

# STRUCTURALISM, POST-STRUCTURALISM AND NEW HERMENEUTICS

Eberhard Lämmert<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

When in European scholarship natural sciences have separated from humanities during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the concept of hermeneutics won the distinctive mark characterizing the special methods of the humanities in contrast to explanation practiced by natural sciences. The high esteem in literary studies for the individuality of a poet or writer implied that the most important aim of understanding and interpreting was to find the author's secret intention. Maintaining the results of such research in literary studies necessarily must remain subjective or even ideologically determined made the Russian formalists- -later the structuralists from Prague and Western Europe- -try to find a more scientific constitution of a poetic text.

This lecture intends to describe the development of the different methods during the last decades up to the point where you find analysis of "discourse

networks" and computer communication in poststructural attitudes but at the same time new ways of hermeneutics taking in consideration the fundamental ambiguity of fictional writing.

## Structuralism, Poststructuralism and New Hermeneutics

The three concepts in the title of this lecture are not all of the same quality. Words with the endings *-ism*, *-isme*, *-ismo* or *-ismus* refer in most European languages to a way of thinking, a lifestyle or even a conviction shared by a group of people in order to agree on a thing or even on all the phenomena of the world. This applies to modes of viewing life like materialism and existentialism but also to the world's great religions, Catholicism or Buddhism. If a community of people choose such a concept in order to distinguish itself from other perhaps predominating directions, then under certain circumstances it might take on belligerent traits, and at the same time strengthens the communal consciousness of the people that gather under this name.

The concepts of 'structuralism' and 'poststructuralism' also follow this rule. In the history of philologies, they designate an epoch in which at first linguists and then academic critics and theorists of literature decided to treat their objects in a new way, in sharp distinction to the previous tradition in these disciplines. The fact that poststructuralism follows structuralism

---

<sup>1</sup>Emeritus Professor of German and Comparative Literature, Free University of Berlin and Director of the Center for Literary Studies, Berlin; Former president of Free University of Berlin(1976-1983)



shows, moreover, that even its own adherents accorded it the status of truth only for a limited time.

Concepts with the suffixes *-ics*, *-ique*, *-ica* or *-ik* describe in most European languages an area to which people, observing and organizing, have applied boundaries; and they thereby describe conceptually or practically with this area. Subjects like physics, economics, aesthetics can do this, but ways of thinking and working like engineering, tactics and dialectics can, too.

In this series, hermeneutics designates the special ability of people to interpret texts, that is, to uncover and make comprehensible the message or the knowledge that is contained in a text—particularly when this text contains holy or magic messages from another time or another world, or has been written in a foreign language. In contrast to the *-ism* concepts, this is a capacity that is needed everywhere and at all times. In fact, from the earliest cultures on, there were medicine men and later magicians, monks and scholars who saw religious tidings in astrological signs, the flight of birds or writings handed down from past ages, and who even predicted the future from them. Ever since cultures gave themselves laws, they have had to be interpreted by lawyers and judges in each case in order to administer justice. It is evident that poems that express their message in images and rhetorical figures challenge one to interpret them. But each reading is basically already the interpretation of a text, and thus a hermeneutic act.

Therefore, when structuralists rise up in

arms against hermeneutics, as they have done several times since the early twentieth century, it can only be a matter of either simply an attack on the way hermeneutics was practiced at that time or an attack on hermeneutics itself, with the accusation that even if the interpretation of texts is a life practice, it could never lead to a result upon which doubts could not be cast, and therefore it has no claim to be a science. Scientifically exact research into texts can only yield information on their composition and at most, ask why they must be interpreted in order to be understood.

In fact, the group of young linguists and literati that came together at the beginning of the First World War in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg wanted to mount an attack against both: they were battling against poetry being exploited for the purpose of supporting all sorts of theses on philosophical or cultural history, and they insisted that the specific form of poetic language, not its meaning, is the only legitimate object of scholarly analysis. If one takes into account that hermeneutics – the precepts of textual interpretation – has a history of at least one and half thousand years in Europe alone, from the early Christian church father Augustine onwards, and that in the second half of the twentieth century, the Italian philosopher Emilio Betti described hermeneutics as the fundamental method of all the human sciences (*Teoria generabile della Interpretazione*, Milano 1955), then the extent of the affront becomes evident: for the structuralists, in the name of a more exact scientificity, fought a pitched battle against a study of literature that



lends the appearance of scientific certainty to that which is always only a subjective interpretation. In fact, the rise of the exact sciences – and in Western science since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was increasingly claimed that only measurable results could guarantee the objective ‘truth’ of a thing – played a significant role in the frequent revolt against textual interpretation as the most important practice in academic literary practices.

