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Gadamer, Habermas and a Re-humanized Literary Scholarship

Summary

This paper speaks of an ongoing re-humanization of literary studies to which the work of Gadamer and Habermas can valuably contribute. True, these two thinkers themselves run the risk becoming the focus of commentaries that are aridly scholastic. True, too, they themselves tend to think of literature as an aesthetic heterocosm that is quite distinct from human communication in general. Yet human communication in general is something they certainly understand, and their profound insights into it can actually be applied to literature, in ways which they themselves have not envisaged. Especially relevant in Gadamer is his sense of the changes which can be brought about by communication, and his rehabilitation of common sense. In both Gadamer and Habermas, there is also a clear recognition of communicational dialogicality, and of communication's sheer possibility, even between human beings who are very differently placed. To this can be added Habermas's central insistence on ethical considerations – on human equality, on truthfulness, on trust, on fairness, on cooperativeness – as an integral dimension of communication at its most genuine. These insights can facilitate the discussion as illustrated with the writings of Dickens and T.S. Eliot.

Key words: philosophical hermeneutics; literary theory; literature as communication; mediating scholarship; Gadamer; Habermas; Dickens; T.S. Eliot

Gadamer, Habermas in ponovno počlovečenje literarne vede

Povzetek

Razprava govori predvsem o Habermasovih in Gadamerjevih dragocenih prispevkih k ponovnemu počlovečenju literarnih študij, s katerimi se oba misleca izpostavljata suhoparnim akademskim komentarjem. Prav tako oba pojmujeta književnost kot estetski heterokozmos, ki se bistveno razlikuje od splošne človeške komunikacije, ki pa jo razumeta tako nedvoumno, da je njuno globokoumno razmišljanje mogoče zvesti na književnost samo, in sicer v oblikah, ki jih sama niti nista predvidela. Pri Gadamerju je posebej relevanten njegov občutek za spremembe, ki jih prinaša komunikacija, in pa njegovo obujanje zdrave pameti. Poleg tega tako pri Gadamerju kot pri Habermasu obstaja jasno zavedanje komunikacijske dialoščnosti in možnosti komunikacije celo pri osebah v zelo različnih položajih. K temu je treba dodati Habermasovo poglobljeno vztrajanje pri etičnih predpostavkah – človeški enakosti, resnicoljubnosti, zaupanju, odkritosrčnosti, sodelovanju – kot nepogrešljivih sestavninah pristne človeške komunikacije. Njuni pogledi so ponazorjeni z deli Dickensa in T.S. Eliota.

Ključne besede: filozofska hermenevtika, literarna teorija, književnost kot komunikacija, posredovanje védenja, Gadamer in Habermas, Dickens in T.S. Eliot

Gadamer, Habermas and a Re-humanized Literary Scholarship

Huge generalizations about the state of scholarship should be taken with a pinch of salt, especially when they are self-congratulatory. But for what it is worth, my impression is that we literary scholars are now leaving some of our twentieth-century shortcomings well behind. During that century huge amounts of literary scholarship were being published, much of it faithfully carrying on the traditional tasks of editing, annotation, commentary and interpretation, and much of it wonderfully enriching. The long series of attempts to develop a theory of literature led to important new insights, and the sheer professionalization of literary studies brought enormous benefits, ranging from the steadily increasing wealth of bibliographical and other research tools to the rich variety of opportunities for discussion, whether at conferences, through scholarly networks, or in journals and periodicals. The downsides of twentieth-century literary scholarship were that literary theorizing sometimes distanced itself from actual literary texts, and from the human beings who actually write and read them, and that scholarly professionalism could all too easily lead to a publish-or-perish mentality, elitist jargon, and sheer over-specialization. Symptomatically, books on literature for the general educated reader were becoming something of a rarity. I touched on this dehumanizing scholasticism in an interview for *Sobodnost* in 2003, and elsewhere tried to suggest some remedies, most extensively in *Mediating Criticism: Literary Education Humanized* (2001). Judging from several publications and conference papers of the past two or three years, however, there is now a clear shift of emphasis. Especially noteworthy was Peter Barry's paper at the 2006 Conference of the European Society for the Study of English, in which he argued that it is time to go back to careful reading, and to a genuine effort of textual, co-textual, contextual and intertextual interpretation. It is against this encouraging background that I shall here try to suggest the possible relevance, for a re-humanized literary scholarship, of Gadamer and Habermas.

