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ENGL-300: INTRODUCTION TO THEORY OF LITERATURE

Lecture 3 - Ways In and Out of the Hermeneutic Circle [January 22, 2009]

Chapter 1. The History of Hermeneutics [00:00:00]

Professor Paul Fry: All right. Let's hope we can free our minds of these matters now and turn to something a little more substantive, which is the question--before we plunge in to Gadamer really: what is hermeneutics? Well, what it is is easily enough explained despite the sort of difficulty and thorniness of the word. It is the art or principles of interpretation.

But hermeneutics has a history; that is to say, it's not something which has always just been there. It's not something that people have always thought about in a systematic way. Strictly speaking, what I have just said isn't true. Many of you probably know that Aristotle has a treatise called *De Interpretatione*. The Middle Ages are rife with treatises on interpretation. I suppose what I'm really saying is that the word "hermeneutics" wasn't available, and the idea that there ought to be a sort of a systematic study of how we interpret things wasn't really current.

Of course, by the same token the notion of hermeneutics arises primarily in religion first, specifically in the Christian tradition, but that isn't to say that there hasn't been, that there wasn't long before the moment at which hermeneutics became important in Christianity, that there wasn't centuries' worth of Talmudic scholarship which is essentially also hermeneutic in nature--that is, to say concerned with the art and basis of interpretation.

What gave rise in the Western world to what is called "hermeneutics" was in fact the Protestant Reformation. And there's a lot of significance in that, I think, and I'll try to explain why. You don't really puzzle your head about questions of interpretation, how we determine the validity of interpretation and so on, until A) meaning becomes terribly important to you, and B) the ascertainment of meaning becomes difficult. You may say to yourself, "Well, isn't it always the case that meaning is important and that meaning is hard to construe?" Well, not necessarily. If you are a person whose sacred scripture is adjudicated by the Pope and the occasional tribunal of church elders, you yourself don't really need to worry very much about what scripture means. You are told what it means. It goes without saying therefore what it means. But in the wake of the Protestant Reformation when the question of one's relationship with the Bible became personal and everyone was understood, if only through the local minister, to be engaged with coming to an understanding of what is after all pretty difficult--who on earth knows what the Parables mean and so on, and the whole of the Bible poses interpretative difficulties--then of course you are going to have to start worrying about how to interpret it. Needless to say, since it's a sacred scripture, the meaning of it is important to you. You do want to know what it means. It can't mean just anything. It's crucial to you to know exactly what it means and why what it means is important.

So as Protestantism took hold, by the same token the arts and sciences of hermeneutics took hold, and people began to write treatises about interpretation--but it was always interpretation of the Bible. In other words, in this tradition religion came first. After that, the next thing that happens is you begin to get the rise of constitutional democracies, and as you get that, you begin to become much more interested, as a citizen or as a person who has suffrage or as a person who in one way or another has the rights of the state or nation--you begin to become concerned about the nature of the laws you live under. That's why hermeneutics gradually moved--I should say, it didn't desert religion, but it expanded--to the study of the law. The arts and sciences that had been developed in thinking about interpreting scripture were then applied to the interpretation of something the meaning of which had become almost as important; that is to say, it mattered what the law was and how it was to be interpreted. You know of course that this is absolutely crucial to the study of the law to this day: what are the grounds for understanding the meaning of the Constitution, for example? There are widespread controversies about it, and many of the courses you would take in law school are meant to try to get to the bottom of these thorny questions. Well and good. Once again you see that hermeneutics enters a field when the meaning of something becomes more important and when that meaning is recognized to be difficult to grasp.

