

T I N A H A M R I N

Eric Hermelin and Mystical Hermeneutics

Interpretation beyond itself

Eric Hermelin (1860–1944) translated more than 10.000 pages Persian Sufi poetry, German texts by Jakob Böhme and Latin texts by Emmanuel Swedenborg, while locked up in a mental hospital for thirty-three years. Hermelin belonged to the Swedish nobility, but he always hated aristocratic pride. At the university in Uppsala, he felt a loathing for any toady student looking up to noblemen. As a student, and all the time until he was interned at St. Lars Hospital, he lived the life of a debauchee.

He got on the wrong side of conventional society and fell out with his father. Then he decided to keep himself to himself, to keep aloof and emigrate to the United States. This happened in 1883. In the land of dreams he thought he would find happiness, instead he found syphilis. Sick and drunk Hermelin met a traveling preacher, who had been a commissioned officer during the Civil War, fighting for the Federals. This man, Leander Whitcomb Munhall, gave Hermelin a new world view that led to another self-understanding. Munhall taught the twenty years younger Hermelin the importance of humor when trying to be radical, and Munhall demonstrated a radicalism in which irony was a means to repudiate ecclesiastical élitist concentration of power and to dissociate oneself from institutionalized church matters. Thanks to Munhall, the importance of the written word became clear to Hermelin, and the concept of emptiness became central. Also, it was pointed out that a necessity for happy living was to get rid of all ego-based wishes (Ekerwald 1976: 23–24). In 1885 Hermelin went through some severe religious crises, he drank a lot and he was in bad shape because of his venereal disease. Following Munhall, Hermelin became a soldier, but he was dismissed after seven months; his syphilis made life very difficult for him. Hermelin went to Germany to rest, there he became better and in 1886 he de-

cided to be enrolled for military service again. This time he went to England and signed on with The Middlesex Regiment, a contract for twelve years. In 1887 he was transferred to a battalion in India. To pay homage to his sheikh Rev. Munhall he called himself Hallan. According to Ekerwald, India was a success since it was so awful: his syphilis blazed up, he got the typhoid fever as well as malaria, dysentery twice, and the d.t.'s (delirium tremens). Out of five years in India he spent two years in prison. Hermelin was brought back to England as a prisoner, the judgment was "conduct very bad", and he was fired in 1893. Then he took himself off and went to The United States, Jamaica and Australia, where he was put in prison because of theft. Hermelin returned to Sweden in 1908, was immediately put in a hospital in Stockholm, and then in 1909 he was hospitalized in the south of Sweden for the rest of his life (Ekerwald 1976: 25-26).

I have concentrated on the ontology which is written in the margins, in occasional excursions which interrupt the poems being translated, and in the comments found in unpublished papers and in letters presented by Per-Erik Lindahl and Carl-Göran Ekerwald. Besides this, the stories told by Olle Hjerm who's grandfather was a very good friend of Joseph Hermelin, the brother of Eric Hermelin, have been very helpful.

The chosen Persian poetry and the way Hermelin translated it illustrates an abstract ontology with a concrete example, while the margin invites the reader to a psychological, phenomenological case study (cf. Hussain Azad 1921; Mahmud 1926; Omar Khayyam 1928; Sana'i 1928, Attar 1929a, Attar 1929b, Attar 1931-43, Firdawi 1931, Niami Gandjavi 1933; Rumi 1933-39, Kalila wa-Dimna 1942). Reflections in the margin come with the understanding of the text being translated, it is the task set for Hermelin to persevere in time, to stay with the flux, to produce his identity as an effect. And this ultimately is a religious task.

When we think of something as "method", we pull it back into the orbit of those traditional concepts and categories which have organized the discourse of Western reason from the time of its ancient Greek inception. When it comes to hermeneutics, I lean towards a generalized idea of that activity, an idea assumed to comprehend all its differences of local application. Here, in this paper, I see hermeneutics as pilgrimage. The translation work of Persian Sufi poetry itself became a form of ritual practice in the hospitalized world of Eric Hermelin. Literally and symbolically, through the texts he translated, Hermelin made several journeys to a sacred center inside him. Hermelin's pilgrimage through interpretation was a way to act

out, and it gave him a new perception of the elusive 'self' and gave him a chance to affirm his religious identity.

