Before Textuality: Orality and Interpretation

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I

It is a commonplace that the formal study of hermeneutics or exegesis began by centering on texts. In his profoundly rich and comprehensive *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer states (1985:146): "The classical discipline concerned with the art of understanding texts is hermeneutics." He goes on immediately to explain how the concept of hermeneutics must be extended to include aesthetics, "the whole sphere of art and its complex of questions." He notes later (353) that hermeneutics extends also to oral utterance and states that Schleiermacher was the first to discern this truth. But aesthetics and oral utterance appear as "extensions" of a narrower original focus, the textual focus. Gadamer recalls (353) "that the task of hermeneutics was originally and chiefly the understanding of texts." This appears to have applied quite certainly to the rabbinical tradition, too, from the start, even in the light of the interplay of text and orality in this tradition described by Susan A. Handelman in *The Slayers of Moses* (1982:27-82).

The formal study of hermeneutics or interpretation or exegesis that began by focusing on texts and then extended itself to provide interpretations of art and/or oral utterance extended eventually—although Gadamer does not go into such matters—also to gesture or other kinesics (the use of any kind of nonlinguistic body movements), to social behavior, to social structures, and eventually to anything that carries "meaning," intentionally or merely *de facto*. One can even interpret a sunset or a blast of wind, for interpretation (the Latin-based equivalent of the Greek-based "hermeneutics") means ultimately making evident to a present audience or milieu something in a manifestation that is not of itself evident to this milieu (it may be quite evident to other milieus).

Even when the concept of hermeneutics or interpretation is extended far beyond the textual, however, there can remain a tendency to take textual interpretation as the model for all other kinds of interpretation. In "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," Paul Ricoeur proposes that the human sciences (*sciences humaines*, such as history,

sociology, and so forth) develop by interpreting human action by analogy with textual interpretation (1971:529), which serves not only as the historical starting point for the science of hermeneutics or interpretation but as a model or paradigm for all interpretation (559). Human actions, in other words, are understood for interpretive purposes by analogy with texts, though, of course, they are not reduced to texts. The idea of "nature" as something "out there" like a text of a book–a kind of visible "thing" to be read and interpreted runs back at least to the Middle Ages (Curtius 1953:311-19). But David Olson (ms. in progress) has made a more specific point: the very idea of interpretation as an activity separate from other kinds of statement depends on the existence of writing. Interpretation of the "text" that is the world would be something of a different order than the text itself if the world is like a text. Before writing, there is no functional or effective distinction between a statement and an interpretation of a statement. Asked to repeat a statement and an interpretation of a statement that he or she has made, a person from an oral culture commonly gives not a word-for-word repetition of what he or she has said, but an interpretation–and with good reason, I would suggest, since the request to repeat the statement establishes a new context for the statement (one which, moreover, suggests that the original wording was not understood). Since the oral mind is holistic, it adapts to the new context with a wording that presumably fits the new context, not the original context, a wording which we would regard as interpretative but which to the oral mind represents in the new context essentially what the original statement represented in the original context. What is the point of repeating *verbatim* a statement that is unclear enough to elicit a request to repeat it? A text sets up a different situation from this oral scenario, providing a visual object which is thing-like, seemingly stable, so that verbal commentary on it appears to be of a different order of being. In Olson's view, it would seem, interpretation is antecedent to text, for it operates in purely oral cultures, too: texts provide verbalization which only appears different from interpretation.

Olson's and Ricoeur's observations are extraordinarily informative, and they both suggest a somewhat text-centered concept of interpretation or hermeneutics which the history of the term, as explained by Gadamer, validates. Hermeneutics begins with texts, and it appears to stay in some primary sense with texts or, if in some vaguer sense not always with texts, at least with words, implying that the problem of explanation or hermeneutics is paradigmatically a problem of making clear something that is verbalized.

