

4 / The Contemporary Battle over Hermeneutics: *Betti versus Gadamer*

THE SIX INTERRELATED and often overlapping definitions of hermeneutics just discussed carry us from 1654 to the present. All six are in varying degrees still found in the spectrum of contemporary hermeneutical thinking, yet a clear polarization exists today. There is the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, whose adherents look to hermeneutics as a general body of methodological principles which underlie interpretation. And there are the followers of Heidegger, who see hermeneutics as a philosophical exploration of the character and requisite conditions for all understanding.

The preeminent representatives of these two basic positions today are Emilio Betti, author of a work on the theory of interpretation,¹ and Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose *Wahrheit und Methode* was discussed briefly in the previous chapter. Betti, in the tradition of Dilthey, aims at providing a general theory of how "objectivations" of human experience can be interpreted; he argues strongly for the autonomy of the object of interpretation and the possibility of historical "objectivity" in making valid interpretations. Gadamer, following Heidegger, orients his thinking to the more philosophical question of what understanding itself is; he argues with equal conviction that understanding is an historical act and as such is always connected to the present. To speak of "objectively valid interpretations" is naive, he asserts, since to do so assumes that it is possible to understand from some standpoint outside of history.

The demythologizing theologians—Rudolf Bultmann and

1. TGI and AAMG.

the two leaders of the New Hermeneutic, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs—can be grouped together as allies of Gadamer's basically Heideggerian and phenomenological approach. This identification of the New Hermeneutic with Gadamer is explicit and mutual; Gadamer cites Ebeling and Fuchs with approval in his book,² and the theologians advise their students to study Gadamer's book with care.³ Also, the theological and philosophical critics of the New Hermeneutic, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg,⁴ explicitly connect it with Gadamer's position. Betti has attacked Bultmann, Ebeling, and Gadamer as enemies of historical objectivity in his 1962 pamphlet, *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*, and E. D. Hirsch has subsequently echoed and somewhat amplified the protest in his article on Gadamer's theory of interpretation.⁵

It is a debatable question, of course, as to who is attacking and who is defending, or who started the attack. It would appear that Betti and Hirsch are assailing the whole Heideggerian version of hermeneutics and the New Hermeneutic.⁶ Yet they are voices of reaction and defense, for they call for a return to "objectivity," for a reaffirmation that the study of history involves leaving behind the historian's own present standpoint; hermeneutics, they claim, must function to supply the principles for objective interpretation. In his own defense, Gadamer states that he is simply engaged in describing what is, in every act of understanding; he is doing ontology, not methodology.⁷

The problem arises in the fact that Gadamer's ontology is such that the possibility of objective historical knowledge is

2. WM 313.

3. Professor Ebeling conducted a semester seminar on the book at the University of Zurich shortly after it was published. The customary *Protokol* (minutes) of the proceedings was kept, which would be of interest in assessing Ebeling's relationship to Gadamer.

4. See "Hermeneutics and Universal History," HH 122-52; originally ZThK LX (1963), 90-121.

5. HAMG; and Hirsch, "Gadamer's Theory of Interpretation," RM XVIII (1965), 488-507, reprinted in VII 245-64.

6. Betti discusses Bultmann, Ebeling, and Gadamer in HAMG, and Hirsch refers to Gadamer's WM as the "summa" of the New Hermeneutic in theology.

7. Letter to Betti, printed in HAMG 51n. This letter is later cited in Gadamer's article, "Hermeneutik und Historismus," PhR IX (1962), 248-49. The point is further clarified in the Preface to the 2d edition of WM. See also Robinson's discussion of this significant letter in NH 76. See Niels Thulstrup, "An Observation Concerning Past and Present Hermeneutics," OL XXII (1967), 24-44, for a comparison of Gadamer and Betti.

called into question. From Betti's standpoint, Heidegger and Gadamer are the destructive critics of objectivity who wish to plunge hermeneutics into a standardless morass of relativity. The integrity of historical knowledge itself is under attack and must be stoutly defended.

To understand the general thrust of the objections of Betti and Hirsch to the hermeneutics of Bultmann, Ebeling, and Gadamer, it is necessary to sketch very briefly the approaches of Bultmann and two of his disciples, Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs.

HERMENEUTICS IN BULTMANN, EBELING, AND FUCHS

RUDOLF BULTMANN is well known as one of the major Protestant theologians of this century. Although his name is most often associated with the controversial project of demythologizing, his reputation as a great New Testament scholar was well established before he published his famous essay *Jesus Christ and Mythology* in 1941.⁸ The main lines of his existentialist emphasis in theology, however, were in evidence as early as 1926 in his *Jesus*,⁹ and they have since continued. This emphasis is itself an effort to confront more meaningfully the hermeneutical problem of interpreting the New Testament to twentieth-century man.