Now as yet we haven't said anything about literature, and the fact is there is no hermeneutic art devoted to literature during the early modern period and for most of the eighteenth century. Think about the writers you've studied from the eighteenth century. It's very interesting that they all just sort of take meaning for granted. If you think about Alexander Pope, for example, or even Samuel Johnson, as they reflect on literature and why it's important and what the nature of literature is, they aren't concerned about interpretation. They're concerned about evaluation, establishing the principles of what's at stake in writing a poem or in writing literature in some other form and raise questions that are largely moral and esthetic. They are not concerned about interpretation because to them, good writing is precisely writing that's clear, writing that doesn't need to be interpreted but has precisely as its virtue its transparency of meaning. In fact, during this whole period playwrights were writing prologues to their plays abusing each other for being obscure--that is to say, abusing each other for requiring interpretation. "I don't understand what your metaphors are all about. You don't know what a metaphor is. All you do is make one verbal mistake after another. Nobody can understand you." This is the nature of the prose and verse prefaces to theatrical pieces in the eighteenth century, and from that you can see that interpretation is not only not studied but is considered to be completely extraneous to what's valuable about literature. If you have to interpret it, it isn't any good.

Then as the eighteenth century wears on, you begin to get the sense-- with the emergence of Romanticism, as is well known and I think often overstated--you begin to get a cult of genius. You get the idea that everything arises from the extraordinary mental acuity or spiritual insight of an author and that what needs to be understood about literature is the genius of its production. Well, well and good, but at the same time, if that's the case, and if there is this extraordinary emphasis on the importance of the expression of genius, you can see what's beginning to happen. The literary creator starts to seem a lot more like the divine creator, that is to say, and in a certain sense could be understood as a placeholder for the divine creator. Remember that secularization in Western culture is increasing during the course of the Enlightenment--that is to say, during the course of the eighteenth century, and there's a certain way in which Romanticism and what's

important about Romanticism can be understood as what Northrop Frye has called a "secular scripture." In other words, the meaning of literature becomes more difficult because it's profoundly subjective and no longer engaged with the shared values that had made for the importance of literature; that is to say, our sense of why it's so important to understand it has also grown because for many people, it begins to take over partly at least the role of religion.

So with the rise of secular scripture--that is to say, literature imagined as something both terribly important and also difficult to understand--naturally the arts and sciences of hermeneutics begin to enter that field. In particular, the great theologian of the Romantic period, Friedrich Schleiermacher, devoted his career to principles of hermeneutics that were meant to be applied as much to literature as to the study of scripture, and established a tradition in which it was understood that literature was a central focus of hermeneutics.

Chapter 2. The Hermeneutic Circle [00:20:37]

So much then for the history of hermeneutics. What followed was the work of Wilhelm Dilthey around the turn of the century, of Heidegger in his *Being and Time* of 1927, of Gadamer who in many ways can be understood as a disciple and student of Heidegger; and a tradition which persists today follows from the initial engagements of Schleiermacher during the Romantic period with literature.

All right. So what is the basic problematic for hermeneutics in this tradition? It's what we probably all have heard about and something that I will briefly try to describe, what's called the hermeneutic circle. So what is the hermeneutic circle? It's a relationship between a reader and a text or--as is the case for certain kinds of students of hermeneutics but not Gadamer, I think--of a relationship between a reader and an author: in other words a relationship which is understood to aim at understanding the intention of an author. The author of the fourth quotation on your sheet for today, E. D. Hirsch, belongs in that tradition and understands the hermeneutic circle as a relationship between a reader and an author where the text is a kind of a mediatory document containing the meaning of the author.

But for Gadamer and his tradition, it's a little different. It can be understood as the relationship between a reader and a text, and this can be put in a variety of ways. It's often put in terms of the relationship between the part and the whole. I approach a text and of course the first thing I read is a phrase or a sentence. There's still a lot more of the text and so that first fragment a *part*, but I immediately begin to form an opinion about this part with respect to an imagined or supposed whole. Then, I use this sense I have of what the whole must be like to continue to read successive parts--lines, sentences, whatever they may be. I keep referring those successive parts back to a sense of the whole which changes as a result of knowing more and more and more parts. The circularity of this interpretative engagement has to do with moving back and forth between a certain preconception about the whole that I form from studying a part, moving then to the part, back to the whole, back to the part, back to the whole and so on in a circular pattern.