At first my suggestion may seem a complete non-starter. Gadamer and Habermas have published a fair number of books, some of them very fat, and in difficult language. That there are already extensive commentaries on them could seem to indicate a risk of more mere scholasticism. This possibility I must frankly acknowledge. But to the extent that the risk is real, I personally hope to avoid it by being as clear and concise as I can manage.

Literary scholars undaunted by the prospect of scholasticism may have another objection. Gadamer and Habermas are interested in interpersonal understanding and interpretation, whereas literature – well, *is* literature something to be understood and interpreted? Peter Barry thinks it is, and I do, too. But are Peter Barry and I right? Are understanding and interpretation the most appropriate modes to be applied to literature? Or are they the *only* modes, or just *two* of the modes? Do we have to understand and interpret literature first, before we can do anything else with it? Or do we understand and interpret it in parallel processing with some other activity? Or does understanding and interpretation come last? After all, some commentators do seem to have rationalized after the event – whatever the event was.

According to F.R. Leavis (1962), when readers turn to a literary work they are not looking for a line of argument, but for qualities of felt life and experience. Cleanth Brooks (1960)[1947], too, said that literary texts are fundamentally unparaphrasable. Oddly enough, though, a similar stance is to be found in Gadamer, who discusses literature under the category of the beautiful. A work of art, he says, has to be thought of *as* a work of art. It is not “the bearer of a message”. So he finds Hegel’s approach to art unsatisfactory, because it assumed that “everything that addresses us obscurely and non-conceptually in the particular sensuous language of art was to be recuperated by philosophy in the form of a concept” (Gadamer 1986, 33). Why, then, we might ask, does Gadamer himself write about art? – unless to say that he *cannot* write about it. About beauty, is there anything hermeneutical really to be said?

By perpetuating, as it would seem, a Kantian sense of aesthetic beauty, Gadamer is surely in danger of dehumanizing literature at least as much as twentieth-century literary formalists did. And surely his concept of the work of art as a classic could easily flip over into elitism. True, his point is not that the classic work establishes some kind of standard before which admirers must for ever afterwards bow and scrape. Instead, the classic for him is always the same, yet is also always different, depending on how it is freshly perceived by each new audience. The classic is not so much universal as deciduous, so to speak (cf. Weinsheimer 1991: 148). But in his thinking generally, Gadamer does place a very strong emphasis on tradition, of which the artistic and literary heritage is of course a part. Habermas has not been alone in thinking that this does leave an opening, at least, for authoritarianism.

But Habermas (1998)[1985] himself makes a sharp distinction between poetry and communication. Poetry, he says, is not communication but a heightening of rhetoric. In real communication, he continues, such heightening does not occur. In real communication, the role of rhetoric is much more subordinate.

How rhetoric, especially heightened rhetoric, can be anything but oriented to communication is difficult to see. But Habermas’s suggestion, so closely akin to the formalist New Critics’ disregard of authorial intention and impact on the reader, is typical enough of philosophical hermeneuticians, whose usual starting-point is a concern for ratiocination. Their interest is in meanings, interpretation, understanding, agreement, and disagreement. So they often think of language mainly as a medium for thoughts, for arguments, for ideas, and for real-world truths. They also go well beyond this, making crucial connections between language-use and real-world power. The central concept in Habermas (1984, 1987, 1998) is nothing less than “communicative action”. He sees communication as a *form* of action, and re-writes sociology entirely on this basis, as a *critical* sociology, which examines communicational pragmatics from precisely an ethical point of view. But as for literature, both Habermas and Gadamer think of it as an aesthetic heterocosm that is quite separate.