What do structuralists mean when they want to limit academic dealings with literature? In Roman times, the word ‘*structura*’ already meant, first and foremost, ‘masonry’. Masonry does not consist of one stone, but of a myriad, and each stone does not sit firmly in the wall where one sees it; instead it is held in place by the mortar in which the bricklayers have laid it. Something of the human work that is the only thing that can produce such a structure obviously still adheres to this archaic concept of ‘*structura*’. Instead of this, the structuralists were particularly fond of using the image of a woven web or lattice work in order to show the uncircumventable uniqueness of a text. Such lattice work also plays a significant role for authors in the second half of the twentieth century, for example in Alexander Kluge’s structural analysis of the battle of Stalingrad in his novel *Schlachtbeschreibung* (Olten, 1964), as he describes in hundreds of individual enlistments the turn of the Second World War and the defeat of the German Sixth Army, or for the lyricist Paul Celan, who conceived of his poems as a cage of language in which is kept the millionfold death the Holocaust brought upon European Jewry.

In nature, such lattice forms occur particularly in crystals in which molecules of different elements come together according to a particular system, in order to bring into being a formation that has its own forms of construction and usually a beauty of its own too. It is also significant that the molecules of a crystal structure can become mobile at certain temperatures.

We will address this point during the transition from structuralism to poststructuralism. In any case, one can see from this that the structuralists are thinkers of system. Unlike the positivists, they are interested not as much in the individual elements of the language and their historical development, but rather in the functions that a segment of the whole text – a ‘Lexie,’ as Roland Barthes would call it later – performs in a phrase or a coherent statement. Such segments can be arranged parallel to others in order to strengthen a motif, or in opposition to another motif or can also be nodes in a whole network of relations that holds a text together.

On one point, however, there appears to be agreement between the observation of such a text structure and that which a hermeneuticist makes his task. And that is that both inquire of a text, as it lies before them, not just about its material composition – stone or paper, notch or trace of ink, vocabulary and grammar, but also about that which it represents beyond its outer composition. For a text is not merely an object. A text is also always a sign for something else that it itself is not, and it is precisely this other which must be excluded from it. For this



reason, that which, since Aristotle, has held true for all objects cannot be said of texts: "their form is the mode of appearance of their content." What holds true for a text is rather "its form is the mode of appearance of possible contents." For this reason, in reverse, the content of a linguistic expression can also occur in different forms, such as in a speech and in a poem.

The advocates of the aesthetics of genius who set the tone in the West from the eighteenth until the beginning of the twentieth century really did believe that every genuinely poetic text was unique, its content and its form corresponded perfectly to each other. But those authors who stood for this aesthetics also suggested as a rule to their hearers or readers that they should refrain from any word of interpretation of their own, in pious awe of a poetic text.

Apart from such sacralisation of the poetic text that happens wherever art takes over the role of religion as announcer of truth, structuralism on the one side and Hermeneutics on the other side pose quite different questions to a text. Structuralism asks "What is this text?" hermeneutics asks "What does this text say?" Moreover, structuralism asks "In which forms do sounds, written characters, grammatical, stylistic and also semantic elements of the present form of language create a connection that lets itself be addressed as a poem, for example?" Hermeneutics, in contrast, asks in addition: "What sense and which meaning can be deduced from the interplay of the sounds and the written characters, the grammatical, the stylistic and the semantic elements as a whole?"

With these almost irreconcilable foci of knowledge, the young advocates of a text analytics and the traditional custodians of a hermeneutic study of literature were at opposing poles from each other around 1920, and even in the year 1966, which is to say a decade after Emilio Betti's renewed proclamation of hermeneutics as the foundation of all human sciences, Michel Foucault made it clear in his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (*Les Mots et les Choses*, Paris 1966; *The Order of things*, London 1970) what new tension the structuralists had conjured up: "Le partage entre l'interprétation et la formalisation – il est vrai qu'il nous presse aujourd'hui et nous domine"- "The disparity between interpretation and formalisation menaces us today and dominates us."

