire field of hermeneutics. As Wilhelm Dilthey has already noted, there is a tension between hermeneutics and the art of interpretation: “This art [of interpreting expressions of life in fiction—A.J.] is the basis of philology. The science of this art is hermeneutics.”<sup>2</sup> Although Dilthey gave the idea of *ars interpretandi* contemporary meaning and, in this way, distinguished it from hermeneutics (the human science of understanding), he also succeeded in illustrating the opposite – that it is impossible to draw a clear distinction between art and science in literary interpretation. Hermeneutics was even more closely associated with the art of interpretation in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Emil Staiger.

For literature, as a process for conveying a message from one person to another (in other words, the Hermes process), to be understood as well as possible, the writer’s skill in creative expression (*ars poetica*) does not suffice – the reader’s skill in hearing (*ars interpretandi*) is also needed. If the first

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<sup>1</sup> Arūnas Sverdiolas, “Paulio Ricoeuro užuolankos,” in Paul Ricoeur, *Egzistencija ir hermeneutika: interpretacijų konfliktas*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2001, p. lxxvii.

<sup>2</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, “The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life-Expressions,” in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, The Continuum Publishing Company, 2006, p. 161.

originates from the “inside” (from thought) and moves towards the “outside” (to the word and language), and is dedicated to the expression of thoughts that are never precisely expressed and to the generation of narratives, the second begins from the “outside” (from the verbal expression of given language), moves towards its “inside,” and is dedicated to the explication of thought. This is why, when Jean Grondin had the opportunity to ask Gadamer to define hermeneutics, he received a short answer: *verbum interius*.<sup>3</sup> It is understandable that the history of hermeneutics began with allegorical commentary that sought to unravel hidden meanings in the most important holy texts. In other words, the events of the literary process are generated not only by writers, but also by the readers and critics of their works.

It would seem that the broad concept of hermeneutics proposed and practiced by Viktorija Daujotytė and many other theorists – “hermeneutics is the way in which something is interpreted”<sup>4</sup> – is not incorrect, even if it sounds tautological. But when some theorists refer to any literary methodology, or criticism, from the Parisian semioticians and even members of the Yale school of deconstruction (who were the greatest critics of phenomenological hermeneutics), as hermeneutics or as the “hermeneutic mafia,” the very meaning of the term is erased, and it becomes urgent that this meaning be better defined.<sup>5</sup> This is why it may be important to more clearly distinguish the broader meaning of meta-hermeneutics, which includes all theories of the interpretation of discourse, from the more narrow field of literary hermeneutics, which not only raises philosophically abstract questions about understanding, but also explore more specific philological questions about the art and technique required of the reader for the interpretation of a literary text.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Grondin, *Filosofinės hermeneutikos įvadas*, trans. N. Putinaitė, Vilnius: ALK/Aidai, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Viktorija Daujotytė, *Literatūros fenomenologija*, Vilnius: Vilniaus dailės akademijos leidykla, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Pritchard, “The Hermeneutical Mafia or, After Strange Gods at Yale,” *Hudon Review*, 28, (Winter 1975-76), p. 601-610.

<sup>6</sup> This dualistic definition of hermeneutics is reminiscent of the double meaning of poetics (*poiēin*): when the broad Greek meaning, which refers to creativity and creation in general, is separated from the narrower meaning of poetics as a literary theory devoted to exploring esthetic particularities in literature, while recognizing the similarities between them. For more extensive discussion see: Gérard Dessons, *Poetikos įvadas*, trans. N. Keršytė, J. Žalgaitė Kaya, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 2005, p. 14.

The problem explored by hermeneutics – the problem of the difficulty of interpreting texts – is most relevant to the human sciences. Whenever we encounter the challenges of interpreting any text that is read (its confusing parts and the confusing speech of the Other) and we begin to wonder how to overcome them, we are engaged in what can be called hermeneutics. Linguistic text analysis constitutes the force and constraints of contemporary interpretation, and is what hermeneutical theorists invite us to transcend: “Hermeneutic experience is a correction made by thought which, though formed by language, evades its violence. By thus escaping from itself language itself continuously raises new hermeneutic questions.”<sup>7</sup> But also the problem of literary interpretation cannot be abstracted or philosophized to the point that it loses its “literariness.”