So on *literary* pragmatics they remain silent, and it is no surprise that they have nothing to say about the pragmatics of fiction. When Gadamer speaks of poetry’s aesthetic beauty and of the impossibility of recuperating art in the form of a concept, there may even be a distant echo of Plato’s grouse about

the poet as a liar. It is almost as if literary language could engage in no form of action apart from beauty-making and truth-telling, and as if these two activities were mutually exclusive.

A humanized literary scholarship must certainly acknowledge literature's full communicativity, it seems to me, in ways which Habermas and Gadamer have explicitly ruled out. My suggestion is, though, that we can apply to literature these two thinkers' most profound insights into communication in general, along lines which they themselves have not envisaged.

In what senses, exactly, is the interchange between a literary author and a reader the same as other kinds of communication? My own account, developed in *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (2000), runs as follows. When two parties are genuinely communicating, this is not a matter of a message being transmitted from an active sender to a more passive receiver, though – heaven knows! – much communication certainly is depressingly monologic. Genuine communication is more egalitarian, tending, as the term's own etymology suggests, to *make a community*. The two parties begin from within their two different positionalities – two life-worlds of experience-knowledge-beliefs-thoughts-values which only partly overlap with each other – and the process entered upon is essentially one of comparing notes about some third entity. This third entity can be either the communicants themselves (as when you and I can talk about you and me) or somebody or something quite unconnected with the communicants themselves, and it can also involve an element of hypotheticality or even fiction, as in jokes about celebrities, or as in most of the texts nowadays regarded as literary. Nor does what is said or written necessarily involve a paraphrasable argument. What goes on can have less to do with meanings than with feelings, attitudes, affect, and moral sensibility, so that any change to the status quo will begin as a change in the communicants' perceptions, feelings, or evaluations surrounding the real, hypothetical or fictional third entity under discussion. Seen this way, communicants, including readers of literature, inevitably lay themselves open to the possibility of mental and emotional re-adjustment, by which the overlap between the two different life-worlds will actually be increased, sometimes very considerably. Even at its most minimal, even when communicants' attempts to empathize with otherness do not result in positive agreement, the expansion of positional overlap is in itself an enlargement of community. A community arising from mutual understanding and respect can be very heterogeneous.

I say this is my own account. But apart from its inclusion of fictionality and unparaphrasability, nothing could be more Gadamerian. It is from Gadamer (1989) that I have drawn the crucial point about communication as a dynamic triangularity. It is Gadamer who says that communicant *A*, with his or her own context and horizon of expectations, is in communication with communicant *B*, with his or her own context and horizon of expectations, about some third entity. And it is Gadamer who suggests that as a result of negotiating this third entity their two understandings may come closer together, and their different horizons of expectations partly merge.

Despite his own aesthetics, then, Gadamer can provide an counterbalance to literary theory in its more de-humanizing forms. But both he and Habermas offer literary scholars other important benefits as well.

For a start, their intense concern for dialogicality can help the literary scholar avoid both arrogant presentism and dry-as-dust historical or cultural purism. On the one hand, they will shame us out of imposing our own values on a writer's there-and-then. On the other hand, as soon as we so much as hint that writers' significance within their own there-and-then represents the sum total of their human interest, Gadamer and Habermas will ridicule our pedantry.

More generally, they can inspire a sheer hopefulness for human communication which will make certain trends in twentieth century commentary seem quaintly paranoid. Especially potent will be their antidote to interpretations that were grimly deterministic. Their perception is that human beings are *not* completely shaped by language, culture, society or history, so that the barrier between one sociocultural grouping and another is *not* completely watertight. Communication between different formations is seen as bracingly possible.

In fact for Gadamer and Habermas, sociohistorical differences are not an insuperable obstacle to communication but a positive stimulus. Otherness is exciting, because it may always turn out to be a significant otherness for us, so prompting us to creative self-scrutiny. In other words, communication is bound up with our very processes of individuation, which are nothing if not dialogical. To speak metaphorically, genuine communication is itself metaphor! It is a juxtaposition of participant *A* and participant *B*, as a result of which they see themselves in each other's light, and become susceptible to change.