We now ask ourselves why this tension at the beginning of this century had to arise and prevail for the larger part of the century and even perhaps until today? For this, first we need to take a glance at the older of the two activities, the history of textual interpretation. In so doing, I shall mention only briefly the developmental stages of hermeneutics that were crucial for the antagonism that erupted in the twentieth century.

As it did in other cultures in Europe too, the canon of the Holy Scriptures, therefore principally the Bible, provided the impetus for the development of more and more techniques of interpretation in the courses of the centuries. The word of God and his prophets required translation into the language and into the thought of all later generations. This zeal to understand as exactly as possible what



God had to say to man was carried over into the eighteenth century, when the poet was proclaimed the "second maker" or a "Prometheus second under Jove," to the wish to penetrate as deeply as possible into the secret message of the poetic word. It was not by chance that for this reason, around 1800, the theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher became the founder of a new hermeneutics, for which he drafted two main rules: firstly, the interpretant must cast off his own disposition and entirely assume that of the writer. Secondly, the interpretant should determine the meaning of each and every word "in accordance with its companionship with the words that surround it." This second rule is the beginning of tenets of composition that already around 1800 were also paving the way to structural analysis of poetic texts.

However, it was principally the first goal, to approach as closely as possible the assumed opinion and disposition of the author, that became dominant and even the ruling one in the time to come. Middle class communities were founded who, under the continuing dominion of the aristocracy, sought a replacement for the unattainability of their own political rights in honouring their *Dichturfürsten*, poet-princes, and after the turn of the century this also increased the tendency of the scholarly study of literature to focus the interpretation of a poem or a tale on the question as to "what the poet wants to tell us." In Martin Heidegger's Halderlin interpretations, this awe of the word of the poet seemingly reached its climax when even the philosopher transformed with his archaic language the verses of

Halderlin more in reverse into the message of his own philosophy.

Of course, Heidegger was not alone in this ambition to put himself, interpreting, in the place of the writer. In some scholars of literature, in particular those who interpret poetry in their own language, this end stage of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic recommendation became perverted into the habit of justifying their own *Weltanschauung* with the words of poetry, and for this reason, in not a few cases they willingly fell prey, precisely under the dictations or dictatorships of the twentieth century, to the prevailing ideologies.

By the turn of the century, the distinguished philosopher and theoretician of knowledge Wilhelm Dilthey had further developed Schleiermacher's hermeneutics into general precepts for the understanding of texts and had even used these tenets of understanding to categorically distinguish the process of knowledge of what is called the humanities from the explanatory procedure of the natural sciences. Dilthey's tentative to rank a poem according to the power of expression with which a poet processed his experiences did not have less important consequences. Overzealous interpreters derived a privileged position for the artist in society from his standard work, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung* (Leipzig, 1906; *Experience and poetry*), and two decades later, this bestowal of a special power of linguistic expression on the artist became for the Italian philosopher and theoretician of poetry Benedetto Croce a criterion by which poetry could be distinguished from 'non-poetry'.



This idealisation of the artist's existence prescribed by Schleiermacher but afterwards crassly radicalised was one pillar of the edifice into which the poetic hermeneutics of the twenties had comfortably settled itself. Then other pillar was the claim of the text-interpreting scholar of literature to deliver the one correct and valid interpretation of the poet's work and ideas through congeniality with him. It was precisely these two pillars that were assaulted, first by the Russian Formalists and then by the structuralists, in order to carry into effect a new theory of poetic language and also a new aesthetics. In this way, the study of literature was to be freed at the same time from letting its objects be exploited for extraneous purposes, for example for psychology or for the history of ideas; it was to have nothing but the composition of literary texts and their constitution as its object, and thus prove itself to be an exact and not just essayistically practised science.

In their attempt to give the study of literature a systematically defined object, the Formalists, and later the structuralists too insisted on distinguishing the uniqueness of poetry as sharply as possible from other linguistic expressions. In so doing, however, they were not betting on a special inspiration of the poet, as their opponents were doing, but on poetry distinguishing itself by a special system of linguistic elements from other forms of linguistic expression and on the particularity of this system guaranteeing its aesthetic effect.