The seemingly simple question “What is the art of literary interpretation?” has been answered in many different and ambiguous ways, and the description and analysis of these answers are the object of this book. It is devoted to the question of the self-awareness of the fields of literary study and literary criticism – concepts that will be determinedly seen as related and intra-disciplinary. The object of author research therefore includes the very different things that are related to this question: literary criticism and theories of literary criticism, esthetics, exegesis, philological hermeneutics and philosophical analyses of the question of understanding. All this is understood as the historical tradition of hermeneutic theory and its efforts at countering the positivist tradition in literary studies.

The initial intention of this book was to discuss literary hermeneutics in a synchronic, systemic manner, and to provide a conceptual description of the contemporary art of literary interpretation, its essence and its most important principles. This very quickly had to be abandoned in favor of a more familiar historical approach which would once again reinforce the banal truth that hermeneutics is inevitably hermeneutical. At the risk of allowing this historical study of literary hermeneutics to slide into the repetition of well-known matters, it was nevertheless decided to reject a static, reductive and synchronic description, so that this study would not risk ignoring the important, and perhaps most important, questions – historical shifts of ideas, their polarity and key moments of conflict, the unexpected renewal or

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<sup>7</sup> Sverdiolas, *min. veik.*, p. xx.

prolapse of distinct problems from active, contemporary critical circulation. The hermeneutic tradition has consistently rejected the idea that a literary work can have static, objective meanings, because these, like the lives that speak through these works, dissolve in the rivers of time. In hermeneutics the literary work is first of all conceived of as an inter-subjective means of communication which allows an author to share his/her life experience with others – with a community of readers and commentators. Like the community reading it, the work's meanings are therefore continually shifting. Just like literature and its critics, literary hermeneutics cannot evade the principle of historical dynamism:

Hermeneutics names no particular method of interpretation or coherent body of theory that could be expounded in systematic form. In our time, as before, it exists only as a historical tradition. Thus hermeneutics can be understood only through a historical overview of its development.<sup>8</sup>

While historical research into literary hermeneutics helped the author to reveal its polymorphic, but also its more precise nature, the combination of historical typological methods with the principle of the hermeneutic circle made it possible to relate general historical tendencies to the analysis of concrete theoretical works and critical articles. However, as the German philosopher of life and cultural theorist Friedrich Nietzsche noted, the identity of any phenomenon that has its own history is problematic, so what can be said about the nature of literary hermeneutics, which has a several thousand-year old history? The origins of Western European hermeneutics are inseparable from the very origins of literature: Greek spoken literature began to be recorded in 500-600 B.C.E. With the evolution of written language – which was devoted in part to public speeches and theatre, and in part to the private reader – the need to discuss and evaluate it also grew. These were the origins of literary theory and criticism which, in 500-400 B.C.E., were impressively developed in Plato and Aristotle's philosophical works, marking the establishment of the concept of hermeneutics in various linguistic forms. It is not surprising that, with the growing diversity of hermeneutic conceptions, literary critics became concerned with the question

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<sup>8</sup> Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, Yale University Press, 1991, p. 1.

of the nature, or identity, of hermeneutics – should they hold to the strict tradition of epistemological hermeneutics, following the American theorist E.D. Hirsch in *Validity and Interpretation* (1967), or waded into the jungles of vague philosophical abstractions by claiming that all contemporary thought is “hermeneutic,” following Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and Gadamer and Ricoeur’s supporting theories? The goal of the present study is to explain how, in search of its identity, literary hermeneutics has successfully navigated through the Scylla and Charybdis of these dangers. To this end it was important to select the works of E. D. Hirsch, Richard Palmer, Péter Szondi, Emil Staiger, Georges Poulet, Wolfgang Iser, H. R. Jauss, Stanley Fish, and other theorists who demonstrate the vitality and relevance of hermeneutics. Philosophical hermeneutics has had an ambiguous effect on theorists of literary hermeneutics: it has both drawn them in with its anti-positivist existential ideas, and inspired opposition to its abstract formulations.<sup>9</sup>