"Demythologizing" is probably an unfortunate choice of term. It tends to suggest that the New Testament as it stands is regarded as untrue (i.e., mythical) and that its message will have to be accommodated to our post-deistic world view. The picture is formed all too easily of an ingenious theologian who is ready to purge away the mythical elements as meaningless and present a reduced Bible in which only the most believable elements remain. This is emphatically not the case. On the contrary, demythologizing does not presume to delete or bypass

8. Bultmann's major works are available in translation, such as *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (1921); *Jesus and the Word* (1926); and *Theology of the New Testament*, I (1941) and II (1951). There are also two collections of his articles: *Essays: Philosophical and Theological*; and *Existence and Faith*, trans. and ed. Schubert M. Ogden. (The dates given in parentheses are those of the original German editions and not of the translations.)

9. See esp. pp. 11-19: "Introduction: Viewpoint and Method."

the mythical elements in the New Testament but to emphasize in them the original and saving meaning. Far from being an effort to accommodate the Gospels to modern ways of seeing, demythologizing is directed against the shallow literalism in the modern way of seeing, the tendency of laymen and even of theologians to regard language as merely information rather than as the medium through which God confronts man with the possibility of a radically new (un-Greek, unnaturalistic, unmodern) self-understanding. Demythologizing is not an instrument of rationalist demystification and iconoclasm in the manner of Freud, Nietzsche, or Marx (to mention Ricoeur's distinction between demystification and demythologizing); it does not seek to strike down and destroy the mythical symbol, but regards it as a window to the sacred. To interpret the symbol is to recollect its original, authentic, but now hidden, meaning.

The emphasis of Bultmann's demythologizing is obviously on transforming one's self-understanding. In the matter of existential self-understanding, Bultmann is clearly indebted to Heidegger, with whom he was in close association in the middle 1920's at the University of Marburg while the latter was putting together *Being and Time*. The influence of Heidegger on Bultmann is so well known that it is sometimes vastly overestimated. Yet while the attempt to construct a point-for-point analogy between Heidegger's concepts and those of Bultmann (as John Macquarrie has done¹⁰) may be due as much to the unconsciously religious character of Heidegger's ontological model as to Bultmann's debt, it is nevertheless fair to say that Heidegger was a decisive force in Bultmann's thinking on the hermeneutical problem. This reflects itself in demythologizing, which is essentially a hermeneutical project in existential interpretation.

For instance, not only is Bultmann's concept of man as a future-oriented, historically existing being very close to that enunciated in *Being and Time*, but there are at least three other fairly specific respects in which Bultmannian theology follows Heidegger. (1) There is the distinction between language used as mere information to be interpreted objectively as fact, and language filled with personal import and the power to command obedience, which parallels Heidegger's concept of the deriva-

10. *An Existentialist Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann*,

tive character of assertions (especially logic).¹¹ (2) There is the idea that God (Being) confronts man as Word, as language, which parallels Heidegger's increasing emphasis on the linguistic character of Being as it presents itself to man. (3) There is also the concept that *kerygma* as Word in words speaks to existential self-understanding. The movement of the New Testament in itself, says Bultmann, is toward a new ("authentic") self-understanding; the function of proclaiming the New Testament is to bring about this new understanding in the modern man it addresses today. The New Testament Word is thus something like an actualization of the call of conscience that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time*.¹²

Certainly the call to a new self-understanding is an affront to one's present way of being in the world. Bultmann has no wish to remove the "scandal" of the New Testament but to place the scandalousness where it belongs: not on credal affirmation of myths that are taken literally, not on believing cosmological information that is manifestly false, but on the call for radical obedience, openness to grace, freedom in faith. Bultmann's discussions of the hermeneutical problem specifically indicate that for him hermeneutics is always defined in terms of exegesis of an historically transmitted text. However much he may be indebted to Heidegger, he still sees hermeneutics as the philosophy that should guide exegesis rather than as understanding theory per se. In "The Problem of Hermeneutics" (1950), he reaffirms the liberal Protestant insistence on full freedom of inquiry—the critical-historical method—and goes so far as to say again that the Bible is subject to the same conditions of understanding, the same philological and historical principles, as would apply to any other book.¹³ The "hermeneutical problem," although always related to exegesis, is seen not as distinctly and peculiarly theological but as resident in all text interpretation, whether of legal documents, historical works, literature, or the Scriptures.

Of course the crux of the problem remains the definition of what constitutes historical understanding in reference to

11. SZ § 33.

12. *Ibid.*, § 60.