Why is this so? Since anything that is unclear may call for interpretation—a sunset, as instanced before, or a person's gait or other behavior–why is the formal study of hermeneutics or interpretation so primarily focused on something that is verbalized or, more specifically, something that is textualized (written or printed)? First, because of all things in human life, words clamor most for explanation. The reason they do is

paradoxical: words themselves are efforts at explanation, and, in so far as they do not provide total explanation, they face the reader or hearer with unfinished business. Total verbal explicitness is impossible, so that all words, written or spoken, are invitations for more words. But textualized words, written or printed, call especially for explanation because, while spoken words–which for tens of thousands of years were the only words formed in any human society–are in great part ultimately explained, given meaning (implicitly but really), by the nonverbal elements in the situation in which they are spoken–who is speaking to whom, on what occasion, with what sort of force, with what gestures, what facial expressions, and so on–these nonverbal elements are missing in a text and must somehow be made up for. Hermeneutics (interpretation, exegesis) allows us to make up for them, shows how to supply now in words the originally nonverbal elements or their equivalents. (Of course, the supplied, interpretive words themselves are ultimately explicable only with the help of the nonverbal, but for the nonce they suffice.) Even if we know the language in a text, to interpret a text two thousand years old requires special knowledge and skills to recover something of the text's extraverbal context, in which its meaning was originally defined, and thus requires formal study and/or application of hermeneutical or interpretative or exegetical techniques.

Moreover, formal, "scientific" study of anything at all is by its nature text-dependent and in this sense text-oriented: formal study requires texts, written or printed (Ong 1982:8-10). This is not to say that persons from a primary oral culture, a culture with no idea at all of writing, cannot be widely knowledgeable and articulate about specific matters as well as wise about complex and deep matters, but only that they cannot set up their knowledge in the elaborately categorical, scientific ways that formal study demands and that writing and, even more, print and computer cultures can manage. Since formal study of any subject began with the use of texts, its interest in interpretation gravitates with a special intensity toward texts first of all: these constitute the habitat of its thinking in a way that pure orality does not. It took many millennia for a science of linguistics to develop which had a true feel for language as basically oral, as sound. Rhetoric indeed had for centuries studied the use of language, and precisely the use of sounded language, for rhetoric was originally, and until very recent years, the study of oratory, but rhetoric was not linguistics or even much related to linguistics: it was more related to politics, developing skills addressed to practical persuasive purposes.

II

One reason, then, why hermeneutics has begun with texts is that they are at first blush more noetically manageable than oral utterance is (Ong 1982:1-30), for they are quiescent, passive, fixed, recuperable, manipulable. They are seemingly reified verbalization. They can be treated as things. But several developments in structuralism and poststructuralism and deconstruction have tended to undermine this sense of the text as simply reified. Awareness of intertextuality makes it evident that all texts, even when they are not explicitly citing other texts, are interwoven with other texts in the most elusive ways. All texts are part of what poststructuralists call generically Text or Writing or *Ecriture* (Barthes), which often renders any given bit of writing particularly unsteady in the virtually limitless and uncontrollable relations it has with an unknown number of other writings. Thus we find Michel Leiris's "reflections on the associations of the name 'Persephone' alongside Derrida's discussion of the limits of philosophy" or, perhaps at the greatest extreme, Derrida's *Glas*, which presents in parallel the text of Hegel's analysis of the concept of the family and a text of Jean Genet, interrelating the two (see Culler 1982:136). Intertextualist critics look for the most unexpected "traces" of other texts in a given text, "a set of relations with other texts" (Leitch 1983:59) cued in by various methods. Of course, there is no end to this game. One can always produce one more study, or a hundred more studies, carrying into new innings, if not always new thoughts.

Intertextuality has upset many persons by countering the more or less received romantic doctrine that the successful writer was marked by "originality," an ability to produce quite fresh verbiage, something new and previously unrealized. This most often unarticulated but strong presumption has produced the state of mind which Harold Bloom treats in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973)–the nervous fear that, after all, one may be inevitably more bound to one's textual predecessors than it is comfortable to admit.