This can also be understood as a relationship between the present and the past--that is to say, my particular historical horizon and some other historical horizon that I'm trying to come to terms with, so that I refer back and forth to what I know about the world before I engage the text; what the text seems to be saying in relation to that which I know, how it might change my sense of what I know by referring back from what I

know continuously to an understanding of the way in which the past text speaks. Finally of course, because hermeneutics isn't just something that takes place across an historical gulf--because it also can take place across a social or cultural gulf, or maybe not even very much of a gulf--when we engage each other in conversation, we are still performing a hermeneutic act. I have to try to understand what you're saying and I have to refer it to what I want to say, and the circuit of communication between us has to stay open as a result of this mutual and developing understanding of what we're talking about. It's the same thing, of course, with conversations across cultures. So understand that hermeneutics isn't necessarily about, as Gadamer would put it, merging historical horizons. It's also about merging social and cultural and interpersonal horizons and it applies to all of those spheres.

All right. Now the hermeneutic circle, then, involves this reference back and forth between the entities that I've been trying to describe. Let's just quickly--and here we begin to move in to the text--listen to Gadamer's version of how the circularity of this thinking works. This is on page 722 toward the bottom of the left-hand column.

The reader [Gadamer's word is 'he'] projects before himself a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. [In other words, as soon as he sees what the part is like, he projects or imagines what the whole must be that contains this part.] Again the latter [that is to say, the sense of the initial meaning] emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this fore-project [that is to say, the sense we have in advance of the meaning of what we are going to read] which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there.

In other words, what is there--which is a kind of way of talking that Gadamer inherits from Heidegger--really has to do with what Gadamer means when he talks also about *die Sache*, the subject matter. In other words, the effort of a reader in coming to terms with the meaning of a text is an effort to master the subject matter, what is there, and--I suppose it's fair enough to say as a kind of paraphrase--what the text is really about. That's what Gadamer means when he says "what is there."

Anyway, you can see that in this passage on page 722, Gadamer is describing the circularity of our reading, and he's describing it in a way that may raise certain concerns for us. "What do you mean, a fore-structure or a fore-project or a fore-having? Can't I view this thing, as we might say, objectively?" In other words, aren't I going to be hopelessly prejudiced about what I read if I've got some sort of preliminary conception of what it's all about? Why don't I just set aside my preliminary conceptions so that I can understand precisely what is there? How am I ever going to understand what is there if I approach it with some sort of preliminary idea which I never really get rid of because each revision of what I think is there as a result of further reading nevertheless becomes in itself yet another fore-project or preliminary conception?" In other words, this way of thinking seems to suggest--to tell you the truth it does suggest--that you can't get away from preliminary conceptions about things.

This, of course, is disturbing and it's especially disturbing when you then get Heidegger and Gadamer insisting that even though there are always these preliminary conceptions--which Gadamer sort of boldly calls "prejudices," and we'll come back to that--even though there are always these preliminary conceptions, there nevertheless are, as Heidegger puts it, two ways into the circle. All right? A circle, in other words, is not necessarily a vicious circle. See, that's what you are tempted to conclude if you say, "I can never get away from preconceptions." All right? "I'm just going back and forth meaninglessly because I'm never going to get anyplace." Right? But Gadamer and Heidegger say, "No, that's not true. That's not true. A circle isn't at all

necessarily vicious. The way into the circle can also be constructive." That is to say, you really can get someplace, and so you're entitled to say, "Well, okay. It can be constructive, but how can that be?"

Take a look at the second passage on your sheet from Heidegger, not the whole passage but just the first sentence of it where Heidegger says, "In an interpretation, the way in which the entity we are interpreting is to be conceived can be drawn from the entity itself, or the interpretation can force the entity into concepts to which it is opposed in its manner of being." "Now wait a minute," you say. "If I'm just dealing in preconceptions here, how can I take anything from the entity itself?" Right? That's just what seems to be at risk if I can never get beyond my preconceptions.