13. "Die Interpretation der biblischen Schriften unterliegt nicht anderen Bedingungen des Verstehens als jede andere Literatur," G&V II, 231. The article first appeared as "Das Problem der Hermeneutik," ZThK XLVII (1950), 47-69, and later in translation in *Essays: Philosophical and Theological*, pp. 234-61.

a text. For Bultmann, the hermeneutic question is that of "how to understand historical documents delivered by tradition," which in turn rests on the question, "What is the character of historical knowledge?"¹⁴ It is to this problem that the second half of his Gifford Lectures (1955) are devoted, and it is precisely the analysis there presented to which Betti later takes violent exception.¹⁵

Bultmann points out that each interpretation of history or an historical document is guided by a certain interest, which in turn is based on a certain preliminary understanding of the subject. Out of this interest and understanding, the "question" put to it is shaped. Without these, no question could arise, and there would be no interpretation. All interpretation, then, is guided by the interpreter's "preunderstanding."¹⁶ (Again, this analysis of understanding is clearly related to Heidegger's delineation of *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorgriff* in *Being and Time* as preconditions for interpretation.¹⁷ Applied to history, this means that the historian always chooses a certain viewpoint, which in turn means that he is open principally to the side of the historical process disclosed to questions arising out of that viewpoint. However objectively he may pursue his subject, the historian cannot escape his own understanding: "Already in choosing a viewpoint there is at work what I may call the existential encounter with history. History gains meaning only when the historian himself stands within history and takes part in history."¹⁸ Bultmann then cites R. G. Collingwood to the effect that events have to be reenacted in the mind of the historian and thus are objective and known to him only because they are also subjective.¹⁹ Since meaning arises only out of the interpreter's relation to the future, according to Bultmann, it becomes impossible to speak of objective—that is, standpointless—meaning, and since we no longer claim to know the end and goal of history, "the question of meaning in history [as a whole] has become meaningless."²⁰

14. HE 110.

15. See HAMG 19-36.

16. HE 113. See Betti's critique of this "ambiguous word, which is best avoided," HAMG 20-21.

17. SZ § 32. *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht*, and *Vorgriff* may be rendered somewhat literally as "prior having," "view," and "conception."

18. HE 119.

19. R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 218.

20. HE 120.

In essence the "Heisenberg principle" or field theory in more radical form may be seen in operation here; that is, that the object being observed is itself subtly altered simply by the condition of being observed. The historian is part of the very field he is observing. Historical knowledge is itself an historical event; subject and object of historical science do not exist independently of each other.²¹ This has implications for Christian faith, according to Bultmann, especially since through the eschatological moment the Christian is lifted above history and reenters it with a new future, and therefore a new meaning for history. It may be mentioned here that in the idea of eschatology Bultmann seeks to go a step beyond Collingwood to use a theological (eschatological) approach to the question of meaning in history.²² But Bultmann's central contention is clear (the very issue which is disputed by Betti): that objective meaning in history cannot be spoken of, for history cannot be known except through the subjectivity of the historian himself.

Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs follow Bultmann in placing the hermeneutical problem at the center of their thinking. Like him, they continue to grapple with the clear disparity between the modern view of reality and that in which the New Testament is set. They continue Bultmann's opposition to literalism in language and his effort to restore to the Word its native power. Like him, they focus on the meaning of the New Testament witness rather than on its factual character; they emphasize that the interpreter is always in the midst of the history he is to interpret, and that the meaning of history stands in a relationship to the interpreter's understanding of the future.

If anything, Ebeling and Fuchs have carried still further Bultmann's assumptions regarding history, language, and demythologizing, giving them an even more radical interpretation. If Bultmann's hermeneutics focused on man's existential self-understanding and went directly to an analysis of what this means in terms of the proclaimed Word, Ebeling and Fuchs turn to language itself and its relation to reality. The hermeneutical problem in this perspective is not simply a matter of adjusting the proclamation of the Word to the reality it conveys in terms of existential self-understanding; it is linguistic, i.e., "how a word [word event] that has taken place comes to

21. *Ibid.*, 133.

22. *Ibid.*, 136.

be understood.”²³ As Ebeling asserts in “Word of God and Hermeneutics,” “Existence is existence through word and in word; . . . existentialist interpretation would mean *interpretation of the text with regard to the word event*.”²⁴

Both Ebeling and Fuchs have made the word event the center of their theological thinking, which has been labeled “word-event theology.” Hermeneutics, they assert, must take its bearings from the word event; “the object of hermeneutics,” says Ebeling, “is the word event as such.”²⁵ Hermeneutics does not, however, seek through paraphrase to make up for a deficiency of the biblical Word but to facilitate the “hermeneutical function” (of causing understanding to happen) of the word itself. The word itself is what opens up and mediates understanding: “The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding of language, but understanding *through* language.”²⁶ Or elsewhere, to reemphasize the linguistic character of such theology: “Hermeneutics as the theory of understanding must therefore be the theory of words.”²⁷ Fuchs puts the matter succinctly at the beginning of his *Hermeneutik*: “Hermeneutics in the realm of theology is faith’s doctrine of language [*Sprachlehre*].”²⁸

Two matters are of interest in this approach, from the standpoint of defining hermeneutics. First, the reference to the “hermeneutical function” of words goes back to the more primary sense of interpretation as a direct mediation of understanding, thus making the goal of hermeneutics the “removal of hindrances” to understanding.²⁹ This is a salutary focusing of the purpose of hermeneutics, although it does not change the fact that we tend to make use, consciously or unconsciously, of systems of interpretation even in the most direct act of mediation. The second point relates to historicism: the focus on the language event, which goes on to assert the “linguisticity of reality,” takes a view of history not as a museum of facts but as a reality coming to expression in words. Thus the appropriate questions are not so much “What were the facts?” or

23. WF 313.

24. *Ibid.*, 331.