One is tempted to relate this impulse

towards an autonomous 'science' of literature to the radical demand for artistic autonomy, which the "*L'art pour l'art*" movement of the turn of the century had already served up. However, while the proclamation of the autonomy of art quickly found advocates not just among artists, but also in the intellectual avant-garde, this demand to treat texts as autonomous creations and to give evidence solely of their artistry, came into direct collision within the human sciences with the prevailing historical evaluation of all cultural phenomena.

With the 'Socialist Realism' that it prescribed, the Soviet regime had forthwith silenced the Formalists or driven them out of the country. However, very shortly after, in Prague, a group of exiles came together and gave their theory on the systematic character of the literary work the name 'structuralism' for the first time. More distinctly than before, the Prague structuralists protested against the susceptibility to ideology of the traditional methods of interpretation, and in turn they saw themselves as speakers for the literary avant-garde of their time. Roman Jakobson, born in Moscow, and René Wellek, born in Vienna, later made their universities on the east coast of the USA, Harvard and Yale, into the most active centres of a structuralist study of literature and from there gave important impetuses to French structuralism. Stricter than their Petersburg forerunners, they insisted on a statistical and thus quantitative evaluation of their observations, and with such 'measuring work' they could then deliver practical proofs too for the thesis that a poetic text disposes of a



quantitatively richer and therefore more compact network of relations, i.e. repetitions, parallels or oppositions, than other texts written only for the purpose of conveying messages.

This constitution of poetic texts, for which the Berlin linguist Manfred Bierwisch introduced the concept of “over-structured sorts of text,” permitted the phonetic, grammatic or rhetorical relations of a text parcel to other parts of the text to be revealed and thereby to demonstrate its artistry without making any statement about the subjectively felt meaning. This took place, for example, in the famous structural analysis that Roman Jakobson carried out with Lévi-Strauss on Baudelaire’s poem *Les Chats*. They showed that in this poem hardly a single phenomenon of the text remained isolated and that it was not just paired linkings that were to be encountered, but whole series of parallel and contrasted linkings.

However, it is precisely in the title figures of this famous sonnet, in the cats and their arrangement in the text, that the limits of this structural mode of observation can be shown. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss prove in their analysis that the cats appear in the first quartet of the sonnet and dominate the first half of the poem and the sphinxes take on this role as principal figure in the second half of the poem, mythic figures, with whose dignified and mysterious attitude the cats are at the same time compared and explained. The parallelism appears perfect. But the cats in the first part of the sonnet really are cats: the pride of the house. In contrast, the sphinxes in their existence under the open sky – this

contrast too Jakobson plays out consistently – do not appear in the second part of the sonnet as real figures; rather they become only additional characteristics for the attitude of the cats, cited as metaphors, so that the listener or the reader can imagine the noble nature of the cats. The structural analysis may well bring the words ‘cats’ and ‘sphinxes’ into an exact formal relation to each other, but it cannot distinguish whether the text in actual fact makes both into its subject or uses the only one as a metaphor for the other. In order to recognize a *metaphor*, i.e. a figurative meaning, as such, one must *interpret* it, and thus the structuralist Jakobson also becomes an interpreter working hermeneutically in the description of the relation between the two thematic nodes of the texts.

Even more than in Jakobson’s Baudelaire or Brecht analyses, in the most extensive of all the existing empirical structural analyses, which Roland Barthes undertook on a forty-page short story of Balzac’s (*S/Z, Essai*, Paris 1970), it becomes clear that another defect of structural analysis is not to be remedied, and that is the more or less complete arbitrariness in the choice of elements to be investigated, so that there can be no question of mathematical rigour in the demonstration of a poetic text composition in Barthes either.