Further, ideals of literature as "self-expression" have encouraged the older anti-intertextualist set of mind, for what can be more different from everything else in existence than I myself am? As Gerard Manley Hopkins notes (1959:123), "We say that any two things however unlike are in something alike. This is the one exception: when I compare myself, my being-myself, with anything else whatsoever, all things alike, all in the same degree, rebuff me with blank unlikeness." The "taste of self" is absolutely unique. In 1890, the year after Hopkins' death, William James makes precisely the same point (1950:289): "to everyone, the neighbor's *me* falls together with all the rest of things in one foreign mass against which his own *me* stands out in startling relief." Although everyone is aware that

everyone's verbal expression is somewhat derivative, to think of writing as essentially self-expression is in some ways to encourage the most anti-intertextualist mindset possible.

In *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (1971) I have tried to make the point that the Romantic Movement coincided with the deep interiorization of print, which culminated (for the moment–the computer was yet to come) the reduction of sound to space initiated by script. This interiorization of print coincided with a marked atrophy of the old classical rhetorical tradition which had dominated the academic and intellectual world since antiquity in sometimes gross and sometimes subtle but always pervasive ways. The classical rhetorical tradition had kept the old oral tradition of expression very much alive even through many centuries of manuscript culture and for the first three centuries and more after print, for rhetoric was originally the art of public speaking and its oral pull was strong until the fuller fixation of the spoken word in space which print eventually effected. The first American rhetoric to address itself explicitly to written composition, Samuel Newman's *A Practical System of Rhetoric*, appeared only in 1827 (Stewart 1983:145). And the point has often been made that *McGuffey's Readers*, the first of which was published in 1836, were concerned not principally with reading for understanding but with declamatory platform reading. Many new developments in literary and intellectual genres following on the deep interiorization of print with the Romantic Age and immediately after were antithetical to the old classical rhetoric: the encouragement of silent reading, the weakening or virtual disappearance of orally grounded noetic structures (formulaic expression and composition, including the conspicuous use of balance, parallelism, antithesis, epithets, openly agonistic approaches to subjects generally, and the like). These elements, evident well into our present century, but more and more moribund, caught in the backwaters of thought, were more and more submerged as print–and, eventually, the computer–brought attention to bear more and more on the text as text. Ultimately, as vernacular literature by the end of the 1800s became a significant academic subject, the ground was laid for the New Criticism, or, its continental European equivalent, Formalism, each a self-consciously text-bound approach to verbal interpretation, keeping the reader's attention programmatically close to what was before him or her on the page, reifying the text as it had never been reified before.

Then, after the New Criticism and Formalism had served their usefulness, there came structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, and with these, the sense or cause of intertextuality, which noted how massively, and often subtly, a text was really not so quiescently reified as its visual make-up suggested but was, to any reader, dependent upon other texts.

III

Of course, recognition of the "influence" of one text on another was not new. What was new about the modern sense of intertextuality was the sense of how thoroughly and hauntingly and inevitably texts seem to inhabit one another, how much echoing and counterechoing there not only was but also had to be. Textualization builds all texts into each other. There are "traces" of everything everywhere, and to the extent that the traces even at some points (not at all points, I would insist) contradict one another (if given the necessary interpretation), they thereby give rise to deconstruction, the critical enterprise which undertakes to show always that any given work of textual art eventually breaks itself down, implying in one place what it denies elsewhere.

The destabilization of the text effected by deconstruction was abetted by the reader-oriented or reader-response criticism which grew into prominence a little ahead of deconstruction, and which insisted that one could not assign a meaning to a text simply in terms of the intent of its writer. One must also take into account what the reader makes of the text, the reader's response, for in the reader, and only in the reader, the text comes to life.