25. *Ibid.*, 319.

26. *Ibid.*, 318; cited in HAMG 36.

27. WF 319.

28. FH v.

29. WF 318-19.

"How can we explain this fact?" but "What came to expression in this fact or myth?" "What is it that is being mediated?"³⁰ Historicism in theology, then, originates in a misuse of language, a "depraved view of word" which abstracts it from the live word event and treats it as a matter of mere statement, resulting in the critical failure of the interpreter to understand the transmitted word in the light of its character as word event.³¹

The effect of the word event emphasis in theology is to bring philosophy of language to the very center of hermeneutics. The purpose of hermeneutics is still a practical one, that of removing hindrances to the word event, but the focus of the hermeneutical problem centers unequivocally on the interconnectedness of language, thinking, and reality. Since hermeneutics cannot be considered apart from modern epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophy of language, it clearly transcends the limits of mere practical disciplinary rules of interpretation. In its departure from the realistic objectivity of "historical facts," it has invited criticism within theology, preeminently from Wolfhart Pannenberg,³² and outside theology, principally from Emilio Betti.

BETTI'S HERMENEUTICS

IN 1962, EMILIO BETTI, an Italian historian of law who founded in Rome, in 1955, an institute for interpretation theory,³³ published a booklet entitled *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften*. Appearing not long after Gadamer's masterwork of 1960, this essay put forward a clear and unequivocal protest against Gadamer's approach to the subject—as well as that of Bultmann and Ebeling. In simplest terms, Betti's objections to Gadamer's work are: first, that it does not serve as a methodology or aid to methodology for the humane studies and, secondly, that it jeopardizes the legitimacy of referring to the objective status of objects of interpretation and thus renders questionable the objectivity of the interpretation itself.

30. *Ibid.*, 295.

31. *Ibid.*

32. "Hermeneutics and Universal History," *HH* 122-52.

33. See *HAMG* 6-7n.

The booklet begins with a lament:

Hermeneutics as the general problematic of interpretation, that great general discipline which welled up so nobly in the Romantic period as the common concern of all the humane disciplines, which commanded the attention of many great minds of the 19th century—like Humboldt in philosophy of language, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the great literary historian, Böckh, the philologist and encyclopedist, Savigny, the jurist, and historians like Niebuhr, Ranke, and Droysen—this venerable older form of hermeneutics appears to be fading out of modern German consciousness.³⁴

Betti was seeking to renew this older but richly significant German tradition in his own earlier encyclopedic work, *Teoria generale della interpretazione*.³⁵

German readers had access to Betti's general thinking as early as 1954, when he published his short "hermeneutical manifesto," *Zur Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Auslegungslehre*,³⁶ a heavily documented advance notice of his *magnum opus* of 1955, which eventually also appeared in German translation in 1967.³⁷ The larger work was the product of some seven or more years of thinking which dated back to his inaugural lecture of May 1948. The 1954 manifesto, in fact, is an enlarged version of this earlier presentation. Betti writes with regret in 1962 that despite this 1954 publication, very little note was taken in Germany of his work.³⁸ Rather, the spell of Heidegger's philosophy had continued to exert its influence on Protestant theology and philosophy, and a very different version of hermeneutics had emerged.

This development was not in the great stream of tradition stretching from Schleiermacher through Humboldt, Steinthal, Lazarus, Böckh, Dilthey, Simmel, Litt, Joachim Wach, and Nikolai Hartmann, which had occupied the attention of Betti in his resolve to take up anew the project of formulating a general methodological theory for interpretation.³⁹ Rather, it was the influence of phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology, coupled with the general interest in philosophy of lan-

34. HAMG.

35. TGI.

36. Originally appeared in the *Festschrift für Ernst Rabel*, II, 79-168, published the same year.

37. AAMG.

38. HAMG 6.

39. *Ibid.*

guage, that were the driving forces in the new German interest in hermeneutics. (Gadamer testifies that another impetus in his own thinking was his profound dissatisfaction in the 1930's with the prevailing theory in aesthetics.⁴⁰) In theology, as we have seen, the development of hermeneutics was closely tied to demythologizing as a way of confronting the profound problem of how the Bible can be made relevant and meaningful to present-day hearers of its Word.