The book *The Art of Literary Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Tradition* is divided into two parts. In the three chapters of the first part (“The Sources of Hermeneutics and of *Ars Interpretandi*,” “The Hermeneutics of Modernity and Literary Studies,” and “The Problem of Anti-Methodological Thinking in Philosophical Hermeneutics”), the question of the understanding of the literary work is discussed as an integral part of hermeneutics in general. There the author explores how the conception of literature and its interpretation was understood in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and the philologists of Antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment; in Schleiermacher and Dilthey’s epistemological and anthropological hermeneutics; and in Heidegger and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. The author also explores concepts and theoretical principles that are important for the contemporary art of literary interpretation: the conception of interpretation as the converse of rhetoric, the hermeneutic circle, the conflict between allegorical and grammatical interpretation, the mimesis of understanding and perspectivism, the shift in philology from the word to a hermeneutics of the spirit, the linguistic and psychological competence of the perceiver, the principle of reconstructing the authorial meaning of a work, the conflict between understanding and explanation, the critique of positivist historicism, the concept

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<sup>9</sup> See: *Literary Theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, ed. Patricia Waugh, 2006, p. 15-17.

of the spirit of an epoch, and, of course, opposition to absolute scientific knowledge. Finally, the author discusses the opposition of twentieth-century philosophical hermeneutics to the habits of anthropological thinking – the overvaluing of language, textual meaning, and the function of the reader; the model of text interpretation as a fusion of horizons (*Horizonverschmelzung*) and the concept of dialogic understanding; the valuing of ontological *a priori* understanding (expectations, prejudices) and the establishment of a hermeneutics of suspicion; the critique of a consciousness (*cogito*) that has become alienated from the world; the relevance of the questions of intersubjectivity and communication; the identification of beauty and truth; the concept of literary interpretation as play; the conceptualization of temporal experience in historical narratives, the correlation between esthetic effect and historical factualness; the future of reception theory.

In the first part of the book the author looked closely at general and philosophical hermeneutics to enable providing a fresh answer to the question that concerns us: what topical ideas has hermeneutics given and continues to provide for our field of literary study? Why did many of these practices of literary interpretation change and what do they mean to us today? Why has philosophical hermeneutics always been close to the human sciences, art, and literature? What did it see of value in literature and literary criticism? Why did it value literary over scientific language? In the second half of the twentieth century, philosophical hermeneutics appealed to literary scholars precisely because it once again firmly reminded them of the dangerous link between immanent academic criticism and the loss of a connection with life practice. By opposing formalist literary analyses and drawing extensively on phenomenology, hermeneutics encouraged “humanly relevant” (R. Palmer) and “personalized” (M. Bakhtin) types of historical literary researches. Without making substantive additions or improvements to an existing methodology of literary interpretation, philosophical hermeneutics was able to ask critical questions about methodological limitations and the dangers of automatically applying technical procedures. The polemical relationship of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur’s to Husserl’s logical and reductionist methodology for analyzing and describing consciousness and to twentieth-century scientist technologies of thinking stimulated critical views within literary studies regarding positivist approaches, in this way deepening understanding of questions related to linguistic, existential, and reception

approaches to the text. The influence of philosophical hermeneutics on literary studies has been noted by many an author: “Philosophical hermeneutics has unquestionably influenced contemporary art history, literary studies, esthetics, philosophy of art, art criticism, sociology, and cultural studies.”<sup>10</sup>