IV

Both the sense of intertextuality and reader-response theory have had a twofold effect. On the one hand, they have called attention to the text more than ever before. But on the other hand, they have destabilized the text, making it impossible to regard it as simply an isolated, visual unit, quiescent, passive, fixed, recuperable, manipulable–in other words, manageable as an object is. Intertextuality involves the text in front of one's eyes with so many other possible texts as to make the text in front of one's eyes impossible to pin down completely. Reader-response criticism involves the text with the nontextual quite explicitly: it locates the text within the consciousness of whatever reader chances upon it. Putting utterance into writing or print can easily be thought of as removing it from discourse. This is precisely what putting utterance into writing or print cannot do. There is no way to remove utterance from discourse. Writing and/or print only delays the discourse, which the reader resumes.

One of the paradoxes of the text is that, until it is read, in a very real sense it is not truly a text. It is only coded marks on a surface. It takes on meaning when it is read–which means, when it is somehow related to sound (internally in the imagination or externally, aloud), and thereby made to

move through time. For sounded words are not things, but events: a sounded word can never be present all at once, as things are. In saying "nevertheless," by the time I get to the latter part of the word, "-theless," the first part of the word, "never-," has passed out of existence. When a text which has laid unread for several hundred or several thousand years is first seen and, often with great difficulty, finally read, moved through current time, the discourse of which the text was a record is resumed. And on such occasions, the validity of reader-response theory makes itself felt. Only in the present reader can any meaning for the text assert itself. The reader may feel called on to study assiduously in order to create, as far as possible, the original world in which the text was put down so as to resume the discourse, so far as possible, from the point at which it was broken off. But he or she has to do the re-creation of the original context, too. Textualized discourse, as has so often been pointed out, is of itself context-free, but reading it gives it context, always related dynamically to the present even more than to the past.

<center>V</center>

Oral utterance is inevitably discourse, verbal exchange between two or more persons, and the text reveals itself to us today as more like oral utterance than had often been thought before. The interweaving of texts to which a sense of intertextuality and a knowledge of reader-response criticism alerts us suggests the well-known interweaving of verbalization in the primary oral world, where continuity with what had been said was of far more consequence than the discontinuity and isolation which have earlier been attributed to textual "creations" or "objects." Oral habits of thought and expression are essentially interweavings with each other, deeply repetitive, built on formulaic expression, commonplaces, epithets, responsive to the total context in which they come into being, and supported in the formal art of rhetoric by the doctrine of imitation, which is repetition of sorts, a kind of interweaving of art and nature. Such habits of thought and expression were taken for granted before the Romantic Age. Their classic expression is Pope's statement in "An Essay on Criticism" that wit deals with "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." Intertextuality *à outrance*.

There is no doubt that writing and print (and now the computer) realize potentialities in language which oral speech cannot realize, and thus in certain ways bring language to a climax (whether to its final climax is no longer so certain since the advent of electronics). But it is paradoxical that concerted studies of the Text or Writing or *Ecriture*, with their associated concerns with intertextuality, "traces," and the like, have served to bring out

features in textualization which are remarkably like the hallmarks of orality itself.

What does this say about the origins of hermeneutics in the study of texts as texts, when the texts here in some sense seem to dissolve back into orality? One thing it might suggest is that, although the scientific study of hermeneutics or interpretation begins historically with the study of texts for reasons earlier suggested, hermeneutics or interpretation is in fact antecedent to textuality. Hermeneutics needs to be considered in perspectives beyond those in which it understandably arose as a scientific study, just as rhetoric has had to be considered as a highly developed human activity long antedating the scientific study of rhetoric or the "art" of rhetoric.

Most modes of human verbalization have never been written at all and never will be. Of the tens of thousands of languages spoken by *Homo sapiens* since the species first appeared, almost none have or have had or ever will have any textual existence at all. Most of them have disappeared without ever having been written and many more are fast disappearing leaving no literature behind. It has been calculated that since the beginning of human history only some 106 languages have ever had a literature (Edmonson 1971:322) and of the 3000 to 4000 spoken today, only some 78 have a literature (332).

