

Hermeneutics and the Contemporary Anglo-American Philosophy

Jaroslav Hroch

This paper tries to reflect the problems of understanding and hermeneutics in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. It examines the hermeneutical conceptions of Peter Winch, Charles Taylor, Paul de Man, Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty.¹ The last part of this article is devoted to the instigations of the William James's philosophy for the theoretical and methodological foundations of the deep hermeneutics.

The access to the problem of understanding and hermeneutics in Anglo-American philosophical thought was strongly influenced by neo-positivism until the end of the 1950s. Up until this time, in the terminology of philosophy and social science, the English notion "*understanding*" had a more general character than the German notion "*Verstehen*". The notion of "understanding" had a meaning similar to the German notion "*Begreifen*", and therefore had not been considered to be a specific type of understanding which was necessary to apply to cultural phenomena and human behaviour. The notion of "understanding" was, in essence, viewed as synonymous with the notion of "*comprehension*".²

Until the end of the fifties, then, the term "understanding" had not been identified in Anglo-American philosophy with the method, but rather with the aim to which all the sciences and their methods are directed. When the neo-positivists in the social sciences used the notion "Verstehen", which had originated in the German hermeneutic tradition, they did not ascribe great epistemological and heuristic value to it. They viewed this notion as an accessory procedure in the mind of the investigator of social processes, who, during his research work, applies the common psychic abilities of empathy and introspection to understand the behaviour of the individual or social group.³

Against the original positivistic claims concerning the scientificity and objectivity of social scientific inquiry, *Peter Winch* argues that we ought to have in mind the sense of the hermeneutic situation in which the language game constitutes the object of the social sciences.⁴ Winch maintains that Wittgenstein's emphasis on how we act in a given context can be very important and inspiring for the conception of understanding in social scientific inquiry. Therefore, an important part of what we mean by understanding in relation to social practices and culture depends on having a *context* within which we can adequately act.⁵

In his conception of hermeneutics from 1990s, Winch claims that understanding another culture is not a matter of understanding the behaviour of all or even most of the individual subjects in it; it is, in fact, "understanding the inner maps according to which people of that culture navigate and the destinations they are trying to reach".⁶ Such maps will be to a large extent culturally determined.

Along with Peter Winch, *Charles Taylor* also emphasizes the situated character of social scientific understanding in his methodological theory, which is especially influenced by Wittgenstein's theory of language games and Gadamer's hermeneutics. Social reality, the actions, practices and norms, which the social sciences investigate, are constituted within *semantic fields* or language games and therefore, the possibility of understanding them depends upon familiarity with the

relevant language games and their interrelated meanings. Taylor argues that understanding the meaning of an action, social practice or social norm involves understanding the range of contrasted and relevant meanings that form the context of the investigated phenomena.⁷ In continuity with Wittgenstein's conception of language games, he introduces the notion of *intersubjective meaning* as an important methodological category in the process of understanding social reality.

In the second half of the 1980s, Taylor also provides his hermeneutic conception of understanding with a deep ethical dimension and as a consequence of this - influenced by Heidegger and the Augustinian Christian tradition - he constructs his concept of understanding with the reflection of the temporal and spacial structure of a being in the world. According to Taylor understanding has narrative dimension and can be roughly defined as the ability of the *life orientation* in the world along with the projection of a future being. "My life always has this degree of narrative understanding, that I understand my present action in the form of an 'and then': there was A (what I am), and then I do B (what I project to become)."⁸ This orientation can be in a transcendental dimension comprehended as a movement in *moral space* aiming towards the future.

The influence of hermeneutics could be noticed in the United States since the second half of the 1960s in the works of literary theoretician *E. D. Hirsch, Jr.* who was mainly influenced by historically and philologically oriented hermeneutic concepts (E. Betti, to a certain extent W. Dilthey) and who criticised Heideggerian and Gadamerian hermeneutics for their alleged relativism. However, the development of hermeneutic conceptions in the USA was above all tightly connected with the beginnings of post-analytic philosophy. This kind of philosophy originated due to the reaction to the American philosophical thought in the 1950s and 1960s, which had been strongly influenced by neopositivism and logical empirism as the basic theoretical background of analytic philosophy in the USA.

But approximately since 1970s it has been much more obvious that analytic philosophy owing to its international character, as well as due to proclaimed conception of the unified science, cannot be useful in solving the complex socio-cultural problems of American society, especially the questions of cultural and political identity, future perspectives and entire sense of Euroamerican culture. The great merit for the knowledge and development of philosophical hermeneutics in the USA has Richard E. Palmer.⁹

At the beginning of the 1970s, we can speak about the instigations of both hermeneutics and anti-logocentrism within Anglo-American philosophy in the methodological conceptions of the primary representative of the American Cultural Left, *Paul de Man*. He refused the dogma of a distinction between literary and critical language, as well as the concept that there exists a single neutral vocabulary, a certain kind of metalanguage, to be extracted from changing literary traditions. In connection with this demand, he puts stress on the self-identity and authenticity of the creative subject, both author's and critical reader's.