Chapter 3. On Prejudice [00:23:45]

Well, let me give you an example. I was going to do this later in the lecture but I feel like doing it now. In the eighteenth century, a poet named Mark Akenside wrote a long poem called *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, and in this poem there is the line "The great creator raised his plastic arm." Now let's say that we're into polymers. We know what plastic is. We have no concern or hesitation in saying what plastic is, and so we say, "Oh, gee. Well, I guess the great creator has a sort of a prosthetic limb and he raised it. All right. So that's what the sentence must mean." But then of course, if we know something about the horizon within which Akenside was writing his poem, we are aware that in the eighteenth century the word "plastic" meant "sinuous," "powerful," "flexible," and in that case of course, we immediately are able to recognize what Akenside meant, why it makes perfect sense. The great creator raised his sinuous, powerful, flexible arm, and we know where we stand.

Now notice this. In other words, this is an example of good and bad prejudice, right? The good prejudice is our prior awareness that plastic meant something different in the eighteenth century than it means now. And we bring that prejudice to bear on our interpretation of the line, then that is a constructive way into the circle according to Heidegger and Gadamer. The bad prejudice is when we leap to the conclusion, without thinking for a moment that there might be some other historical horizon, that we know what plastic means. The reason we can tell the difference, by the way, is that if we invoke the eighteenth-century meaning of plastic, we immediately see that the line makes perfect sense, that it's perfectly reasonable and not even particularly notable; but if we bring our own meaning to bear--that is to say our own sense of what the word "plastic" means--then of course the meaning of the line must be crazy. I mean, what on earth? Why would he be saying this about the great creator?

Now I think I'll come back to this example next week when we're talking about an essay called "The Intentional Fallacy" by W.K. Wimsatt," and I will revisit the possibility that there might be some value in supposing that Akenside meant the great creator raised his prosthetic limb, but I'll leave that until next week. I think for the moment it should be plain to you that this is a good way of understanding what the difference between a useful preconception and a useless preconception brought to bear on an interpretative act might consist in.

Chapter 4. Historicism and "Historicality" [00:23:45]

All right. Now in giving the example, I've gotten a little bit ahead of myself, so let me reprise a bit. As you

can tell from your reading of Gadamer--and of course, the title of the great book from which this excerpt is taken is *Truth and Method* or *Wahrheit und Methode*, with its implicit suggestion that there is a difference between truth and method--the great objection of Gadamer to other people's way of doing hermeneutics is that they believe that there is a methodology of interpretation. The basic methodology Gadamer is attacking in the excerpt you've read is what he calls historicism.

Now that's a tricky word for us because later in the semester we're going to be reading about something called the New Historicism, and the New Historicism actually has nothing to do with what Gadamer is objecting to in this form of historicism; so we will return to the New Historicism in that context. For the moment, what Gadamer means by "historicism" is this: the belief that you can set aside preconception, in other words that you can completely factor out your own subjectivity, your own view of things, your own historically conditioned point of view--I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said "historically conditioned," I mean your own point of view--that you can completely factor that out in order to enter into the mindset of some other time or place: that you can completely enter into the mind of another. This then is the object of historicizing and, as we'll see at the end of the lecture, there's a certain nobility about it to be juxtaposed with the nobility of Gadamerian hermeneutics. In the meantime, Gadamer is objecting to this because he says, you simply can't do this. You cannot factor out these preconceptions. All you can do, he says, is recognize that you do exist in, you do live in, you do think consciously within a certain horizon, recognize that you are coming face-to-face with another horizon, and try to bridge your horizon and the other horizon--in other words, to put it simply, to find common ground, to find some way of merging a present with a past: a here with a there, in such a way that results in what Gadamer calls *Horizontverschmelzung*, "horizon merger." This act of horizon merger has as its result what Gadamer calls "effective history," and by "effective history" he means history which is useful--that is to say, history which really can go to work for us and is not just a matter of accumulating an archive or distancing ourselves from the past.