The second section of the book is devoted to the description, consideration, and evaluation of twentieth century Western and national traditions of literary hermeneutics. In the first chapter, “Twentieth Century Literary Hermeneutics,” the author describes directions and different schools in Western literary hermeneutics. Richard Palmer has noted the general return of hermeneutics from philosophy to philology: “In this movement one may see a return of hermeneutics to its earlier strong connection with the philological problematic of understanding texts.”<sup>11</sup> The return of hermeneutics to the problems of literary interpretation was the subject of E. D. Hirsch’s *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), Richard Palmer’s *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (1969, 1972, 1975), and Péter Szondi’s *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (translated into English by M. Woodmaster as *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics*, 1995). These books all explain the role of hermeneutics in the context of literary theory and criticism, and how hermeneutics developed its identity in dialogue with the tradition of philological analysis, as well as with formalist criticism and philosophical hermeneutics. The position of hermeneutics in the second half of the twentieth century – to “return to philology from philosophy” – should not be interpreted verbatim, because it also marked a radical transformation of traditional philology. Having learned a great deal from philosophical hermeneutics, twentieth-century literary hermeneutics discussed and rejected nineteenth-century methodological ideas and the so-called positivist analyses of classical philology much more than it accepted them. The old habits of philological analysis, which sought to establish a work’s canonical and normative position in the literary field, were foreign to it. The ideas of hermeneutic philosophy provided a basis for the spread of the “relativism” of twentieth century literary hermeneutics. Retrospectively,

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<sup>10</sup> Vytautas Rubavičius, *Postmodernusis diskursas: filosofinė hermeneutika, dekonstrukcija, menas*, Vilnius, 2003, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Palmer, “Allegorical, Philological, and Philosophical Hermeneutics,” in *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts*, ed. Stephanus Kresic, University of Ottawa Press, 1981, p. 18.

it is possible to conclude that contemporary literary hermeneutics, having taken over hermeneutic philosophy's irrationalist ontological concept of understanding, and the new possibilities for text interpretation found forms of compromise and reconciliation with the tradition of philological criticism:

Without the primary factual basis of philological explanation, as Professor Murray would agree, the hermeneutic activity is impossible. Without hermeneutic reflection, the philological explication has no means of reaching beyond the historically conditioned status of the poem in its relation to a world of men living two millennia later. The poem thus remains a captive of its own historical circumstances. It is hermeneutically dead, denied contact with otherness of minds from a different culture. Without hermeneutic reflection, even if not fully articulated, the task of interpretation at any level cannot, as Socrates would say, give an account of itself. Explanation of a text without awareness of the aims of interpretation becomes a mindless, self-justifying activity, a blind groping after facts which are ultimately meaningless because they have no larger context.<sup>12</sup>

The main concern of contemporary literary hermeneutics is that the explication of texts, which was perfected by twentieth-century linguistic methodologies, and their understanding, which philosophical hermeneutics directed towards ontological and existential problems, be reconciled. In this case, hermeneutics and the art of interpretation have become synonymous as categories opposing methodologically rationalistic analysis and metaphysical habits of thought.

During the twentieth century, literary hermeneutics acquired two new and distinct meanings. The broader one applies to all twentieth-century literary theories and shifts the focus of attention from the writer and the genetic analysis of creativity to linguistic text analysis. In a more narrow sense, anti-methodical literary hermeneutics settled into a reaction to structuralism, semiotics, and New Criticism. As the French theorist Gérard Genette proposed in the article "Structuralisme et critique littéraire" (1966), the attitude toward immanent linguistic analysis in twentieth century literary theories was marked by two opposing views of the literary work: while some critics saw it as a subject, others viewed it as an object. This is the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Segal, "Horace's Socrate Ode," in *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts*, 1981, University of Ottawa Press, p 290.



origin of the opposition between two critical directions: “live,” “subjective” philosophical criticism (phenomenology, hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, reception) and “inanimate,” “objective” (structuralism, formalism, New Criticism). Moreover, Gadamer’s anti-scientific understanding of truth created the conditions for the emergence of internal conflicts between hermeneutics and divergent critical schools. Thus, following Jane P. Tompkins’s idea that various streams of literary hermeneutics (from formalist to post-structuralist) can be found in new theories of the reader, the author of this book discusses the Geneva school thematic criticism and Georges Poulet’s article “Phenomenology of Reading” (1969), the German-Swiss Zurich interpretation school and Emil Staiger’s *Die Kunst der Interpretation* (1955), the Constance School of literary criticism and Wolfgang Iser’s *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie Ästhetischer Wirkung* (1976), and H. G. Jaus’s *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation für die Literaturwissenschaft* (a public lecture given in 1967 and published in 1970) and *Asthetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (1982), and the American school of Reader Response Criticism and Stanley Fish’s *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (1980).