Now, one could say that the rows of pillars of a Greek temple derive their beauty not least from a barely noticeable irregularity in the way they are placed, and a “*beau désordre*,” a beautiful disorder” was considered to be aesthetically appealing even by the



French classicists. But here we have something else: in this structural analysis, Roland Barthes claims the same autonomy with which the artist brings his work into being for the scholar of literature too. But that also means that the results of his analysis cannot be 'objectively' secured at all, but remain – if not to the same extent as the search for the 'meaning' of a text – subjective and thus not repeatable in the strict sense, as a scientific experiment is. The reason for this, in turn, is – and thus the tables are turned – that Barthes, the analyst, and after him others, taking even greater liberties, will decide arbitrarily which element they will find significant for their investigation. Paradoxically, however, such a decision – even if Roland Barthes makes it as it suits him, as he says – has as its prerequisite an even more unconscious total interpretation of the text, as the hermeneutic circle does too. And thus every structural analysis necessarily has a hermeneutic prelude.

Derrida's and Paul de Man's poststructuralism made a virtue of this lack. A peculiar characteristic of structuralist analyses, hardly noticed until now and nowhere justified, consists in raising to particular importance the exact middle of a poem or a piece of prose. This is connected to the static mode of observation that also relates the beginning and the end of a text to each other in a similar fashion, as if they were to be read at the same time, in order to investigate the whole text for its symmetries and crossover connections. Numerous examples of this can be found not only in Jakobson and Roland Barthes; already the symbolists among the lyricists have actually

written such "static poems," as Gottfried Benn later called them, in order to secure their autonomy from any definite interpretation. For nothing can prevent the fixing of a text in the direction of a particular point better than a complete balance of the parts. Even the structure of a crystal has no beginning and no end, but it does have a very distinctive middle. This distinction of the middle comes into being through the network of the connecting lines between individual members of the text assigned to each other becoming densest towards the middle, because more connecting lines intersect there than at any point in the text that lies closer to the ends. Therefore there is actually a mathematical reason why structuralist analysis always imputes particular significance to the middle of a poem.

Enough about mathematics, though. In opposition to this distinction of the middle is the fact that every text, whether it is read in silence or listened to, has a temporal duration and for this reason, only reaches its semantic climax shortly before the end, especially when it is a play or a narrative. But even a poem, particularly a funny one, often does not reveal its wittiness until the last verses. How does a structuralist go about describing such textual movements? And how does he deal with the circumstance that after a text has been written down once, it can be understood differently, in accordance with other relations, in short, read differently by anyone who reads it later? The answer can be short: time, and in particular, every new reader or listener sets the text in motion.

Let us have recourse once more to the



example of crystal structure. If one heats a crystal, if one adds new, additional energy to it, the apparently fixed molecules of the crystal structure are set in motion, if necessary to the point at which they become fluid. If they are left alone for a while, they will become fixed again, but probably in a different form.

Some readers of Jacques Derrida's work have wondered why he attributes so much importance to the date when a text is written. There are weighty historical reasons for this attention to the date, for he is fixing the holocaust as the fact to end all fixed forms of assertion about human being. On the other hand in his theory of literature a text moves in time, from the date it was written onwards. With the energy he expends on it, every new reader that encounters it increases its mobility, lets details in it be weighted differently, creates new relations between them. They can be those the text suggests to him, but also those that he selects by himself with the arbitrariness of an autonomous text user. He *destroys* the text with his reading energy and *constructs* it anew. That is the birth of deconstruction out of the spirit of structuralism, and thus a text also at last necessarily acquires its history.

Lévi-Strauss already investigated the most persistent narratives, the myths, and in so doing, he realized that in time they take on other forms, even in archaic cultures in which all the customs and forms of life remain almost unchanged for generations. Thus they adjust to new technical inventions but also to the irritations of former fixed beliefs and thereby are still recognizable as the same myths. However, in the long term, even in such collective narratives, there is

hardly a single centre remaining completely changed in them that is still recognizable.

Certainly such a theory of the movement of texts bears the traces of its time in a century in which all the conditions of life have undergone continually accelerating change. One can discern in it echoes of the dissolution of the great historical and philosophical theories, according to which the course of world history – from Christianity to Marxism – could be explained by one principle for generations. Nonetheless, it also reflects the increasing protest against the concentration of the life of the mind in a few large cities of western civilisation. Roland Barthes himself grappled with the intellectual leaders of a conservative philology whose capital was Paris. Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss and Wellek had to change continents; Jacques Derrida comes from Algeria. Deconstruction also means that texts move when a reader reads them with different eyes and they really start to move when they change from one culture to another. The unrelenting and also relentlessly changing reforming of literary motives, the changing meanings of the words, the modes of expression and historical figures and in the end, the exchange between cultures as a process in which many people participate simultaneously, both actively and passively, can actually be understood with this theory.