Hermelin went deep and far beyond the text itself, and he often found internal conflicts since he did not simply cast an aesthete's glance over the material he interpreted. Hermelin's reading was intertextual since he saw 'a meaning' in one text through glasses dyed by another text. The translation of Hermelin is interrogating and reflects upon itself in an original manner. In this case, the translation process, the activity of reading, seems to be irreducible to concept or method. Generally, Hermelin was mixing exposition and critique with the text by Rumi itself, presented through detailed close-reading. The personality of the translator constantly shines through. Hermelin's vagabond-solitude never allowed itself to be captured or covered over by convention and 'musts'. As a translator he was engaged in a theatrical re-animation of the textual space of Rumi's passion. He often identified himself with the Persian Sufi poet, but his recreation when following a text was in accord with the meaning *he* found in it. "The truth of works of art is a contingent one: what they reveal is dependent on the lives, circumstances and views of the audience to whom they reveal it" (Warnke 1987: 66). According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the integration of one's understanding of a text with its relevance to one's own circumstances, a kind of mediation of meaning with one's specific situation, by Gadamer called a "fusion of horizons", is what an aesthetic experience involves (Gadamer 1975). It was in the light of his own concerns that Hermelin interpreted Rumi's poetry. Between Rumi and Hermelin, whatever the distance or differences may be, the boundary appears uncertain. It is permeable. When I read Rumi through Hermelin, the boundary between them is crossed now and then, not only for there to be analysis at all but also for Hermelin's behavior to be understood. Hermelin was very influenced by the texts he translated. Because of Hermelin's comments in the margin, Rumi's *Mesnavi*, in the Swedish version, has multiple levels of meaning. In Hermelin's work there are four hermeneutic models to be found. Through his translation we have a reconstruction, there is also an interactive interpretation, and beyond this an aesthetic reception. But above them all, an inward exegesis is observable, here called mystical hermeneutics. In the shape of words, Hermelin lets all the phenomena in the world of Rumi pass by, without being interpreted through an objective system, but being filtered through the heart and mind of Hermelin.

He distinguished clearly between the concept of the poem and the concept of the text. When the poetical work he was translating went as a text to his mind, to the philologist inside him, the poem went

straight to the rest of his body. Escaping from the mental hospital in Lund, in the south of Sweden, getting drunk while mingling with whores in Copenhagen, he gave life to the poems of Rumi, very much in a religious way, thanks to Jacob Böhme and Swedenborg. Hermelin carried his Bible with him and as partly Swedenborgian he believed that the Bible, expressing the divine mind, in some sense *was* God. When Hermelin broke through and established contact with reality, with nothingness, he felt flooded with light. But many times he fell into an abyss where all the conceptions he had devised about God collapsed. It was the God of Böhme and Rumi and Swedenborg who refused to submit to human nonsense.

In what way did his hermeneutical work transform his self-understanding? Well, he tried to find an interpretation that could both make sense out of the individual parts of *Mesnavi* and integrate them into a consistent whole, a picture of God and his creation, as he knew it all from Böhme, Swedenborg and the Bible.

The hermeneutics of Hermelin, the pilgrimage, brought forth the concept of nothingness. The starting point here is a text by Jacob Böhme, *Det öfversinnliga Lifvet*, about the life transcending the senses that Hermelin already in 1912 dedicated to his father (Lindahl 1976: 154).