The book ends with the chapter “Manifestations of Hermeneutics in Lithuanian Literary Criticism,” in which the author discusses the implications of Western hermeneutics for Lithuanian literary studies and criticism (she explains how hermeneutic ideas have been articulated in the works of literary critics Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas, Julijonas Lindė-Dobilas, Juozas Girnius, Rimvydas Šilbajorius, Vanda Zaborskaitė, and Albertas Zalatorius).

The book *The Art of Literary Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Tradition* offers a new historical and interdisciplinary consideration of the tradition of literary hermeneutics and its connections with the development of Lithuanian literary criticism. Contemporary literary hermeneutics searches for connections between historical-biographical studies and formalist-textual analyses and highlights that tradition’s opposition to the narrowness of strictly methodological tendencies. In contrast to the usual categories for understanding Lithuanian literary criticism – in terms of historical categories (national revival, early twentieth century, inter-war years, Soviet period, émigré critics, etc.), literary typologies (romantic, realist, symbolic, and so on), or political categories (bourgeois/proletarian, mainstream/oppositional, etc.), and by asking the fundamental question “What is literary interpreta-

tion?” the author of this book suggests a new typological classification for Lithuanian literary criticism, which better reflects the specificity of the historical development of that tradition: normative poetics, positivistic and “spiritual” historical studies, “effective history” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), textual, hermeneutics (the art of interpretation, reception), deconstruction, and pragmatic criticism.

These considerations led to several general conclusions about literary hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics began in Antiquity as the mastery of linguistic understanding (in relation to rhetoric and poetics), and as the practice of commentary and explication of allegorical and grammatical elements in texts, most notably in Biblical exegesis. In modern times it became a method within the humanities (an alternative to the natural sciences), whose goal was to reflect upon how life experiences are expressed in literature. The principle of the hermeneutic circle deepened understanding of the coherence, within diversity, of both life and the creative work, while recognizing issues of inconsistency between them. While nineteenth-century hermeneutic theories of the art of literary interpretation stressed anthropological and psychological aspects of understanding, the twentieth century saw a shift toward ontological and linguistic aspects and the function of the reader. Hermeneutics and the art of interpretation became synonymous concepts which opposed rational methodological studies and the habits of metaphysical thought. This implied two important things: linguistic analysis of the text and interpretive play between the text and its readers. Proponents of the art of literary interpretation used to stress that, though we have only as much experience as we can express through language, experience has primacy over language, which is not a self-contained world.

Although it does not consist of a single, distinct method, during the twentieth century literary hermeneutics evolved as a rather specific and systematic theoretical tradition opposed to rationalist and objectivist approaches to literary texts. From the point of view of hermeneutics, scientific interpretations of literary works are not possible because the starting point of any interpretation is a guess, which is then followed by its explication. This does not mean, however, that interpretation does not require preparation, or a precise and intellectual basis and descriptive language. The notion of the irrational moment of guessing in textual understanding drew on Heidegger’s

ontological philosophy, while the concept of the relativist merging of two horizons was validated by Gadamer. The subject/object opposition that was overcome by twentieth-century hermeneutics makes it possible for us to posit that, to some degree, we share a common world and therefore, to some degree, a common understanding about it which can be broadened only by our conversation.