In accordance with this opinion Paul de Man claims that "not only does the critic say something that the work does not say, but he even says something that he himself does not mean to say. The semantics of interpretation have no epistemological consistency and can therefore not be scientific. But this is very different from claiming that what the critic says has no immanent connection with the work".¹⁰

From that point - according to Paul de Man - no interpretation pretends to be the precise description of a philosophical or literary work. "Interpretation could perhaps be called the description of an understanding, but the term 'description', because of its intuitive and sensory overtones, could then have to be used with extreme caution, the term 'narration' would be highly preferable." ¹¹

Paul de Man has also contributed a great deal to the Derridean polemic against logocentrism and has worked out an inspiring conception of the author's identity. Having applied syncretic influences of Marxism, psychoanalysis and existentialism, he advances his fundamental thesis that literature is the only branch of human activity which transcends nostalgia and desire and that the desire is the fundamental model of being.¹²

Paul de Man's literary theory and hermeneutically oriented philosophy, inspired not only by Heideggerian hermeneutics but also by Freud's psychoanalysis, anticipated the dialectical conception of *understanding* and *misunderstanding*, as well as the problem of tradition, continuity and discontinuity in the philosophical thought of *Harold Bloom*. According to him, poets till the period of Middle Ages lived in a common world where the members of the community established their creative identity in sharing their heritage with one another, tightly connected with literary audience in the form of religiously oriented society. But after the renaissance, the artists had to create their works in an individualistic world, where all the authors had to protect and establish their individuality through original and unique character of their achievements so they were in a certain way forced to break the tradition and stress the moment of discontinuity with their predecessors.¹³ In this connection - according to Bloom's view - the uniqueness of imaginative identity of the modern author is rooted in *misunderstanding*. That means the understanding one poet has of another poet's poetry is not only subjective, it is also a more or a less conscious misunderstanding.¹⁴

In his book *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982) Harold Bloom - influenced also by gnosticism and psychoanalysis - reassumes his conception of tradition as a constant process of re-interpretation, discontinuity and revision of previous cultural and artistic patterns. To *agonize* means in English (in etymological continuity with the word *agon* in Old Greek) not only to *suffer*, but also to *struggle*. "Revisionism, as Nietzsche said of every spirit, unfolds itself *only in fighting*. The spirit portrays itself as agonistic, as contesting for supremacy, with other spirits, with anteriority, and finally with every earlier version of itself."¹⁵

Cultural and philosophical tradition represents therefore for Bloom the constant struggle over the very notion and sense of tradition in the form of the new readings, proof-readings and re-evaluations. Such concept of tradition means - of course - its perpetual self-denying, the emphasis on change and the ability to be independent on one's predecessors. From it - according to Rorty - follows that "the reader ought to read Bloom on Emerson or Freud in order to see these authors transfigured, beaten in fascinating new shapes, in a similar way, as the other interpreters read Derrida on Plato, Hegel and Heidegger."¹⁶ In this connection Bloom rejects the "Kantian" view of culture as a museum of great philosophical and literary works that refer to something objective or timeless in historical consciousness or in the human imagination.¹⁷

Let us compare this Bloom's conception of tradition with Gadamer's. In accordance with his conception of philosophical hermeneutics Gadamer argues that tradition can be conceived as an onto-creative category, which reflects the perpetual process of valorization and actualization of the past culture: "In Wahrheit ist in Tradition stets ein moment der Freiheit und der Geschichte selber."¹⁸ But from the point of view of Harold Bloom the influence and weight of tradition represents rather danger and threat for contemporary culture and art. Tradition and creative identity are therefore in dialectical tension, on the contrary to Gadamer's conception.

Bloom's emphasis on misprision, uncorrect reading and antithetical character of understanding develops and intensifies these conceptions of post-modern philosophy and deconstructivism which are focused on tensions and contradictions inherent to the text, to its inconsistencies.¹⁹ But on the other hand, Harold Bloom's philosophical and critical thought is in a certain way differentiated from the conceptions of European post-modernism by its hermeneutical emphasis to substantial continuity with homegrown philosophical tradition, especially with the philosophy of R. W. Emerson. According to Bloom, the relation of Emerson to both Friedrich Nietzsche and William James also suggests that Emersonian transcendentalism was much closer to pragmatism than to Kant's metaphysical idealism. Emerson namely wants "his language and philosophical thoughts to be independent, fresh, but above all useful, in the basic intentions of pragmatism".²⁰

If we turn our attention to the other representative of American post-analytic philosophy *Richard Rorty*, we can find in his conception of the creative identity certain similar features with Harold Bloom's theory, as well as with Gadamer's hermeneutics. On the contrary to essentialism and in continuity with the hermeneutic category of *Bildung* Rorty takes attention to the creative, self-forming character of philosophy.²¹ The process of hermeneutic understanding is therefore connected with the self-transformation of man by means of his *edification* based on communicative processes, such as reading, artistic creation or, for instance, the dialogue within community.

