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HERMENEUTICS AS A LITERARY THEORY AND A THEORY OF INTERPRETATION IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The triumph of the sciences since the 19th century did startle the Humanities so much that scholars in this discipline began to apply aspects of positivism in their problem discoveries and search for solutions. There was therefore a renewed search for what is scientific in the Humanities. Our attention centers also on the offshoots of the Hermeneutics such as the formalism, explication de texte, new criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, semiotics and de-construction. This paper is therefore a call for a renewed interest in the pure text-immanent interpretation.

Key words: *hermeneutics, interpretation theory, explication de texte.*

1. Introduction

Theories of language, linguistic and non linguistic communication are diverse. In the Humanities there are so many interpretative tools. These tools are means to an end and not the end in themselves. Just as we have equations in the natural sciences so do we have theoretical frameworks, literary criticisms and approaches to literature and the communication arts in the Humanities. These interpretative tools are keys to opening and analyzing works in the Humanities and other disciplines. Most of these theories are borrowed from other disciplines other than the ones exploiting them. In the literary sciences, rooms are given for inter-textual interpretations as well as for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Hence one could analyze a given fiction, drama or poem using one or more approaches as the case may be. At the primary and secondary school level, essays are simply written and novels are simply read and interpreted by simple minds. But at the tertiary educational level, one would expect the reader, the critic or the recipient to be thorough, analytical and scientific in his appraisal of the text before him. In receptions-theory the analytical mind is not left empty handed in this art of researching on or beyond the text. For one to access these tools effectively one must be equipped with literary terms. Interpretative tools are legion. Some are text-centered and linguistic and others are extra-textual and non linguistic. Hermeneutics and the sister theoretical frameworks like the positivism, formalism, explication de texte, New Criticism, Structuralism, post-structuralism, Semiotics, de-construction etc are text-centered interpretative tools while the society based theories like Marxist-socialism, psycho-analytic theory, feminism, receptions-theory, racial theory, cultural and intercultural studies, Literature and the media, literature and history, literature and biography etc fall under the beyond textual interpretative approaches. Our interest in this

exercise is on the raw textual analytic approach. Many students usually prefer the easier approaches which are mostly society based and abhor the dry and puritanist approaches. This paper is aimed at introducing the audience to the rigors of scientific approaches to the study of texts, images and languages.

2. Hermeneutics

This is the study of the theory and methodology of interpretation. When it has to do with theology and the Scripture, it deals with the science of interpretation, and particularly of biblical exegesis. Generally, traditional hermeneutics is the science of interpretation of texts in the fields of law, religion and literature. Hermeneutics covers all versions of interpretative process of written verbal and non-verbal communications. Etymologically the word hermeneutics stems from the Greek – hermeneutike and it dates back to Hermes the Greek mythological deity who serves as a go-between among gods and between gods and human beings (Allkemper/Otto Eke (2004:15b)).

Aristotle introduced it into philosophy through his work (*Peri Hermeneias* – *De interpretatione* (Latin); *on interpretation* (English)). It dates back to 360 B.C. and handled the relationship between language and logic. Klein (2000:344). Hegel and Kant amongst others excelled in philosophical hermeneutics, even as Dithley emphasized romantic Hermeneutics. Allkemper/Otto Eke (2004:156) attempts some definition of Hermeneutics and trace the earliest origins and usage thus:

Auslegen, Deuten, Interpretieren – So lässt sich das griechische Wort “hermeneuein” umschreiben. Hermes, ein umtriebiger griechischer Gott, ist der Bote der Götter, der den sterblichen Menschen den Willen der Unsterblichen übersetzt, in ihrer Sprache auslegt, ein Vermittler zwischen zwei Welten, die sich anscheinend ohne Vermittlung nicht verstehen können oder wollen. Die Hermeneutik befasst sich daher mit dem Verstehen und Auslegen von Texten. Hermeneutische Überlegungen werden dann nötig, und das zeigen bereits die Anfänge der Hermeneutik, wenn das Verstehen problematisch wird. Das gilt in der griechischen Antike für die Texte Homers dessen Gottesmythen besweifelt wurden und deshalb uminterpretiert werden mussten zu philosophischen Prinzipien oder zu moralischen Tugenden; und das gilt ebenso für die biblischen Schriften des Alten Testaments als Voraussetzung für das Neue Testament interpretiert werden.