I'll say again, somewhat in advance perhaps of the time I should say it, that Gadamer thinks that there's something immoral about historicism. Why? Because it condescends toward the past. It supposes that the past is simply a repository of information, and it never supposes for a minute that if we actually merge ourselves with the moment of the past, the past may be able to tell us something we ought to know--that is to say, it may be able actually to teach us something. Gadamer believes that historicism forgets the possibility of being taught something by past-ness or otherness.

Chapter 5. Gadamer's Debt to Heidegger [00:27:48]

Now I think in order to make this viewpoint seem plausible, we probably should study it for a moment a little bit more philosophically. That is to say, you're asking yourself, "Well, sure. You know what? I pride myself on this: I can factor out all forms of subjectivity. I really can be objective. I'm perfectly capable of understanding the past in and for itself without any contribution of my own, without, in short, any preconceptions." So let's look at a couple of passages from your sheet, from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, from his analytic of the hermeneutic circle, and see what Heidegger has to say about this claim. This is the first passage on your sheet. Heidegger says:

When we have to do with anything, the mere seeing of the things which are closest to us bears in itself the structure

of interpretation and in so primordial a manner that just to grasp something free, as it were, of the "as" requires a certain adjustment. . .

What is Heidegger saying? He is saying, I stand here and I am just looking. I look back there and I'm just seeing that sign that says 'exit'. I'm not interpreting it. I don't have any preconception about it. I'm just looking. Right? No, Heidegger says, this is a total illusion. How do I know it's a sign? How do I know it says 'exit'? I bring a million preconceptions to bear on what I take to be a simple act of looking. And then Heidegger says, you know what? It's not at all uninteresting to imagine the possibility of just seeing something without seeing it as something. It would be kind of exhilarating, wouldn't it, to be able just to have something before us. Right? But he says, "You know what? That is well nigh impossible. It is in fact a very, very difficult and derivative act of the mind to try to forget that I am looking at a sign that says 'exit' and, in fact, just looking at what is there without knowing what it is. In other words, I don't *not* know first that that's a sign that says "exit." The very first thing I know is that it's a sign that says "exit." There's no prior act of consciousness. It's the very first thing that I know.

It's an interesting thought experiment to try not to know that that's a sign that says "exit." As Heidegger points out in this passage, that's a thought experiment which, if it can be done at all, derives from that prior knowledge. I always know something first *as* something. If I can just have it there before me, that is a very difficult and derivative intellectual act, and it cannot be understood as primordial or primitive. I am always already in possession of an interpretation of whatever object I look at, which isn't at all to say that my interpretation is correct. It's only to say that I can't escape the fact that the very first movement of mind, not the last movement but the first movement of mind, is interpretative. Right? We always see something as something, and that is precisely the act of interpretation. We can never just have it there before us or, as I say, if we can--if we can--it's a very, very difficult act of concentration.

Continue the passage: "This grasping which is free of the 'as' is a privation of the kind of seeing [and you see how attracted Heidegger is to it because he shifts his rhetoric] in which one merely understands." In other words, It would be an extraordinary thing not to understand, Heidegger is saying. We can't help understanding. We always already understand, which has nothing to do again with whether or not we're right or wrong. We always already just necessarily do understand. It's a kind of imprisonment, understanding, and when Heidegger says, wouldn't it be great not to have to merely understand? right, he's saying, wouldn't it be great just to have it there before us? but he's also insisting that this is an incredibly difficult, if not impossible, moment of thought.

All right. So that's why--and this is perhaps the essential, the central passage, and I don't want to pause over it--but you can look at passage number three on your sheet, which says roughly again what Heidegger is saying in the first passage--that's why we must work always as interpreters with preconceptions, with fore-understandings.