To reach nothingness, free from the ego, from himself Hermelin, was his wish. What are these mystical insights, given to him through Böhme, who wrote: "In yes and no all things consist"? The nothingness of Hermelin was a state of the beyond. In his world with Rumi there were no judgmental relations left with regard to the outside world, hence neither yes or no. It was the indefinable, incomprehensible nothingness which, at the same time, is everything. The mystical experiences on the basis of which he described God as an *Unggrund* — a bottomless abyss from which the Trinity and the universe emerge, was inherited from Böhme. To the creative Hermelin the words of Böhme had a liberating effect. According to Hermelin, to arrive at God through the deepest internal birth, meant that faith should not be bestowed from without by a legend or theory — it should be cultivated from within. In this internal rebirth he saw God directly and believed in God, and at the same time he found his true life and felt infinite power. In Böhme's words *Stille ohne Wesen*, 'the stillness without anything', Hermelin stood still with God. When seen from one angle, God's spirit was unknowable; when seen from another, it was closely connected with Hermelin's spirit. At the base of this unity of consciousness he made direct contact with the face of God. Hermelin learned from Böhme that heaven is everywhere: wherever one stands or goes is heaven, and it is through the deepest

inner life that one arrives at God (*Morgenröte*). He learned about the unity of consciousness and its content. The God prior to revelation — an objectless will — reflects on Godself, that is, makes Godself a mirror; therefore, subjectivity and objectivity are separated and God and the world develop. The content of consciousness is established by unity, and there is no unity apart from the content of consciousness — they are not two separate things, but rather the two sides of a single reality. Hermelin thought about good and evil, not until they were reflected on were they separated. The will without an object (*Wille ohne Gegenstand*), in other words God, must have been both good and evil. In direct experience all phenomena of consciousness are one activity. By making this single activity the object of knowledge and reflecting upon it, the content is analyzed and distinguished in a variety of ways. In the process of this development, the whole at first appears spontaneously as one activity and then, through contradictions and conflicts, its content is reflected upon and discriminated (cf. Böhme 1918a; Böhme 1918b; Böhme 1920).

In Persian Sufi poetry Hermelin felt what his mind dressed in words. The state of non-ego was the goal of his mystical hermeneutics. At the very instant he lost himself, he was totally immersed in attention. Then the division between ego and the world was suddenly removed. It made no difference whether he said: I am outside with the objects, or the objects are within me. What mattered was that he no longer experienced his attention as a function of his embodied ego. The attention was lifted out of the space-time coordinates, whose intersection was his ego: oblivious of space, time and self. Böhme tried to mediate his revelations, and Hermelin tried to become a spiritual midwife through his translations. His life was constantly a life-and-death struggle. The intensity of that present, when he put his life at stake, was without beginning and without end, and it could vanish only because he vanished from it. Attention ceased when he was driven back into his subject-being; then all the dichotomies were back again: The self and the rest, a specific space and a specific time. Once his empirical ego had repossessed him, he could firmly anchor that 'instant of attention' in the moorings of his individuality, his time of life, his location, and he had lost what had lent that instant its inexchangeability — its nowhere and nowhen. That kind of attention must have ceased if he could ascribe it to a place and to a time. He had once more sunk back into individuation, or surfaced to it, whichever way one looks at it. Undoubtedly the ego-less state is a kind of ecstasy, a crystalline ecstasy of clarity and immobility, a euphoria of the eye which, from a surfeit of being able to see, loses sight of the objects.

The terrifying moment of sexual intermingling is also a transcendence of the boundary, when time and space disappear for the lover. It was another kind of dealing with the breathtaking beyond, to which Hermelin was carried by the pleasures of his body. As the senses took over consciousness disappeared. This encountering, this plunge into a flood of desire while Hermelin was carried away by the body to experience self-dissolution in orgiastic sensuality, was overwhelming. Then the body was not abandoned but magnified into the world body. Here, too, an ego disappeared by surrendering to the non-ego-like powers of urges. According to Böhme, the bodily actions will not defile the soul, the pure part within striving towards egolessness in the name of God. And in the texts by Rumi bodily actions are nothing but metaphors for a non-ego state in God.

The hermeneutics of Hermelin are mystical. His understanding of a Sufi text is not mediated by tradition; rather, his understanding of tradition is mediated by his experience of the text. Mystical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of experience. Probably experience as Hermelin conceived it subsumed the subject, who cannot be thought of as a self-possessed, self-contained agent. It remains the case that what this experience wins for the individual is something like a free interpretive space, where one is able to abide with the text in what amounts to a condition of personal intimacy. To Hermelin, the point is simply to open up a place of intimacy, an intimate dwelling place with Persian Sufi poetry. Hermeneutics in this instance is a form of life. Hermelin's task was not the unveiling of the meaning of a certain Sufi text that he translated — since he saw the poetry of Rumi as wide open, as open secrets — but meditation throughout his life upon what the text disclosed (cf. Bruns 1992: 124–136). The connection between text and note is often purely mystical and can be understood only from his philosophy. To the reader, some explanations are to be found in the “lifework” Hermelin created when the Swedenborgian teaching of influxus was being compared with certain expositions by Böhme (Lindahl 1976: 168–187).