This is *not* how Dickens was read by the Modernist critic Edmund Wilson (1941). Wilson's was a gloomily presentist reading, according to which Dickens exposed disturbing subconscious traits of the kind identified by Freud or Adler or Jung, plus ideological subterfuges of the kind pinpointed by Marxian analysis. For Wilson, Dickens was a kindred spirit, whose picture of both human nature and society was very bleak indeed.

Dickens certainly can be extremely unsettling, and Wilson's commentary can help us put this into words. But then the hermeneutic critic will say: "Fine! And what would Dickens have thought about Edmund Wilson?" If Wilson disparaged all the fun and cheerful entertainment in Dickens, all Dickens's belief in the possibility of decent behaviour and sincere human goodness, then surely Dickens would have felt that Wilson and his contemporaries were – understandably, perhaps, given the appalling age in which they lived – dreadfully miserable. After a whole century of cultural pessimism, the hermeneutic critic of today can at last point to new potential allies of Dickens, such as the zoologist Matt Ridley (1997), who argues that virtuous behaviour may actually be natural – that virtue comes much more readily to our genetic programming than psychoanalysts, Marxists and Modernist critics once believed.

As a Modernist critic, Wilson was trying to highlight aspects of Dickens's work which ordinary readers might have overlooked. His working assumption was that ordinary readers were too complacent; they simply perpetuated the wide-spread view that Dickens was above all a jovial entertainer – the favourite uncle at every family hearth. But although Wilson's "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" remains one of the greatest critical essays ever written, the Modernist suspicion of

common sense could be carried too far. Not only was it elitist. It could become an unreflecting stock response in its own right, deliberately cutting itself off from important ideas and feelings just because they were widely shared. Within the culture of literary studies, this attitude was still inhibiting discussion – the discussion of *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield*, for instance – several decades after Modernism’s acme (Sell 2001, 165–93, 263–90).

Another benefit of philosophical hermeneutics is to prompt a cautious rehabilitation of common sense, and even a carefully hedged apology for prejudice. According to Gadamer, we have the common sense and prejudices of our own situationality – of our “thrown-ness”, in Heidegger’s language – and this serves as a kind of support to us. Without it, in situations demanding a swift response we should be quite incapacitated, and even when we do have more time to think, common sense and prejudice are still our only starting point. Some commentators have complained that Gadamer is very conservative and even reactionary here. Others, rightly in my view, say this is unfair, since he also strongly emphasizes that when we do think, and when we are confronted by new situations, our common sense and prejudices are open to revision. His idea is that common sense and prejudice are assets deserving a certain respect, but not that our critical faculties should be allowed to go into abeyance. On the contrary, he sees today’s common sense and prejudice as having resulted from a criticism of yesterday’s.

If these insights were to permeate the culture of literary scholarship, scholastic one-up-manship would become, even more rapidly, a thing of the past. The feelings, perceptions and responses of people who are not themselves members of the scholarly profession would win greater respect, and be more warmly welcomed as partners in dialogue, whose views might well be open to change, but might equally well challenge scholarship’s own orthodoxies and clichés. The knee-jerk rejection of ordinary ways of thinking so typical of literary-scholarly professionals in the twentieth century – think only of their proclamation of intentional and affective fallacies, their blanket denunciation of stock responses, their routine deconstruction of common sense – would be superseded by a truer scholarly self-knowledge and greater modesty.

As well as improving the general climate of debate, these same insights could help with certain specific problems in literary discussion. Not least: How are we to talk about the prejudices we find in literary authors? What about T.S. Eliot’s anti-Semitic attitudes, for instance?