As an historian of law, Betti's interest did not arise out of a philosophical desire for a more adequate account of the truth of a work of art (as for Gadamer), or a desire to achieve a deeper understanding of the nature of Being (as for Heidegger), or from a compulsion to get at the saving meaningfulness of the biblical Word (as in Bultmann and Ebeling). He wished to differentiate among the various modes of interpretation in the humane disciplines and to formulate a foundational body of principles with which to interpret human actions and objects. If a distinction is to be made between the moment of understanding an object in terms of itself and the moment of seeing the existential meaning of the object for one's own life and future, then it may be said that this latter is clearly the concern of Gadamer, Bultmann, and Ebeling, while the nature of "objective" interpretation has been Betti's concern.

Betti by no means wishes to omit the subjective moment from interpretation, or even to deny that it is necessary in every humane interpretation. But he does wish to affirm that, whatever the subjective role in interpretation may be, the object remains object and an objectively valid interpretation of it can reasonably be striven for and accomplished. An object speaks, and it can be heard rightly or wrongly precisely because there is an objectively verifiable meaning in the object. If the object is not other than its observer, and if it does not, of itself, speak, why listen? ⁴¹

Betti argues, however, that recent German hermeneutics has so occupied itself with the phenomenon of *Sinngebung* (the interpreter's function of conferring meaning on the object) that this has come to be equated with interpretation. At the

40. According to remarks by Gadamer on the genesis of *WM* in discussion following my paper, "Die Tragweite von Gadamer's *WM* für die Literaturlauslegung," Heidelberg, July 14, 1965.

41. *HAMG* 35.

beginning of *Die Hermeneutik als allgemeine Methodik der Geisteswissenschaften* (1962), Betti asserts that his main purpose is to clarify the essential distinction between *Auslegung* (interpretation) and *Sinngebung*. Precisely because this distinction is ignored, Betti asserts, the whole integrity of objectively valid results in the humanities (*die Objektivität der Auslegungsergebnisse*) is challenged.

A few examples of the canons of Betti's hermeneutics and his objections to Gadamer's position will illustrate Betti's defense of objectivity. For Betti, the interpretive object is an objectification of man's spirit (*Geist*) expressed in sensible form. Interpretation, then, is necessarily a recognition and reconstruction of the meaning that its author, using a special kind of unity of materials, was able to embody. This means, of course, that the observer must be translated into a foreign subjectivity and, through an inversion of the creative process, get back to the idea or "interpretation" which is embodied in the object.⁴² Thus, as Betti observes, to speak of an objectivity that does not involve the subjectivity of the interpreter is manifestly absurd. Yet the subjectivity of the interpreter must penetrate the foreignness and otherness of the object, or he succeeds only in projecting his own subjectivity on the object of interpretation. Thus it is fundamental and is the first canon of all interpretation to affirm the essential autonomy of the object.⁴³

A second canon is that of context of meaning, or a totality within which individual parts are interpreted. There is an inner relationship of coherence between individual parts of a speech because of the overarching totality of meaning built up of the individual parts.⁴⁴ In a third general canon, Betti acknowledges the "topicality" (*Aktualität*) of meaning, that is, the relatedness to the interpreter's own stance and interests in the present, which is involved in every understanding. The interpreter of an event in ancient times will necessarily interpret in terms of what he has experienced. On the subjective side, there is no escape from one's own understanding and experience. Betti is far from imagining that understanding is a matter of passive

42. *Ibid.*, 11-12.

43. *Ibid.*, 14.

44. "Kanon des sinnhaften Zusammenhanges (Grundsatz der Ganzheit)" or "Kanon der Totalität," *ibid.*, 15.

receptivity; rather, it is always a reconstructive process which involves the interpreter's own experience of the world.⁴⁵ It may even be said that Betti reaffirms "in principle" the concept of preunderstanding enunciated by Bultmann.

He emphatically takes issue, nonetheless, with Bultmann's conclusion that, because of the historicity of preunderstanding, the idea that it is possible to have objective historical knowledge is "an illusion of objectifying thinking" (*die Illusion eines objektivierenden Denkens*).⁴⁶ Says Betti:

The text to which the preunderstanding gives meaning is not simply there to strengthen our previously held opinion; rather, we must assume that the text has something to say to us, which we do not already know from ourselves and which exists independently of our act of understanding. Precisely here the questionability of a subjective focus comes to light, one which is obviously influenced by contemporary existential philosophy, and one which strives to throw together explication [*Auslegung*] and understanding [*Sinngebung*], with the result that the objectivity of the results of the interpretive process in the humane studies as a whole is placed in question.⁴⁷

Betti's criticisms of Gadamer raise strenuous objection to existential "subjectivity" and the historicity of understanding, asserting that Gadamer has failed to provide normative methods for distinguishing a right from a wrong interpretation, and that he lumps together very different modes of interpretation.⁴⁸ The historian, for instance, Betti asserts, is not concerned with a practical relation to the present so much as contemplatively immersing himself in the text he is studying; the lawyer, on the other hand, has a practical application to the present in mind in his interchange with a text. As a result, the two processes of interpretation are different in character; the assertion by Gadamer that every interpretation involves an application to the present is true enough of legal but not of historical interpretation.⁴⁹

Gadamer answered these objections in a letter to Betti. He stated that he is not proposing a method but trying to "describe *what is*. . . I try to think beyond modern science's concept

45. *Ibid.*, 19-22.