Hermelin's work can be seen as a display of nonostensive references: the display of a world that is no longer the surrounding world, the projection of a world that is more than a situation. The hermeneutics of Hermelin shows personal commitment, he grasps the depth semantics of the text and makes it his own. Does this not introduce all the paradoxes of the hermeneutical circle? When trying to understand the hermeneutics of Hermelin, the margin of translated texts, understanding is entirely mediated by the whole of the explanatory procedures that precede it and accompany it. It is the life style of Hermelin in the footsteps of Böhme and other mystics. The

counterpart of this personal appropriation is not something that can be felt, it is the dynamic meaning released by the explanation which can be identified with the footnotes of a translated Sufi text, that is, its power of disclosing a world. Since the correlation between explanation and understanding, between understanding and explanation, is the hermeneutical circle, with personal commitment text interpretation necessary has a paradigmatic character. Therefore, the hermeneutical circle remains an insuperable structure of knowledge when it is applied to human things.

The mystical hermeneutics of Hermelin includes both outward and inward text interpretations. In external his understanding of a text is mediated by words and meanings, both of the Sufi poetry and of what has been handed down in tradition, whereas inward interpretation meant that he saw what the text said. With clear eyes he saw God's speech in the text, he did not just understand what the text said but he saw it, he knew it by experience. His understanding of Sufi poetry became a condition for understanding God's creation. The mystical experience of the text was not an event that was to be set apart from his life. The hermeneutical task entailed a return from the experience of text to the social world of argument, as if to bring even the most remote periphery of the secular world within the experience of divine intimacy (cf. Bruns 1992: 124–136).

According to the literature Hermelin translated, Böhme, Swedenborg and Rumi experienced moments devoid of subject-object that involved no awareness of either the self or another. Experiences phenomenologically and specifically of the individual God. Perhaps the experience, when Böhme and Rumi who stood face-to-face with God through revelation and Hermelin met God through intoxication, were phenomenologically indistinguishable in that they involved the same kind of nothingness, the same kind of light, and the same closedown of consciousness amid the sparkle and roar of perceptual confusion?

Conclusion

In Hermelin's case, an interaction between the self and features of a text as 'other' set in motion certain strategies on the part of his conscious self. Patterns of desire on the part of Hermelin's self gave rise to strategies of self-protection and concealment, and thus to overdetermination of meaning. Multiple meaning-effects emerged which were attributed to conflicts, ambiguities, and overlapping causes within the self of Hermelin. The active operation of these defensive strategies can be seen as transactions between the self and the other.

In the translation process Hermelin shaped his strategies and perceptions in ways which served their patterns of desire, and what they constructed reflected and served their own unique identity. Added up, the devices which constitute strategies of reading set in motion by the self's defense of its identity are: Defenses, Expectations, Fantasies, and Transformations. Hermelin's mystical hermeneutics produced not only understanding of texts, but often no less produced an increased awareness, with appropriate hermeneutical sensitivity, of self-perception and self-identity. A self-awareness and a strengthening of an individual and corporate identity as one who has a stake in the texts and that to which they bear witness constitutes an important reader-effect in this case of Sufi poetry.

But without any principle of suspicion, in Gadamer's terminology a premature fusion of horizons will take place before Hermelin has listened in openness with respect for the tension between the horizons of the text and the horizon of Hermelin. The textual horizon has collapsed into that of Hermelin's narrative biography, and is unable to do more than to speak back his own values and desires. Something socio-pragmatical was after all woven into the controversial *bon vivant*, when he used literary works to replicate himself. At the same time, the texts spoke from beyond the self.

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