As a young man, Eliot was apparently a dreadful snob. One of the student essays he wrote at Harvard was about Kipling, and it blamed Kipling, an older member of something rather like his own patrician class, but a very popular writer, for being immature (see Ricks 2001). The foretaste of I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis’s chastisement of stock responses was very marked here, and in the critical essays through which he later prepared the ground for his own literary breakthrough one of the key arguments was that “it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*” (his italics), a sentence which rapidly became a *locus classicus* of Modernist elitism. Yet the connotations evoked by the Jewish characters in his own early poems can seem at least as facile and unquestioning as Kipling’s alleged jingoism, and were also, of course, just as acceptable to contemporaries of widely varied class backgrounds. But then

again, given the subsequent course of twentieth century history, and given Eliot's indisputable intelligence, and his later, very credible Christian humility, did he remain unswervingly anti-Semitic for the rest of his life? Or did he begin to scrutinize and readjust his own prejudices in the way that Gadamerian hermeneutics would suggest is natural? According to Christopher Ricks's *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1994), Eliot really did subject his own views to criticism, and from very early on. Ricks's slight handicap, however, is his own apparent unawareness of Gadamer, which means that his revisionist account of prejudice, timely and profoundly thoughtful in itself, is more uphill work than it need have been, and correspondingly more open to attack. In the Jewish critic Anthony Julius's *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (1995), Ricks is accused of actually trivializing the issues. For Julius, a prejudice is always evil in itself, and extremely unlikely to be changed. If literary scholars were more widely conversant with philosophical hermeneutics, such controversies could be usefully re-assessed.

In debates about Dickens or Eliot or any other writer, a readership comes into communication not only with the writer but with other readerships. As in society at large, newer communicants and their situationalities are for ever commenting on older ones, and receiving in return, as it were, queries or confirmation. To repeat, a community is not a static consensus, but can be dynamically heterogeneous.

This brings us back to Habermas's insights into communicative ethics, which apply not only to the natural sciences, but to literary texts, to discussions of them, and to *Geisteswissenschaften* and the critical sciences in general. Although Habermas grants the human being a certain autonomy, it is an autonomy which often comes under threat. What he shows is that ethical considerations – of human equality, of truthfulness, of trust, of fairness, and of cooperativeness – are always an integral part of human intercourse, unless, as so often in non-dialogical communication, the process is distorted by some power factor.

One thing this can help literary scholars to think about is literary ethics in the diachronic plane. Dickens, Edmund Wilson and a present-day admirer of Matt Ridley all have to be allowed their say. In the mind of anyone interested, their different viewpoints can all co-exist and throw light on each other.

But Habermas dwells mainly on the possibility of many different tastes co-existing in one and the same time, within a community that is unitary, albeit polycultural. For him, to see Ricks and Julius as belonging to two different communities would be an oversimplification. In a disagreement such as theirs, the depth and sincerity of feeling on both sides is perfectly apparent. Yet literature is nevertheless bringing them into communication, and levels of mutual understanding and respect can always, according to Habermas, be raised. What he foresees in his great essay "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State" is a shared political culture, within which cultural differences at other levels can be readily accommodated.

From this we literary scholars could take yet another cue. In our own sphere, we, too, can endorse an ethical politics of communication. The kind of intercultural non-communication so noticeable

in the Rushdie affair, or more generally in the so-called culture wars of the mid-1990s, is not something we can want to see again. Literary texts do *get to* people, and one and the same text can get to different people in different ways, as a form of real human interaction. As literary scholars, we can try to develop a sharper awareness of this, and to find ways in which our own work can mediate in situations of misunderstanding and even conflict, whether within the present or between the present and the past. Here our aim will not be to bring about a total consensus, for then we ourselves would be communicating, not genuinely but coercively, thereby depriving literature of necessary air. A literary text's essential existence is not as a book on a shelf but in the minds of readers as they go on pondering its significance and value, for ever subjecting so-called definitive interpretations to thoughtful scrutiny. But what our scholarly mediation certainly can hope to promote is a higher level of mutual understanding and respect, whether between writers and readers, between one writer and another, or between one reader and another, all of which parties can be thought of as members of a literary community that is not only indefinitely large but indefinitely heterogeneous. In fact with a nudge from Gadamer and Habermas, we may actually be able to speed up the ongoing re-humanization of literary scholarship, by making real for ourselves and others a sense of literary communication as at once profoundly universal and profoundly historical. This is what, in their diametrically opposite ways, both Victorian liberal humanists and late-twentieth-century postmodern commentators only partly grasped and only partly failed to grasp.

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