Hermes is reputed to be the deity who ferries the dead to the underworld. Since his mediatory role is between the seen and the unseen he had to originate signs and symbols so as to get the two strange worlds embrace each other. Some schools have therefore ascribed the art of Language and Speech invention to Hermes, who equally has been a reputable liar, trick star, interpreter and a thief. Hermes exploited namely the ignorant condition of his recipients.

Socrates became interested in the ambiguity of language which can be used for falsehood and for truth. He analyzed the ability of the transmitter, nay the translator or interpreter to manipulate the ambiguity of his unintelligible message for his selfish purposes (Grondin 1994:21). Grondin notes that the original usage of the term hermeneutics was rooted in the sense of the sacred. The deity transmitting the divine message got it shrouded in mystery and uncertainty; there is no logic, no reasoning. Everything is veiled in ambiguity

and irrationality. The recipient is simply visited with madness, and the only healer of this ailment remains the hermeneutic, the possessor of a rational and intelligible method of breaking down and untying these knot so as to restore the sanity of the receiver. Hence Schleiermacher sees interpretation (hermeneutics) as the act of dodging misunderstanding and this act is psychologically oriented. He is reputed to be the father of modern hermeneutics. Modern Hermeneutics is also enlightened and psychological in nature. Dithley took the romantic and structural angle of Hermeneutics and sees such an approach as a means of understanding other cultures and bettering ones horizon of the given passage and the verbal and non verbal communication of the author or artist.

3. Theory of Interpretation

Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* lays the foundation for our modern day theories of semiotics and interpretation. He sets the ball of modern science of interpretation rolling when he observed in *on Interpretation* (1:1634) that:

Words spoken are symbols or signs (*Symbola*) of affections or impressions (*pathemata*) of the Soul (*psyche*); written words are the signs of words spoken.

As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men.

But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs (*semeia*), are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects (*pragmata*) of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies (*homoiomata*).

Hermeneutics evolved from the Greek to the Scriptures. The Protestant Reformation broke the period of silence with the entry of Luther and Calvin. Hermeneutics, especially Protestants began to view the Scriptures as secular texts. Here therefore one could distinguish the following manners of interpreting scriptures:

- (a) *Sensus historicus* (literal sense) – literal Sense;
- (b) *Sensus allegoricus* (allegorical sense) – symbolic sense;
- (c) *Sensus tropologicus/Sensus moralis* (the moral application of the passage to the hearer or reader);
- (d) *he Sensus anagogicus* (the gnosis or secret metaphysical undertones).

In a word one can delineate between the two major Corpus of exegesis: the *Sensus literalis* and the *Sensus mysticus*. These usages were exploited by the Church Fathers during the Patristic era (Allkemper/Otto Eke, 2004:156–157):

Die Kirchenväter des 2 und 3. Jahrhunderts entwickelten hierzu die Lehre vom mehrfachen Schriftsinn: der Wort-und Literalsinn bezeichnet die Tatsache (z.B. die Stadt Jerusalem); der figuralische oder allegorische Sinn interpretiert die Stadt Jerusalem als Kirche, der moralische Sinn deutet Jerusalem als menschliche Seele, die sich moralisch richtig verhalten soll; der anagogische Sinn Jerusalem als himmlisches Jerusalem, als Paradies der Seligen. Die Willkürlichkeit dieser Zuordnungen und Bedeutungszuschreibungen wird legitimiert durch eine göttlich autorisierte Auslegungsinstanz: die kirchliche Autorität.

4. Hermeneutics in the Humanities and the Literary Sciences

The exploits of Science in the late 19th century changed the way humanity understands the natural world. The hitherto explanation and