Hermeneutics' turning away from focusing its attention exclusively on the author and transferring it to the reader – a turn which it too went through in the seventies and which put it in a position to recognize the change in meaning that every literary work goes through in the



course of its history – also had the consequence that now it is no longer the one ‘correct’ meaning of a passage in a text that determines the aesthetic ranking of a work of art but precisely the potential wealth of meanings. For after this modern turn of hermeneutics, the work of art that only lets one meaning be recognized is, in the end, of lesser aesthetic quality. Once the motive which provides the basis for such a tendentious work of art disappears, then it necessarily loses its meaning and can therefore be forgotten. On the other hand, a work of art, from which one can cull ever new meanings from generation to generation and possibly from century to century because its ambiguous text is open to new interpretations – such a work of art is more likely to have the chance to outlive time, and the continual renewal of its concrete meaning lends it, in the end, a sort of ‘eternal value,’ like that which Gilgamesh or Homer’s epics or even the sphinx of Gizah have for all time.

It shows that with hindsight of the historical movement of a text the supposedly immovable front between structuralism and hermeneutics have loosened up. By recognizing the potential multiplicity of meanings of a text, hermeneutics can now work on them more empirically than it was able to do before, and thereby loses that divinatory trait that Karl Vietor, a German scholar of literature who emigrated to the States, in memory of the aesthetic of genius, was still ascribing to all poetry interpretations in the middle of the century. In reverse, those poststructuralists who have raised “anything goes” to the status of a programme have carried on the practice

of deconstruction to the point when their proponents demand the same autonomy for a scholarly procedure that poets claimed one and a half centuries ago in the name of the aesthetics of genius. Art and science therefore no longer appear to be quite as much at odds with each other in this new freedom of approach to a given text as they still appeared to be at the beginning of the century.

In his book *La condition postmoderne* (Paris, 1979), Jean-François Lyotard expressed the suspicion that poststructuralism’s mode of working arose out of the discontent with western metaphysical thought. But what remains when the study of literature can only make at best interim statements about a text as soon as it goes beyond a simple inventory and when the question as to what the author really wanted to say has also become unimportant to it?

Nevertheless, the ever new readings of a text and the careful observation of its ‘intertextuality,’ which is to say its interrelations with other texts, can be used to crack open views and discourses which have become conventional and also to open public debate on the life-questions of a generation to new ideas. Even careful interpretation concerned about securing its observations can develop a performative strength in this way, which is to say it cannot only report on how it found the text, but also, with this information, it can significantly change its effect on succeeding readers. The eventful history of influence of much-quoted poetry like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or Goethe’s *Faust* is in large part determined by their interpreters. For they have always equipped the character of these literary models anew



with properties that were to make them into a model for their own time or which are to serve as warnings.

The Belgian Paul de Man drew a most explosive conclusion from the transformational capacity of literary texts after he left Europe and settled down in the States in the very place in which Derrida's teachings on deconstruction had allied themselves most intimately with the ramifications of Prague structuralism with the Yale critics in New Haven. It was not by chance that Paul de Man used Nietzsche to develop his theory of the rhetoric of the text. Nietzsche had already spoken of the "dance of the spirit with the word" (*"Tanz des Geistes mit dem Wort"*) before the turn of the century and in so doing, given the earliest impetus for all theories which presuppose the transformation of the meaning of texts. Paul de Man then radicalised this mobility to the point where he was able to formulate the thesis that no text can ever be fixed to a particular meaning.

On a verse from the poem *Among School Children* by William Butler Yeats, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Paul de Man demonstrated that only the reader – the "dancer" himself – determines the meaning of the text (*Allegories of Reading*, New Haven 1979). In so doing, not only is the real creative performance imputed to the reader, but the text has become a vessel from which even opposing meanings can be culled. However, in de Man's work, the texts receive an entirely new quality: newly read, they incessantly undermine the claims that were made until then about them, and the audacious inference that follows therefrom runs: texts are always

subversive and again and again they baffle the purposes for which they have been claimed.