46. *HE* 121.

47. *HAMG* 35.

48. *Ibid.*, 43-44.

49. *Ibid.*, 45-49.

of method and to think in explicit universality what always happens.”⁵⁰ Betti printed Gadamer’s letter as a footnote in the same pamphlet in which he attacks Gadamer, so it is clear that Betti is hardly satisfied with this answer. For Betti, Gadamer is lost in a standardless existential subjectivity. In the Preface to the 1965 edition of *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer again replies to Betti, this time emphasizing the nonsubjective character of understanding. The ontological turn of his book (which Betti deplores) leads Gadamer to view the functioning of the “historically operative consciousness”⁵¹ not as a subjective but as an ontological process:

The meaning of my investigation is not, in any case, to present a general theory of interpretation with differentiations to account for the different methods of special disciplines, as E. Betti has so excellently done, but to seek out what all ways of understanding have in common and to show that understanding is never a subjective procedure in relation to a given “object” but that it belongs to the operative history [*Wirkungsgeschichte*]⁵²—and this means, to the being—of what is understood.⁵²

The point Gadamer is making will be further examined in Chapters 10 and 11, but at this point the fundamental contrast between Betti and Gadamer is clear. We are confronted with two very different conceptions of the scope and purpose of hermeneutics, the methods and kinds of thinking appropriate to it, and the essential character of the discipline as a field of study. With two very different definitions, resting on different philosophical foundations, the two thinkers formulate hermeneutics to fulfill very different purposes. Betti, following Dilthey in quest of a foundational discipline for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, looks for what is practical and useful to the interpreter. He wants norms to distinguish right from wrong interpretations, one type of interpretation from another. Gadamer, following Heidegger, asks such questions as: What is the ontological character of understanding? What kind of encounter with Being is involved in the hermeneutical process? How does tradition, the transmitted past, enter into and shape the act of understanding an historical text?

What is one to say of this conflict of definitions? As I shall

50. *Ibid.*, 51n.

51. “Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein”; see WM 325–60.

52. *Ibid.*, Preface to 2d ed., xvii.

assert in the next chapter, the two positions are not totally antithetical. Rather, the two thinkers are working on different aspects of the hermeneutical problem. Obviously a basic choice must ultimately be made between a realistic and a phenomenological perspective; nevertheless, it can be admitted that for hermeneutics as a whole, both philosophical positions yield important approaches to the hermeneutical problem.

E. D. HIRSCH: HERMENEUTICS AS THE LOGIC OF VALIDATION

IN 1967 E. D. HIRSCH, JR., published the first full-dress treatise in general hermeneutics written in English: *Validity in Interpretation*. In the years to come it will undoubtedly take its place among the significant American works on the theory of interpretation. In a systematic and carefully argued presentation, the book challenges some of the most cherished assumptions that have guided literary interpretation for some four decades. For instance, Hirsch maintains that the author's intention must be the norm by which the validity of any "interpretation" (explication of the verbal meaning of a passage) is measured. He argues, further, that this intention is a determinate entity about which objective evidence can be gathered and that, when the evidence is in hand, a determination of the meaning can be made which will be universally recognized as valid. Dilthey's dream of objectively valid interpretation would seem to be realized.

Of course the "verbal meaning" of a passage as determined by intensive philological analysis (both of the work and all external evidence that bears on its author's intentions) and the "significance" that same work may have today are two very different matters. But this is precisely Hirsch's point: endless confusion is created by lumping together "verbal meaning" and "significance" (meaningfulness for us), and this sin he ascribes to Gadamer, Bultmann, and the theologians of the New Hermeneutic.⁵³ In the language of Betti's attack on the same point, the *Bedeutung* (meaning) must be held separate from *Bedeutsamkeit* (significance),⁵⁴ or philology will fall

53. VII 246.

54. *HAMG* 28-29.

apart and the possibility of obtaining objective and valid results will vanish. Upon this distinction rests the integrity of philology and the possibility of objectivity.

The objective of hermeneutics, says Hirsch, is not to find the "significance" of a passage for us today but to make clear its verbal meaning. Hermeneutics is the philological discipline which sets forth the rules by which valid determinations of the verbal meaning of a passage may be achieved. Gadamer and the followers of Bultmann have not only wrongly brought in considerations that lie outside the real task of hermeneutics, but they have, Hirsch asserts, espoused a philosophical position which goes so far as to question whether it is even possible to hope for an objectively determinable meaning.