interpretation of the natural world that was based on faith, speculation, myth and opinion had metamorphosed to demonstrable facts and data. Natural Science so triumphed over literature and the humanities that the latter was seen as the leper in Western Education. This uncomfortable condition of the humanities forced many scholars to launch literary study into a rigorously based and logically deductible discipline. The study of literature began to lay greatest emphasis on research into facts such as the textual history of a literary piece, the authorship and the historicity of the literal text. The Germans for instance began to see literary study as a science proper – *Literaturwissenschaft*. Literary studies mounted in this way the stage of scientific scholarship. Apart from looking at imagery, plot, setting, character, point of view, one should go a step further by analyzing form (structure) and seeing the form and language of every literary work as being unique. The French *l'art pour l'art* - *explication de texte*, the German *Werkimmanenz*, the American close Reading and New Criticism and Russian formalism were various forms of healthy competitions in this modern way of doing literature. Just like in natural science, literary studies became a technically complex exercise; became dry and a highly disciplined text-concentrated exercise. Many scholars see any attempt to look beyond the text as mere distraction. There is preference for a close focus on the complexities of meaning that are loaded on the text of a literary work (Westermann, 1993:31). In all these exercises, the prevailing word is interpretation. Interpretation in this context becomes a methodical and rigorous analysis of a written or verbal communication. This rigor should even tower above the creator or author of the given work. The set standards of gauging a work should in all objectivity be applied on a given work. This is what Kant meant when he noted: it is possible to understand an author even better than he understands himself (Diemer/Frenzel, 1967:98):

Wenn Kant bemerkte, dass es moeglich sei, einen Autor "besser zu verstehen, als er sich selbst verstand" (Kr.d.r.v. B370), so deutete er u.a. gerade dies an, dass man einen Text auch ueber das, was der Schoepfer dabei gedacht und gewollt habe, hinausschliessend interpretieren koenne.

The art of looking at the text eyeball to eyeball and dissecting it for the purpose of comprehension requires a lot of academic discipline and thorough. It also frees the critic from undue flirting with the socio-political alignments of the world around him. Von Volker Meid (1999:253) drawing his lesson from the history of the post war German Studies and the *Werkimmanenz*-Interpretation (close Reading) explains the literary Interpretation thus:

Voraussetzungsfrein Zugang zum sprachlichen Kunstwerk , also das Werk immanent, aus sich heraus, in Hinblick auf die Jedem Text eigene Stimmigkeit zu interpretaieren.

The interpreter armed with intensive reading concentrates on the structure of the text rather than on the content because the latter is beyond – literary sphere "Ausserliterarisches" (Stadler/Dickopt, 1992:41). In this way the goal of interpreting is to fathom that which is unfathomable to us. Ziel des Interpreten ist es, so formulerte es Staiger, das zu begreifen, was ihn zuvor ergriffen habe (Von Volker Meid 1999:253–254).

5. General Application of the theory of Hermeneutics

The principles of the Hermeneutics are sine qua non in virtually all known modern fields of human endeavours. It has been proved by scholars that studies in Archaeology, Architecture, Political Science, International Relations, law, Safety Science, Psychology, Marketing, Sociology, Mass Media, Information Technology, Religion and Theology are suffused with aspects of hermeneutic interpretative processes. The scientific revolution and the exigencies of the information super highway have necessitated the approach to accuracy, thorough, close-reading, mathematical precision and minute detailed analysis of data, images, verbal and non verbal communication as well polls, surveys, signs, symbols, designs, figures, contexts, mimicks and gestures that one can hardly evade some form of hermeneutical application or the other. Hence Stolze (1994:183) sees modern Hermeneutics as a translational, explanatory, analytical and interpretative tool between one sphere of world's discipline and the door:

Die Hermeneutik reflektiert den Umgang des Uebersetzers mit Welt, Sprache und Texten. Mitteilungen werden von den Ausgangssprachlichen Zeichen losgeloest und in neuer Gestalt zielsprachlich formuliert. Uebersetzungstexte sind uebersummative, multiperspektivische Ganzheiten, die zuerst verstanden werden muessen, bevor eine Uebersetzung formuliert wird. Die Uebersetzungsloesungen koennen dann anhand der translatorischen Kategorien begruendet werden.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing we have tried to introduce the reader to the core scientific tone of the Humanities and particularly of the literary sciences. Without prejudice to the other fields of theories of literature, as well as the in roads made by Wellek and Warren on literature and the society, we have attempted in this work to initiate the literary student to the regions of the interpretative levels of the science of Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics opened the way to textual interpretation and others followed: positivism, structuralism, close Reading, New criticism, Explication de Texte, Post-Structuralism, formalism, Deconstruction, Werkinmmanenz and so on. While we appreciate the use of the other methodologies and theories of literary sciences like the feminist psychoanalytic, Marxist-socialist theories, etc, we are happily showcasing the merits of the rigours of the interpretative approaches. Our study is also tailored to be of benefit to graduates and post graduates in all disciplines.

