

THE LOGIC OF INTERPRETATION IN DAVID BLEICH'S CRITICISM

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Ключевые слова: интерпретация, процесс интерпретации, переосмысление символов, восприятие, сознание, субъективный отклик.

The term "interpretation" and different aspects of the interpretive processes are under discussion in the article. The author treats interpretation as a means of producing helpful knowledge in different spheres of man's activity.

Рассматриваются понятие и термин «интерпретация», а также различные аспекты интерпретационной деятельности. Исследуется процесс интерпретации как средство создания нового знания в различных сферах человеческой деятельности.

The term "interpretation" mostly refers to an act of linguistic explanation of a literary work, and producing a new piece of knowledge. The interpreting community, and each of its members enhance their understanding of their own experience and thereby improve their own adaptive capability while interpreting something. Evidently, interpretation has this adaptive communal function.

This formulation, in the author's opinion, may be applied to even the oldest types of interpretation, such as astrology and prophecy. The interpreter's role was to enlighten others about experiences generally thought of as obscure or mysterious. Any anomaly of human experience is susceptible to interpretive treatment. The basic facts of life and death have always occupied the forefront of interpretive activity. Interpretation has consistently been the first and fundamental means of coping with the unsettling disharmonies of experience. It is almost as deeply rooted in phylogenetic behaviour as speech, and it is a natural consequence of speech.

Interpretation has not always had the same level of authority as a path to knowledge.

In contemporary times, verbal interpretation has had less authority than mathematical interpretation. As a matter of fact, science, in everybody's opinion, is knowledge, and interpretation is only opinion. But in clinical psychology, starting with Freud, interpretive knowledge is as scientifically authoritative as any other knowledge. Bleich argues that quantitative knowledge rests on acts of interpretation and the interpretation, in turn, is dependent on the motivational character of language.

But if we should understand interpretation as a new systematic means of producing helpful knowledge, there should be a communal motive for believing in this means. Otherwise, there would be no point in setting any greater importance to interpretation now than it was in the past.

Freud's faith in the authority of interpretation came about mainly from his success in interpreting dreams. His interpretation of other forms of behaviour was founded on his interpretation of dreams. His claim was simply that dreams are caused by wishes and that these wishes may be discovered by examining the dream in connection with the dreamer's free-associative thoughts given immediately after reporting the dream. The dream itself disguises the wish because, as a rule, it would disturb the sleep of the dreamer to experience the wish directly in the dream. The appeal of this logic was that, for the first time, dream interpretation was not superstitious and was, on the contrary, visibly related to the overall functioning of the individual. A mysterious human experience was rendered comprehensible.

So, "the logic of interpretation is that its resymbolizing activity is motivated and organized by the conscious desires created by disharmonious feelings and/or self-images; the goal of these desires is increasing the individual's sense of psychological and social adaptability" [1, p. 84].

Instead of searching for the necessary cause of a patient's complaint or a person's particular dream, interpreter and dreamer try to reconstruct their perception and experience of the interpretive occasion and then find the context in which it ceases to be puzzling. Even though this conception of interpretation seems to violate certain commonsense notions of it, it is the only way to understand its functional efficacy without searching for proofs and objective causes that cannot exist in a form and on a scale on which a viable community of observers will agree. In the contemporary community of psychological thought, this point of view has already been broached, though it remains a minority opinion. The author analyzes two particular formulations that are of interest to him: Leon Levy's *Psychological Interpretation* (1963) and Samuel Novy's *The Second Look* (1967).

Levy begins with the idea that interpretation is the fundamental act of psychotherapy. His definition of interpretation, however, may describe almost any act of intellection: "Psychological interpretation, viewed as behavior, is engaged in whenever a state exists that seems refractory to other efforts at mitigation or understanding. In essence, it consists of bringing an alternate frame of reference, or language system, to bear upon a set of observations of behaviors, with the end in view of making them more amenable to manipulation" [3, p. 7]. He argues, that interpretation is the use of a new language system to conceptualize in an enlightening way a commonly agreed-upon experience. The definition presupposes

that an interpreter is called upon just because he speaks a different language. A person seeking interpretation of his behaviour is seeking an adequate language with which to think and speak to himself. Levy proposes that interpretive understanding amounts to the translation of disturbing experiences into a language that will better manage them. This formulation is consistent with the explanation of infantile language acquisition as a “translation” from sensorimotor language into the more adaptive conceptual language. The new languages acquired by infant and patient get their characteristic shapes, respectively, from negotiation with parent and therapist. In each case the change in systems of symbolization is dependent of the motives defining the influencing relationships.