Recognizing, phenomenologically, that understanding the world means revealing our relationship to it (because the phenomena surrounding us do not have their own meaning and being, only their meaning for us), a discourse around the so-called art of interpretation, and, with that, literary hermeneutics, become relevant. The idea that textual understanding could not be separated from the self-understanding of the interpreter became especially relevant. This self-understanding is not simply subjective in hermeneutic theory, as it “includes such dimensions as the methodological self-understanding of the discipline, the social role and force of the discipline, or even an interpretation of the present age as such.”<sup>13</sup> According to Gadamer, any kind of understanding is dialogic because we can only understand that which we understand as an answer to our question. Because the interpreter who is raising questions is affected by his/her socio-historical situation (horizon), the meaning of the text is inevitably applied to it. So, after Gadamer, the question “What is literature?” loses all strict metaphysical answers and becomes a problematic consideration of changes in how literature is understood.

All hermeneutic theories shape a similar, phenomenological and existential, approach to understanding literature according to which the interpreter is first of all a human being who construes his/her labile identity through cultural signs. By preserving esthetic categories, literary hermeneutics drew attention to the danger of the esthetic consciousness becoming alienated, and esthetic understanding becoming one-sided and isolated from life experiences.

Humans are historical beings, and being is time, so that both those who create art and those who participate in the play of interpreting it have one primary goal – to contain the penetrability of the world. Interpretation is

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<sup>13</sup> David Couzens Hoy. *The Critical Circle: Literature, History, Philosophical Hermeneutics*. University of California Press, 1982, p. 150.

concerned not only with the “meaningful form” of a work, but also with its references. Because the work, as well as those reading or understanding it, are historical (existing only in a process of continual becoming), by their very nature they resist “eternal” models of scientific knowledge. Hermeneutic ideas have encouraged the modernization of both Western and Lithuanian literary historical research and helped to stimulate questions about historical consciousness, because “a truly historical thinking must also think its own historicity” (Gadamer). Literature does not only move in a chronological, linear manner, but awakens integrated experiences of different times.

Humans have language and time so that they can interpret, create, and preserve their being. The power of science is deflated as soon as we approach existential matters – when we begin to think about works of art, which require dialogic, not only logical, understanding. One person interpreting a text cannot understand it in either a better or a worse way than another – only *differently*. The art of literary interpretation occurs and unfolds as a conversation between different opinions about the same text, as a discussion, incessantly expanding the breadth of its meaning. As a result, where problems of understanding, or miscommunication, occur, “the hermeneutic challenge of finding a common language emerges most importantly.”<sup>14</sup> But the idea of dialogism in the art of interpretation is the most challenging moment and has very often been considered as dangerous relativism by many opponents.

Theorists from the Renaissance philologists to Wolfgang Iser note similarities between the art of interpretation and the art of translation, and their opposition to rationalist textual analysis. Because the art of literary interpretation cannot be a phenomenon of pure science, rhetoric is as important to it as logic, and narrative and metaphor are as important to it as abstract logical definitions. Hermeneutics charges literary science with examining the criteria and habits of literary understanding and how they have changed – in other words, with interpreting itself.

But a book dedicated to literary hermeneutics cannot end with only a list of the most elementary and general conclusions. It is important to note which of the questions raised by its theoretical tradition are still relevant and being discussed today:

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<sup>14</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Filosofija ir hermeneutika,” in Gadamer, *Istorija, menas, kalba*, p. 144.

What does the concept of interpreting a work mean to us in general? Can understanding of a text be non-assumptive, disconnected from history and from the interpreter's life and horizon of expectation? What does it mean to understand the Other? Should interpretation be directed more toward text analysis or dialogue? How much meaning does a critic find, rather than bring to, a work? Is our understanding of a literary work beyond the subjective/objective opposition? Can the value of a work be related to the energy it expends resisting the reader's expectations? Is it necessary to comply with purity in terms of analytical methods? Is experience or language primary in the process of interpreting literary works? How should linguistic interpretation of a text be related to its shifting (historical) contexts? How can we overcome the tension that continually occurs, in understanding, between abstract ideas (Platonism) and the excessively empirical factual analysis of phenomena (nominalism)? Is it possible to methodologically resolve the conflict between scientific (logical structuralism) and artistic (irrational experience) trends in literary interpretation, or should the literary critic leave that beyond the limits of methodology and pick paradoxical, interpretive play? The art of literary interpretation is usually related to its present moment of reading, focusing on the importance of the transactional and dialogic relationship with the work. But could someone soon turn the rejection of that relationship into a new hermeneutical problem? Why is the text understood differently by readers, what does that depend upon, and what unconsciously affects and shapes our understanding of literature? How do the assessment of literature and ideas about the canon change historically?