Chapter 6. Prejudice and Tradition [00:33:21]

Now what about this word "prejudice"? It is a sort of a problematic word. Gadamer is a bit apologetic about it, and he goes into the appropriate etymologies. The French *préjugé* and the German *Vorurteil* all mean "prejudgment" or "prior judgment." They actually can be used in a court of law as a stage toward arriving at

a verdict. They needn't be thought of as vulgar prejudices, one of which is in fact the "prejudice against prejudice." As Gadamer says, this is the characteristic idea of the Enlightenment: its prejudice against prejudice, that we can be objective, that we can free ourselves of--

Okay, fine. But prejudice is bad, we know prejudice is bad. We know what prejudice has wrought historically and socially, so how can we try to vindicate it in this way? It's extremely problematic.

What Gadamer does in his essay is actually an act of intellectual conservatism, it has to be admitted. That whole section of the essay in which he talks about classicism--and you may have said to yourself as you were reading it, "Well, gee, isn't this sort of digressive? What's he so interested in classicism for?"-- the whole section of the essay in which he's talking about classicism and which he later calls "tradition" is meant to suggest that we really can't merge horizons effectively unless we have a very broad and extensive common ground with what we're reading. The great thing about classicism for Gadamer, or what he calls "tradition," is that it's something we can share. The classical, Gadamer argues, is that which doesn't just speak to its own historical moment but speaks for all time, speaks to all of us in different ways but does speak to us--that is to say, does proffer its claim to speak true. The classical can do that.

"Okay, great," we say to Gadamer. "Certainly you're entitled to an intellectually conservative canon. Maybe other principles of hermeneutics will place much more stress on innovation or novelty or difference, but you're not sure people can understand unless they share a great deal of common ground." All well and good, but you know what? That's where the bad side of prejudice sneaks in. Slavery was considered perfectly appropriate and natural to a great many of the most exalted figures working within the tradition that Gadamer rightly calls classical--classical antiquity. A great many modern figures never stopped to question slavery. Slavery was an aspect of classical culture which had its defenses. Well, Gadamer doesn't talk about this obviously, but it is an aspect of that prejudice that one might share with tradition if one weren't somewhat more critical than this gesture of sharing might indicate. I just say that in passing to call your attention to it as a risk that's involved in our engagement with a hermeneutic project of the nature of Gadamer's. It's not to say that Gadamer favored slavery or anything of the sort. It is, however, to say that prejudice--while plainly we can understand it simply to mean preconception which is inescapable and can understand that philosophically--nevertheless can still be bad. We have to understand the way in which it's something that, if we're going to accept this point of view, we need to live with.

Chapter 7. E. D. Hirsch [00:37:20]

All right. So it is troublesome, and it's troublesome also, perhaps, in a variety of other ways that I won't go into. I think that what I'd like to do in the time remaining is to call your attention to two passages, one in Gadamer's text which I'm about to read and the other the fourth passage on your sheet by someone called E. D. Hirsch, whom you may actually know as the author of a dictionary of what every school child should know and as a sort of a champion of the intellectual right during the whole period when literary theory flourished, but a person who also is seriously invested in hermeneutics and conducted a lifelong feud with Gadamer about the principles of hermeneutics.

The two passages that I'm about to read juxtapose the viewpoints that I've been trying to evoke in describing

Gadamer's position. The dignity and nobility of Gadamer is that it involves being interested in something true--that is to say, in hoping that there is an intimate relationship between meaning, arriving at meaning, and arriving at something that speaks to us as true. Hirsch, on the other hand, is evoking a completely different kind of dignity. What I want you to realize as we juxtapose these two passages is that it is impossible to reconcile them, and it poses for us a choice which, as people interested in interpretation, needs ultimately to be made and suggests perhaps differing forms of commitment.

Now the first passage is in Gadamer's text on page 735, the very bottom of the page, and then I'll be going over to page 736. Gadamer says, and here again he's attacking historicism:

The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true. We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint, i.e., place ourselves in the historical situation and seek to reconstruct the historical horizon. [I've been attempting to summarize this position and so I trust that it's easily intelligible as I read it to you now.] In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find, in the past, any truth valid and intelligible for ourselves.