This logic applies to the question of the applicability of alternative interpretations. Levy states that the making of one [interpretation] does not imply that any other one is untrue. The orientation and purpose are functions of the interpreter’s language system. A different system may also be applicable to the same interpretive occasion. The question of an interpretation’s correspondence with an objective situation is not relevant, since the situation is defined to begin with the community of, in this case, therapist and patient. Therefore, Levy observes, “the interpretation of an event is not a search for the true meaning of the event. Every event is subject to a vast range of interpretations. In psychological interpretation we apply the particular construction which we believe will best suit our purposes and which is consistent with the theoretical frame of reference we bring to the situation” [3, p. 7].

Samuel Novey’s treatise, like Levy’s, is oriented around the determining nature of the subjective present in interpretive situations. He says that a person’s life history as it appears in a therapeutic situation is already a product of the patient’s interpretation of his own memory. The participants in theory “get the view of prior events to be looked at again – not prior events as they happened, but today’s view of those events” [4, p. 10]. Interpretation is thus a resymbolization of the presentational form of the patient’s life history. This epistemological status of “the past” implies that the interpretive basis of any historical discipline is far greater than we nominally assume.

E. D. Hirsch Jr., in *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), argues with great care and precision that determination of the author’s meaning in a work of literature is not only admissible but is the only possible foundation for achieving valid interpretations.

Early in his study Hirsch allows the human basis of verbal meaning: “A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness. Whenever meaning is connected to words, a person is making the connection, and the particular meanings he lends to them are never

the only legitimate ones under the norms and conventions of his language” [2, p. 94]. He defines understanding as how a person constructs verbal meaning, while interpretation is the explanation of this meaning to someone else. Thus, the interpretation of a given sentence involves the explaining of a speaker’s meaning to you. In contrast to interpretation, there is another act, criticism, which is the explanation of a judgment. Just as understanding constructs meaning, judgment names significance, which is the relationship between meaning and anything else – for example, values or historical circumstances. The Hirsch’s treatise involves these two points: first, in order for the discipline of literary studies to make sense and avoid confusion, the distinction between meaning and significance has to be carefully maintained and followed; second, acts of interpretation can be validated by criteria which, in principle, all readers can accept. Thus, there are actually two branches in the literary discipline – the branch which proposes judgments of significance for public debate and the branch which defines the most valid interpretation of any given work or language sample.

Hirsch gives major authority to the author’s meaning because of his belief about language that follows from subjective considerations, namely, that verbal meaning is always constructed by a human mind. The meaning of a text was constructed by the author rather than the reader, so we should ground all interpretive processes on the determination of the author’s meaning. The problems begin because any procedure for recovering the author’s meaning is necessarily either personally or culturally subjective. Hirsch denies that his own procedure for recovering the meaning is subjective, but he says that genuine certainty in interpretation is impossible. The aim of the discipline must be to reach a consensus, on the basis of what is known, than correct understanding would probably be achieved. The most that Hirsch seeks is the probability of “correct understanding”, rather than certainty. Hirsch outlines certain sensible techniques that we normally use to determine obscure textual meanings. Ultimately, both the correctness of understanding and the probability of correctness rest on the consensus within the discipline. If this is so, the motives of the community of students are more decisive in determining correctness than this community’s objective perception of meaning.

The pragmatic effect of Hirsch’s grounding literary interpretation on the recovery of the author’s meaning is to devalue the act of interpretation. Interpretation is not a decoding or an analytical process; it is a synthesis of new meaning based on the assumption that the old shared meanings of words and works are not in question, but that the present perception of these meanings have created the experiential circumstances for resymbolization. In this way, the logic of interpretation excludes consideration of whether and how the author is communicating anything to us and explains, instead, the motives and processes developed by the interpreter on the interpretive occasion.

Literature is the locus for the organized cultivation of new language elements and habits. It has been traditionally conceived as play or amusement or art or nonsense, but these roles only contribute to its importance as a prime occasion for tangibly enlarging mental capacity and strength. Insofar as literature has been treated as a real object and criticism pursued as the local description of that object, the growth of language awareness is essentially inhibited. The decisive subjective action we all take with literature is subordinated, in educational practices and depressing cultural lethargy, to the dissemination of information and the moralistic, coercive demand to read carefully. To treat literature as a symbolic object is to shift our attention from acts of informational perception first to the perceptual initiatives we automatically take with a work, and then to the more deliberate conceptualizations we try to synthesize from these initiatives, concludes the author.

He has identified these latter conceptualizations as resymbolizations or the familiar act of interpretation. He argues that interpretation is an explanatory procedure, motivated by the first perceptual initiatives toward a symbolic object, and he identifies these initiatives as subjective response.

References

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