Contemporary philosophical and literary hermeneutics raises the potentially interesting idea that understanding of the text should be based more on *practical*, rather than on *theoretical* models of thought.<sup>15</sup> First of all practical thinking differs from theoretical thought, because it cannot limit itself to the explanation of normative, logical, "universal" truth/meaning. On the other hand, if practical thinking has doubts about, or rejects normative methodology, that does not mean that it can justify or legitimate the subjectivity of "impressionistic" interpretations or the so-called naiveté of literary criticism when the latter refuses to critically review its own operat-

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<sup>15</sup> See: Steven Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics*, Cornell University Press, 1998; Jan Sjavik, *Reading for the Truth: Rhetorical Constructions in Norwegian Fiction*, 2004.

ing principles. It is not without reason that Gadamer created hermeneutics as a universal meta-theory with the most important question: how much, in modern times, can the scientific (methodical) knowledge that pushed out mythological and religious thinking help humans understand the important truths about their lives, and with that the poetic truths of artistic works? For this reason, the hermeneutic history he described and analyzed first of all consisted of that which was and continues to be opposed to the domination of scholarly thought and tradition, that which is related to exegesis and the exclusivity of everyday existential and artistic interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

Some so-called positivist hermeneutics explore ways of finding a basis for the correct meaning of a work, and are connected to the exegesis of textual language, while others, the so-called irrational and negative hermeneutics, ask questions about the nature of understanding and debate the limits of rational thought. In the first case understanding is more related to the fact and essence of the text (its fixed meaning), while in the second it is related to the effects and dynamic of the text. Both the positive and negative questions are important, and for this reason the theories of both of these approaches make an important contribution to literary hermeneutics in general. It appears that the question of how to understand the work, raised by literary hermeneutics, is so complicated that it cannot become the property of any one school of literary study.

It is very important that in the tradition of the art of interpretation the literary work is seen as a multi-layered phenomenon (discourse or “the event of speech,” narrative, contextual text, open work) that is influenced by diverse linguistic, psychological, cultural, religious, socio-historic, philosophical, and political contexts, and this makes it possible to apply various methodologies in analyzing it.<sup>17</sup> Hermeneutic literary studies are

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<sup>16</sup> See: Robert Holub, “Hermeneutics,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume VII: From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. Raman Selden, 2005, Cambridge University Press, p. 265.

<sup>17</sup> “The theory of hermeneutics, in my opinion, would consist of developing the parallel theory of genesis of text and of reading, and to show the flow of one to the other. This undertaking itself requires a very different operation, because the act of reading is, after all, a summing-up of numerous activities, going from the simple interpretation of sentences in their syntactic and semantic constitution to the comprehension of the work of an author in its living totality.” Paul Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Theory of Literature. An Interview with Paul Ricoeur,” in *Modern Literary Theory*, edited by Ph. Rice and P. Waugh, London, 1996, p.91.

dominated by a trend toward methodological pluralism. It is interesting to note that – unlike hermeneutics, which draws on all of them – none of the “pure” methodologies describes itself as an “art,” as they are all concerned with upholding their scientific status; only hermeneutics stresses the idea of the “art of interpretation.”