In essence, Hirsch argues that if it is held that the "meaning" of a passage (in the sense of the verbal meaning) can change, then there is no fixed norm for judging whether the passage is being interpreted correctly. Unless one recognizes the "glass slipper" of the original verbal meaning intended by the author, there is no way of separating Cinderella from the other girls.⁵⁵ This recalls Betti's objection to Gadamer's hermeneutics: that Gadamer does not provide a stable normative principle by which the "correct" meaning of a passage can be validly determined. Hirsch makes the author's intended verbal meaning the norm and goes even further to characterize verbal meaning as changeless, reproducible, and determinate. A brief quotation will show his reasoning and also give something of the Aristotelian flavor of his exposition:

When, therefore, I say that a verbal meaning is determinate I mean that it is an entity which is self-identical. Furthermore, I also mean that it is an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next – that it is changeless. Indeed, these criteria were already implied in the requirement that verbal meaning be reproducible, that it be always the same in different acts of construing. Verbal meaning, then, is what it is and not something else, and it is always the same. That is what I mean by determinacy.⁵⁶

Hermeneutics here sets for itself the task of furnishing the theoretical justification for the determinacy of the object of interpretation and of setting forth norms by which the determinate, changeless, self-identical meaning can be understood.

55. VII 46.

56. *Ibid.*

Naturally, the task is also to say on what grounds one meaning may be chosen over another; such is the question of validity. A hermeneutics that does not deal with validity is, in Hirsch's view, not hermeneutics but something else. Like Betti, he raises the objection that the Heideggerian current in hermeneutics sidesteps the issue of validity, without which there simply cannot be a science of interpretation and a method of arriving at correct interpretations.

To the objection that hermeneutics should deal with the significance of the text for us today, and with the structures or mechanisms by which the verbal meaning becomes meaningful to us, Hirsch replies that such is the province of literary criticism and of areas other than hermeneutics.⁵⁷ Hermeneutics, strictly speaking, is "the modest, and in the old-fashioned sense, philological effort to find out what the author meant."⁵⁸ This is "the only proper foundation for criticism,"⁵⁹ but it is not criticism; it is interpretation. Hermeneutics may well make use of logical analysis, biography, and even the calculus of probability (to determine the most probable among several possible interpretations), but it remains essentially philology. Even with this restriction, however, it is still broadly significant and interdisciplinary; it is still a foundational discipline which enunciates general principles of interpretation for any written document, whether legal, religious, literary—or culinary.

What are we to say of this latest definition of hermeneutics as the rules of the modest yet foundational effort to determine the verbal meaning of a passage? The most striking thing about it is what it leaves out; hermeneutics is not concerned with the subjective process of understanding, as in Schleiermacher and Dilthey, or with relating an understood meaning to the present (criticism), but with the problem of umpiring between already understood meanings so as to judge among conflicting possible interpretations. It is a guide for the philologist who must decide among several possibilities what is the most likely meaning of a passage.

57. See esp. the crucial distinction in Chap. 4 of VII, titled "Understanding, Interpretation, and Criticism." Hermeneutics as a logic of validation excludes "understanding" on the one hand, and criticism on the other; it is a science or set of principles for valid ascertaining of the verbal sense of the text, i.e., interpretation.

58. *Ibid.*, 57.

59. *Ibid.*

For Hirsch, then, the hermeneutical problem would not be one of "translation"—of how to span the historical distance between, say, the New Testament and today so that the meaningfulness of the text *for us* can emerge; the problem is simply a philological one of determining the verbal meaning intended by the author. Certainly Hirsch would acknowledge that relating a text to the present is a real problem, but he would deny that it belongs within the field of hermeneutics. To take this position, of course, he has to affirm that the verbal meaning is something independent, changeless, and determinate, which one can establish with objective certainty. Such a conception of verbal meaning rests on certain specifiable philosophical presuppositions, mainly realistic, or perhaps those of the early Husserl of *Logical Investigations*, whom Hirsch quotes to the effect that the same intentional object may be the focus of many different intentional acts.⁶⁰ The object, in this latter case, remains the same, an independent idea or essence.

Although it is beyond the scope of the present work to present a detailed critique of Hirsch's presuppositions, it is necessary to observe that when the hermeneutical problem is defined simply as the philological problem, then the whole complex development of twentieth-century thought on historical understanding is shoved aside as irrelevant to the practical determination of verbal meaning. Hermeneutics becomes a set of philological principles of interpretation which the English teacher, clergyman, or lawyer can use, without bothering his head about twentieth-century developments in philosophy of language, phenomenology, epistemology, or Heideggerian ontology. Who needs to trouble about Hegel, Heidegger, or Gadamer to collect data on the "real intention," the "changeless verbal meaning," of Milton's *Lycidas*? What about the problem in understanding what *Lycidas* can or should mean to us today? That, says Hirsch, is the business of the literary critic. But of course the literary critic will "not disdain" the modest technical job of work performed by the "interpreter"—"the only foundation for criticism"—even as the interpreter cherishes the pristine purity of the changeless, suprahistorical meaning in isolation from its significance for the present day.