Since oral utterance, too, obviously calls for interpretation—people have to explain to one another what they say, at least from time to time—must this interpretation arise only by analogy with textual interpretation? The question cuts deep, for when oral language is thought of in terms of interpretation, it would appear that it is always interpretation. This goes farther than the statement that there are no facts, only interpretations. For it includes oral utterance over and beyond that which may be concerned with "facts." The term "fact" in our ordinary sense of that which is actually the case, appears very late in English (in the *Oxford English Dictionary* the first record of its use dates only from 1581). Human utterance is concerned basically with more than announcing or disputing "facts," although it sometimes does deal with "facts," too.

Oral utterance comes into being in a holistic situation which is fundamentally nonverbal. Two or more human persons exist in a given temporal, spatial, social, interpersonal setting into which words erupt, not as things, but as events. For words are sounds, and sounds are events. Words modify the holistic situation and in one way or another they explain or interpret it, make something known in it that was not know before—a need for assistance, a manifestation of unity as in a greeting, or, as in some greetings, a manifestation of hostility, a manifestation of the meaning of some nonverbal element in the situation, a manifestation of exaltation or celebration, and so on *ad infinitum.*

It is in orality that verbal expression has its origin. The oral word is essentially a call, a cry (Ong 1967:111-75). It is not a thing or a reification, but an event, an action. The oral word is a call from someone to someone, an interpersonal transaction. No interactive persons, no words. The oral word is a unique kind of event and it may have to do with all sorts of things, including information and even "facts," but if there is no hint of another person, real or imaginary, to whom the word is addressed, called out, cried out, the sound is simply not functioning as a word. Because it is a call, a cry, addressed to another person or, the equivalent, an imagined person or persons, the oral word is essentially explanation or interpretation or hermeneutics, a clarification by one person of something that to his or her interlocutor or interlocutors is otherwise not evident.

The etymology of the term "interpret" is informative here. It comes through the Latin from a Proto-Indo-European root *per-*, meaning "to traffic in, to sell," and, more remotely, "to hand over, to distribute." This root belongs, with many other verbal roots, to a more generalized Proto-Indo-European root group *per-*, which forms the base of many prepositions and proverbs with the fundamental meaning of "forward" or "through," a meaning which gets widely extended to senses such as "in front of," "before," "early," "toward," "around," and so on. To this root, the Latin form adds the preposition *inter*, which itself means "between." The Latin term *interpres* thus means initially an agent who barters between two parties, a broker or negotiator, and from this comes to mean an interpreter pretty much in the present sense of this English word, that is, an explainer.

It will be noted how far all this is from a sense of language as essentially a phonocentric or logocentric enterprise (Culler 1982:92), a set of signs cued one-to-one to each other and to external reality outside consciousness. We are here in a climate of interpersonal negotiation, in which meaning is brought into being and sustained or changed through discourse between persons set in a holistic, essentially nonverbal context. Indeed, since the *per-* root refers to interaction and the prefix *inter-* to in-betweenness, the term *interpres* and its English derivative "interpreter" reinforce the idea of inbetweenness by a kind of doubling of the idea. An interpreter is in between his or her interlocutor and the noninterpreted phenomenon–whether something not a human creation such as a bank of red clouds at sunset, or something that is a human creation, such as a gesture or, paradigmatically, as has been explained earlier, a verbal utterance. Ultimately, meaning is not assigned but negotiated, and out of a holistic situation in the human life world: the speaker or writer in a given situation, which is shared by speaker and hearer in oral communication, but in written communication is generally not shared.

Interpretation as an activity that inhabits or suffuses the oral world and interpretation as an activity that is applied to texts relate to one another in

many ways beyond those specified here. All that these reflections undertake to do is to suggest some of the differences in ground between interpretation in a purely oral world and textual hermeneutics.

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