It is not superfluous to remark that this theory of the subversiveness of all texts is closely linked to the knotty problem of the biography of Paul de Man. For the claim that a binding statement can never be gained from texts can be read at the same time as a self-defence with which he distances himself from his own texts which he as a young author in Nazi-occupied Belgium had written against the Jews. It really is worthwhile almost every time to trace radical text theories right back to the life- circumstances of their creators.

Once having arrived at this extreme point, the poststructuralist refusal of any unambiguous statement about a text had to challenge a counterposition and bring into the arena a hermeneutics that once more took the content of a text seriously and also its historical force of evidence. It had moved into its bastions on the other shore of the North American continent, in Berkeley, and deployed the "New Historicism" against the "free play in the blue" of poststructuralist Yale critics. The first to employ this name was Stephen Greenblatt, in order to characterise a collection of his Shakespeare essays as studies that also focus on the social surroundings and the information on contemporary forms of rule in the Shakespeare plays when describing their power of poetic expression (*Shakespearean Negotiations*, Berkeley 1988). Later, Greenblatt cited "studies in cultural poetics" as the direction in which academic work on literature could go to gain a new interest in the prehistory of present



civilization, but also a new incitement to critique of its present condition. The considerable distance of this new type of hermeneutics from the old kind of historicism can be recognized in that there, historical forces that have an effect on a text took on the status of a historical fact, while New Historicism inherits from structuralism the conviction that the construction of historical events themselves are the results of *interpretations* of history, thus from texts and discourses, that each in their respective times set the tone for a while. I might mention in passing that Foucault too spent some years in Berkeley as a guest and his thesis of the power of dominant discourses which fiction follows or resists has clearly also had a strong influence on the hermeneutic goals of New Historicism.

But the theory of the constant deconstruction of texts has had a strong effect on these theses too. Greenblatt passes in review, for example, the repeated accounts of an attack in November 1586 on the west African coast in which the white crew of a ship that was part of an expedition fleet fell upon on the native population, driving them out and plundering them. The different degrees of attention devoted to this act, which was only briefly mentioned as a matter of course in contemporary accounts, but was dealt with in detail and problematised in contemporary dramas, gives him the opportunity to draw out in ways quite different from the structuralists the particular character and poetic literature's special function in society.

Different routes have converged to make it the new task of the academic pursuit

of literature to recognize the culture of a society by its symbolic forms and actions, and so by its arts and by its literature, too. By dedicating itself to the social and intellectual power of expression of literature, and comparing its role in different cultures as my colleague Chetana's new project does, it is on the point of winning its way back from a mere practice centering on texts to a human science in the full meaning of the term.

The new responsibility that thus devolves upon the study of literature stands out in bold relief world-wide, but in particular where the technical and economical development of the living conditions of a population has suddenly changed and not only the traditional cultural values but also the concept of a common culture as such is pushed into the background in favour of the material gain that individual members of society gain from this change.

This development also requires a new attitude from the human sciences, toward the change in forms of life which brings with it the accelerated change in technical living conditions in the domain of culture. For the new technical media have also had a considerable influence on the treatment of literary texts, and while it is still being debated whether a new television culture fundamentally changes the communication forms of society, computer culture has already provided a new yardstick for the development of the arts and their potential for new interplay.

It is therefore not surprising that the most recent attack on hermeneutics comes from the domain of technology



itself and that it climaxes in the accusation that all interpretation of a text is only speculative if it does not take into account as well the tools or instruments with the help of which a text comes into existence and circulates. This new call to make the research on the devices and the technologies with which texts come into being into a principal object of the study of literature can also be traced back to the great 'pre-thinker' (*Vordenker*) of the twentieth century, Friedrich Nietzsche, and indeed, to his lapidary remark: "With a typewriter, one thinks differently than one does with a goosequill."

In a book, entitled *Aufschreibesysteme, 1800/1900* (Munich 1985; *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, Stanford 1990), Friedrich Kittler, professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin, described the change in devices that served to convert texts into print then and now. Here too a new interest in the transformation in cultural technologies has taken the place of a merely speculative hermeneutics and again, this happens not least in order to limit its subjectivity and to guarantee a contrastingly more 'objective' scientificity. Hermeneutics, as Kittler writes too, however, is "the least verifiable" of all the cultural technologies, and therefore no longer capable of survival without supplementation in the age of technology.