7. Possible Findings

Our findings show that part of the socio-political miasma and dead-end in Africa in particular and the developing world in general may be linked to her lack of adequate patronage of the Discipline and thorough of the hermeneutic interpretative approach. Unalloyed and text-centred close reading and analysis may be a good training in disciple and responsibility. Most post independent African leaders in different spheres of administration were not illiterates; many were graduates and post graduates from tertiary institutions. If they had applied the rigor, the discipline and the precision that are associated with their training to their jobs, African nations would not have been so miserable almost a century

after their encounter with Euro-American civilization. But many of those graduates had preferred to apply the so called Post colonial literary approaches which ushered in political and social engagement into most discipline (Orjinta:2008). The usual argument was that the African post colonial writer nay scholar could not afford the luxury of l'art pour l'art (puritanist New Criticism, Werk-Immanente-Ansaetze, Explication de Texte, Formalism, Close-Reading). They had argued that their background of Slavery, Colonialism, and perpetual Imperialism forced them to use their works and scholarship to champion the cause of liberating their people first (Orjinta: 2012). This argument carried some water. Today it is high time the African Scholar retraced her step and sees himself as the last hope of the deplorable African continent. There is a serious missing link in communication between the recipients and the artists even though the African artists are claiming that they are the mouthpiece of the masses. Once tried on the saddle as incumbents, they began to sing other tones. They and the masses began to speak and read each other at cross purposes.

Abhorrence of the application of modern hermeneutic theoretical approaches in our research and the preference for the society based frameworks may also be the cause of our distractions even in the day to day administrative and academic life. We hardly handle issues. We prefer to handle persons and their private life. Many a time one finds it difficult to face the issue at state, or to take responsibility for what is at state. One prefers to bring in distractions and flight routes from the issue at stake by the so called it is because of this or that. The administrator can no longer take administrative decisions lest he be maliciously accused of taking such a decision because of this or that. The question that may be asked is if this it is because of this or that flight from the issue at stake or flight from the reality has some link to our flight from the Text and its analytical, rigorous, and close appreciation as the Hermeneutics and its related approaches would enjoin?

Next, there has to be some order in the head before one can bring some order in the environment and governance. The whole issue about bribery and corruption as well as terrorism (Al Kaida, Boko Haram) may also be explained in like manner; are there no disorder somewhere in the head, intellect or psyche in the celebrated African cases in Uganda of Idi Amin, Rwanda/Burundi of the Genocide, Central African Republic of Emperor Bokassa, Nigeria of the military juntas and the Boko Haram, Liberia of the Samuel Doe and Charles Tailor, Sierra Leone of the enfant soldiers? Logic, precision, analysis, close reading and proper interpretation of events, time and intersubjectivity as enshrined in the impacted hermeneutic principles may assist humanity to come to terms with orderliness and better understanding.

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Ікечукву Алоїзій Оржінта. Герменевтика як теорія літератури та теорія інтерпретації у ХХ ст.

Тріумф науки, починаючи з ХІХ ст., вплинув на гуманітарні науки настільки, що вчені в цій дисципліні почали застосовувати аспекти позитивізму в дослідженнях своїх завдань і пошуку рішень. Тому знову почався пошук того, що є наукового в галузі гуманітарних наук. Наша увага зосереджена також на відгалуженнях герменевтики, таких як: формалізм, пояснення текстів, новий критицизм, структуралізм, постструктуралізм, семиотика та деконструкція. Запропонована стаття головним чином закликає до відновлення інтересу до чистої іманентної інтерпретації тексту.

Ключові слова: герменевтика, теорія інтерпретації, пояснення текстів.

Ікечукву Алоизий Оржинта. Герменевтика как теория литературы и теория интерпретации в ХХ в.

Триумф науки, начиная с ХІХ в., оказал влияние на гуманитарные науки настолько, что ученые в данной дисциплине начали применять аспекты позитивизма в исследованиях своих задач и поиске решений. Поэтому снова начался поиск того, что же является научным в области гуманитарных наук. Наше внимание сосредоточено также на ответвлениях герменевтики, таких как: формализм, разъяснение текстов, новый критицизм, структурализм, постструктурализм, семиотика и деконструкция. Данная статья, главным образом, призывает к возобновлению интереса к чистой имманентной интерпретации текста.

Ключевые слова: герменевтика, теория интерпретации, разъяснение текстов.