Ricoeur’s version of a contemporary hermeneutics proposes either to integrate different ways of interpreting literature, or, when that is not possible, to recognize the conflict between different interpretations as a sign of its expression. His steady coordination of different approaches was very attractive and promising for contemporary literary study. Although the current post-theoretical situation illustrates the decline of all literary theories, including hermeneutics, the questions they raise continue to be relevant today, as Vincent B. Leitch argues in his book *Living with Theory* (2008). Having established the importance of questions related to the new reader and reading, literary hermeneutics found broad resonances in the field of education.<sup>18</sup> And the fact that hermeneutics has encouraged a reconsideration of traditional essentialist methods, which had damaged literary studies and led them down a blind alley, and has provided twenty-first century literary studies important tools (the emphasis on inter-subjectivity, interdisciplinarity, methodological pluralism, the importance of the function of the reader, the relevance of historical context, the biographical nature of the writer, conventions of literary evaluation, and questions related to publishing repertoires and popular literature) that allow some theorists to draw the conclusion that it will continue to be relevant for contemporary literary criticism.<sup>19</sup>

This book about the art of literary interpretation is, in a sense, the author’s response to the complaints of semioticians and positivist literary critics that everything written beyond the boundaries of their own workshops is nothing.

<sup>18</sup> See: Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*, 1987; Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem, The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, 2nd ed., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992; Denis Donoghue, *The Practice of Reading*, Yale UP, 1998; Richard Beach, *A Teacher’s Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*, Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1993; *Reader-Response in Secondary and College Classrooms*, ed. Nicholas J. Karolides, University of Wisconsin-River Falls, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> See: Philip Goldstein, James L. Machor, “Introduction: Reception Study: Achievements and New Directions,” in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, ed. Philip Goldstein, James L. Machor, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

ing but “foggy literary readings” with no clear methodological basis – mere “impressionistic criticism” incapable of transcending its own subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that what they see as “foggy literary interpretation” does not only describe the intellectually weak work of some unprofessional critics, but is part of the long-standing and influential tradition of the art of literary interpretation that was modernized by various twentieth-century hermeneutic theories (existential phenomenology, reception, Reader Response) – theories that resisted not only Enlightenment and positivist literary historical research, and twentieth-century textual theories but also the dogmatism of all scientific thought. Is it relevant to apply the subject/object opposition – associating subjectivity with erroneous “impressionistic criticism” and objectivity with correct “rationalist criticism” – to works of literature which attempt to reflect on human existence? Is it right to limit literary interpretations to the logical comprehension of its language? During the writing of this book, hearing the persistent discussion about these things allowed the author to better grasp and discern the tradition of the art of literary interpretation in Western and Lithuanian literary study – a topic which calls for continued research. Sadly, the works of such important literary theorists as Jean-Paul Sartre, Roman Ingarden, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Umberto Eco, which have had a great impact on the contemporary reading

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<sup>20</sup> “Researchers, at least in the human sciences, can be divided into two camps: ‘impressionists’ and ‘methodologists,’ who seek to crystallize the methodology they use, define their theoretical principles, and consistently apply them. I call this methodological monism, and admit that I am an adherent. In my view, a method must be coherent. According to Greimas, coherence is one of the few criteria we have for truth. [...] An obvious contrast to semiotics would be so-called impressionistic criticism. These kinds of critics also talk about meanings in literature. Here many different aspects intersect: psychology, psychoanalysis, ideology and everything else... However, the impressionistic critic is always at the centre of the interpretation; he is convinced that he is correct and needs nothing else. Semioticians are much more humble; they do not limit the meaning of the subject [...]. The goal of semiotics is to avoid subjective connotations, to make knowledge more objective. [...] An old debate between hermeneuticists and semioticians: explanation and understanding. Hermeneuticists, and with them most philosophers, believe that the world must be understood intuitively, or through gesture, through breathing. For them, explanation is but a technical procedure.” --Kęstutis Nastopka, Blykčiojanti semiotika: tarp metodo ir pasaulio.“ Loreta Mačianskaitė and Dalia Satkauskytė interview Professor Kęstutis Nastopka. *Colloquia*, 2010, nr. 25, pp. 170, 174.



of literature, were included only in the background research for this book. There are also many Lithuanian literary critics whose work has an affinity to the tradition of literary hermeneutics, and who deserve more extensive examination. This book raises one final and provocative question: does hermeneutics, the oldest theory of the understanding of linguistic messages, and one which has undergone fundamental changes, not remain one of the most important theoretical foundations for literary criticism in our contemporary globalized society, which is seeing a significant decline in the reading of books?

Translated by Karla Gruodis