It really seems like a liberation that scholars of literature can concern themselves not only with the invisible deep layers but also with the tangible externals of a text and make statements which have the exactitude of scientific statements.

We will leave aside the question as to whether it is really true or not that Franz Kafka gave his prose new forms and his manuscripts a new *Façon* when he had recourse to the typewriter because his fiancée for a time, Felice Bauer, knew exactly how to use one. At least it is an interesting avenue into the intimate sphere of literary work that one could follow. In any case, like this, Kittler prolongs Foucault's discourse theory into the industrial age, and as more and more people, at least in Europe and in the USA, only encounter spoken, written or performed literature through the new media, the proponents of this new materials science of literary study can also claim to contribute with their work to public communication and to active participation in the forming of literary life in the technological age.

If we look back at the debates that under changing names threw into question the traditional art of textual interpretation and its theory, hermeneutics, as the most respectable task of the study of literature, we can generalize with two observations:

1. New theories and attacks on traditional forms of scholarly work are almost always related to new necessities of life, which the earlier forms of learning are no longer capable to cope with. As fiction prefers to make its object those social conflicts which have neither been resolved by political instances or by the sciences, such debates take place even in the study of literature more frequently and with more vigour than in other disciplines of the human sciences. It is precisely



the most recent attacks on a hermeneutics that does not take the technical metamorphosis of our civilization sufficiently into account that bring to our notice that it is high time that the human sciences adjusted themselves to the technical revolution of modern life.

2. It has turned out that hermeneutics itself has fundamentally changed under the various attacks by the Formalists, the Structuralists and under the playful excesses of poststructuralism. From the security with which its intellectual leaders still believed that the author's intention fixes for all time the meaning of a text at the beginning of the century, the relentless questions as to the constitution of texts and later the shifting of attention from author to listener or reader have had the effect that aesthetic as much as ethical interpretation of texts reckons with a multitude of changing meanings and in doubtful cases, ascribes a special quality to precisely that text that in the course of history has again and again permitted new interpretations. With this, the notion of the participation of the listener or the reader in the history of texts has changed a great deal: the new hermeneutics no longer sees them as merely receivers of a message that the poet announces to them. Their role has become significantly more active, for their reading sets the text in motion, accentuates it anew and gives it an additional or even an altogether new meaning.

The debates of the last decades have dispensed entirely with the notion that the scientific investigation of a text can clearly fix what a text – and what is more, a poetic text – really says. And yet a burning question remains if we want to carry on the interpretation of literature as a responsible contribution to human civilization, and that is the question: how can a text contain truth, if it can change colour like a chameleon in different lights? And what good is a text at all, if it doesn't tell the truth?

I remember when my youngest daughter was barely three years old, she used to call me in to her every evening before she fell asleep, and with the ingenuous command "Tell me something" she awaited a story from me. She got one, an endless story with lots of animals and their adventures, but I cannot imagine that she would have slept peacefully afterwards if I had told her at the end every time, "That's how the story goes, but don't believe a word of it; it was only a text."

There are many linguistic ways to make a text believable. A whole branch of knowledge, "persuasive rhetorics," has come into being in order to collect them and to test their effect. But what has to happen, so that a text can really contain a truth and does not simply sound as if it does? It has to unfold a bit of life reality with what it says and the way in which it says it, a reality that the listener recognizes as his own, or, like the fairy tale or the tales of wonders, it has to arouse the listener's secret fears or desires and make them clearer to him than he can himself. This was the way Friedrich Schiller explained our



enjoyment of even tragic events that take place in the theatre before our eyes.

A text is true when it makes one understand one's own life better. However, in order that it can do this for many people, it must and can be true in different ways in each case. But to do this, it requires an interpretation of one's

own life each time. And for this reason, all attacks on hermeneutics in the name of an exact science can change and renew hermeneutics, but they cannot get rid of it. And that is alright, because even a three-year-old child needs it in order to be able to sleep peacefully.

Translated from German by Fiona Greenwood