And, by the way, this would also apply to cultural conversation. If I'm proud of knowing that in another culture if I belch after dinner it's a compliment to the cook, right, and if I'm proud of knowing that without drawing any conclusions from it, that's sort of the equivalent of historicism. It's just a factoid for me. In other words, it's not an effort to come to terms with anything. It's not an effort to engage in dialogue. It's just historicizing otherness in a way that somehow or another satisfies my quest for information. So it's not just a question of the past, as I say and as I've said before. It's a question of cultural conversation as well.

Continuing:

Thus, this acknowledgment of the otherness of the other, which makes him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth.

This is a devastating and, I think, brilliant argument. I think it ought to remind us of what's at stake when we invoke the notion of objectivity. Implicit, according to Gadamer, in the notion of objectivity is an abandonment of the possibility of learning from the object, of learning from otherness. It only becomes a question of knowing the object, of knowing it in and for itself, in its own terms, and not at all necessarily of learning from it, of being spoken to by it.

All right, but now listen to Hirsch. All right? This is really a hard choice to make. [laughs] What Hirsch says, invoking Kant--rightly invoking Kant--is: "Kant held it to be a foundation of moral action that men should be conceived as ends in themselves, not as instruments of other men." In other words, you are an end and not a means to me unless in fact I'm exploiting you and instrumentalizing you. Right? That's Kant's position and that's what Hirsch is leaping to defend. This idea that I don't really care, or that I don't really think I can come to terms with the actual meaning of an entity as that entity, is instrumentalizing the entity. In other words, it's approaching it *for me*. This turns the whole idea of being open to the possibility that the other is speaking true--it turns it on its ear and says, Oh, no, no. You're just appropriating the other for yourself. Right? You're instrumentalizing the other. You're not taking it seriously as itself. That's Hirsch's response.

He continues:

This imperative is transferable to the words of men because speech is an extension and expression of men in the social domain and also because when we fail to conjoin a man's intention to his words, we lose the soul of speech, which is to convey meaning and to understand what is intended to be conveyed.

Notice that although the nobility of this alongside the nobility of Gadamer is obvious and painful [laughs] and really does seem to bring us to a crossroads where we really want to be Yogi Berra, right, and go in both directions--even though this is the case, notice one thing. Hirsch is not saying anything about truth. Right? He's talking about meaning--that's good--and he's making the notion of arriving at a correct meaning as honorific as he possibly can, but it is significant that he's not talking about truth. It's Gadamer who is talking about truth. For Hirsch the important thing is the meaning. For Gadamer the important thing is that the meaning be true, right, and that's where the distinction essentially lies. Gadamer is willing to sacrifice because of his belief in the inescapability of preconception. He's willing to sacrifice historical or cultural exactitude of meaning. He's willing to acknowledge that there's always something of me in my interpretation, but it's a good something because after all I am mindful of the horizon of otherness. I am not just saying "plastic" means "polymer," right, but nevertheless there's something of me in the interpretation.

Hirsch is saying, "There's nothing of me in the interpretation. Therefore, I am able to arrive accurately and objectively at the meaning of the other, and I honor the other by arriving with such accuracy at the meaning," but notice that truth isn't backing it up. It doesn't seem to be a question for Hirsch of whether the other speaks true. This is unfair to Hirsch, by the way, because truth actually is backing it up. All you need to do is read him and you will recognize that it does matter to Hirsch whether the other speaks true, but it's not implicit in the philosophical position he's taking up here. It's something that the philosophical position sacrifices.

Okay. So that's the basic distinction and, as I say, as far as I can see it's irreconcilable so it leaves us with a choice that really does have to be made, and it's a choice which looms over a course in literary theory and coming to understand the tradition of literary theory. Some will take one side, others will take another, and we'll find ourselves siding or not siding with them, at least in part for reasons that arise out of the distinction between these two positions that I've been making today.

We may or may not have the lecture on Iser, but on Tuesday we'll be getting into the varieties of formalism and first we'll take up the American New Criticism. All right. Thanks.

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