But in fact the hermeneutical problem is not simply a philological problem, and it is not possible to relegate to limbo with

60. See Hirsch's interesting Appendix III, "An Excursus on Types," *ibid.*, 265-74.

Aristotelian definitions the bulk of understanding theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, not to mention the contributions both inside and outside theology toward defining historical understanding. Hirsch argues that verbal meaning is in fact separable from significance since (1) we can in fact distinguish what the work meant to its author and what it means to us, and (2) otherwise, objective, repeatable meanings would be impossible. Yet how satisfactory is this argument? The fact that a mental object can be viewed from several perspectives does not make it historically changeless and eternal; and to argue that objectivity would otherwise be impossible is circular, since the possibility of objective and ahistorical knowledge is itself the question. Upon the validity of this distinction between meaning and significance, however, the validity of Hirsch's whole treatise on validity depends. But does understanding operate in the mechanical way Hirsch assumes? Or is this separation of meaning from significance strictly a reflexive operation, constructed *after* the act of understanding? Is not this form of hermeneutics perhaps actually textual criticism in disguise—a methodology for distinguishing reflexively between one understanding and another? Is it not merely a system or structure for the critic or philologist to use in judging whether one of Wordsworth's Lucy poems (to use an example cited by Hirsch) reflects a gloomy or affirmative view of life?

Certainly such a hermeneutical theory does not propose but presupposes a theory of how understanding itself takes place. (And it must be asked how adequate this theory of understanding is.) Rather, it begins after understanding. As Hirsch remarks: "The act of understanding is at first a genial (or a mistaken) guess, and there are no methods for making guesses, or rules for generating insights. The methodological activity of interpretation commences when we begin to test and criticize our guesses."⁶¹ Or more pointedly, "The discipline of interpretation comprises the having of ideas and the testing of them. . . . [It] is founded not on a methodology of construction but on a logic of validation."⁶² Hermeneutics is for Hirsch no longer the theory of understanding; it is the logic of validation. It is the theory by which it can be said, "This is what the author meant to say, not that."

Hirsch has succeeded brilliantly in his purpose: to construct

61. *Ibid.*, 207.

62. *Ibid.*

a single system for arriving at objectively verifiable meanings. But at what cost? First, in order to make the meaning determinate, he asserts that the norm or standard must always be the intention of the author. Second, in order to make this meaning objective, it has to be reproducible and changeless, so Hirsch asserts that verbal meaning, as meaning, is forever the same, and that it is separate and separable from its meaning for us as we encounter it in understanding. But can these assertions be accepted? Many of them rest on basically Aristotelian epistemological assumptions and a theory of meaning that must itself be defended on philosophical grounds.

Has Hirsch's redefinition of hermeneutics as the logic of validation really contributed to a grasp of the hermeneutical problem in its breadth and complexity, or has it oversimplified the problem? Ebeling asserts that "the object of hermeneutics is the word event as such"; thus hermeneutics reaches deeply into the question of reality and the nature of our participation in language. What happens to this vision of the hermeneutical problem? Can it be left to some other field, like philosophy of language? The ease with which Hirsch ignores the implications of understanding theory and philosophy of language suggests that the specialization he proposes for hermeneutics is inadvisable. How much narrower the problem of hermeneutics would be in theology today if it proposed simply to establish the author's probable verbal meaning! But immediately the question arises as to the nature of, say, Paul's meaning; was he trying to convey new self-understanding, or what? Can the norms for judging this be found in Paul himself? If such norms were allegedly found, on what basis would we decide whether these were valid? We are back in the present again. And it is just this point that needs to be emphasized; even the standards for, and of, objectivity are manufactured out of today's historical fabric. To recognize this is to recognize something of the complexity of the hermeneutical problem, a complexity which a narrowly restrictive definition of hermeneutics subtly encourages an interpreter to bypass.

So the hermeneutical debate goes on. On the one side are the defenders of objectivity and validation, who look to hermeneutics as the theoretical source for norms of validation; on the other side are the phenomenologists of the event of understanding, who stress the historical character of this "event," and consequently the limitations of all claims to "objective knowledge" and "objective validity."

Hermeneutics

*Interpretation Theory in
Schleiermacher, Dilthey,
Heidegger, and Gadamer*

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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EVANSTON

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 68-54885

Manufactured in the United States of America

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ISBN 0-8101-0027-4

Second printing, 1972

Third printing, 1975

Fourth printing, 1977

Fifth printing, 1980

Sixth printing, 1982

Seventh printing, 1985

Eighth printing, 1988