Using the instigations of romanticism, Rorty emphasizes the self-forming nature of human mind, the creative character of which is enabled also by the fact that our thought is oriented not only to verified knowledge, but also to something unknown, abnormal, revolutionary, poetical, metaphorical. In this connection he highly evaluates romanticism, which is understood by him as the other name for the creative conception of reality. Romantic tradition, tied to the emphasis on the creative subject and characterized by the conception of life as the work of art, ought to be connected - according to Rorty - with social reformism, the function of which is to develop the ideals of liberal democracy in present time.²²

Understanding is based on the process of constant forming and interrelated dialogue of various interpretations, regarded from the beginning as equal and legitimate. On the basis of mediation between the influences of American pragmatism and modern European hermeneutic thought Rorty argues that the only criterion of the adequateness and "rightness" of understanding and interpretation can be only consensus within historically concrete community which respects the principles of democracy, dialogue, and tolerance.

As far as Richard Rorty's conception of *tradition* is concerned, we cannot miss an important influence of German hermeneutically oriented philosophy (M.

Heidegger, H.-G. Gadamer, J. Habermas). Rorty is especially connected with Gadamer's hermeneutics by dialogical conception of understanding and by a great attention paid to integrative function of interhuman relations. Both Gadamer and Rorty highly evaluate historical role and moral authority of these institutions, the origin of which has been connected with gradual formation of the democratic political life.²³

For that reason Rorty cannot agree with one of the most typical Leftist ideas that "escaping from such institutions is automatically a good thing, because it ensures that one will not be used by the evil forces which have 'co-opted' these institutions".²⁴ In accordance with the conceptions of Gadamer's hermeneutics Rorty especially in contemporary time refers to a great importance of tradition and the consciousness of political and cultural continuity in the social life of North Atlantic civilization.

There is - of course - a certain difference in socio-historical and political foundations of their conceptions of tradition. For instance Gadamer emphasizes much more than Rorty the importance of the spiritual heritage of Christianity in the life of Western society. Rorty on the other hand conceives his notion of tradition along with the sharp analysis and profound reflection of the contemporary situation of American society and its future perspectives. He interprets tradition therefore as a historical continuity with the spiritual heritage of these historical personalities in the political and cultural life of United States who have embodied the ideals of democracy, justice and equality among the citizens (especially R. W. Emerson, A. Lincoln, and M. L. King). Rorty in this connection argues that we cannot escape the traditions to which we belong as well as we cannot "step outside our skins".²⁵ Nowadays he even criticizes American Cultural Left for the lack of a sense for tradition and national identity.²⁶

If we try to summarize Rorty's conception of tradition, we can view it as a result of his effort to synthesize the spiritual heritage of European, especially Gadamerian hermeneutics and American pragmatism. This synthesis was successful owing to Rorty's ability to find their common feature in the sense for solidarity and dialogue, in historical attitude to social reality and in emphasizing the practical dimension of philosophy.

At the end of this study I would like to point out to some motives uniting American transcendental idealism and pragmatism (R. W. Emerson, W. James) in their theoretical contribution along with analytical psychology and archetypal literary science to create the foundations of the deep hermeneutics (C. G. Jung, J. Lacan, J. Hillman, P. von Matt). It is well known that William James, influenced by Frederick C. Myers, has introduced to his philosophical and psychological thought the categories of *subliminal consciousness* and of *subconscious self*, used in the psychoanalysis of S. Freud: "The subconscious self is nowadays a well-credited psychological entity; and I believe that in it we have exactly the mediating term required."²⁷

W. James - on the contrary to the influential opinion of German psychologist W. Wundt (*Grundriss der Psychologie*, Leipzig 1902, p. 248-251) - has legitimated the existence of the psychical processes which exist outside the primary consciousness. This has been very appreciated by the forerunner of the deep hermeneutics and the founder of analytical psychology Carl Gustav Jung. It is not

surprising that in Jung's essay *Theoretische Überlegungen zum Wesen des Psychischen* we can find this important passage from W. James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: "I cannot but think that the most important step forward that has occurred in psychology since I have been a student of that science is the discovery, first made in 1886, that [...] there is not only the consciousness of the ordinary field, with its usual centre and margin, but an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are extra-marginal and outside of the primary consciousness altogether, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs. I call this the most important step forward because, unlike the other advances which psychology has made, this discovery has revealed to us an entirely unsuspected peculiarity in the constitution of human nature."²⁸

Anticipating the conceptions of the deep hermeneutics W. James argues that "there is actually and literally more life in our total soul than we are at any time aware of."²⁹ In this consequence we ought to realize that the philosophy and psychology of William James, especially his theoretical reflections from *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, have helped C. G. Jung to create a new, very inspirative paradigm of *psyché*. It might be argued adequately that Jung's theories of collective unconsciousness and archetypes - with the central archetype of *Selbst* (Self)³⁰ - have been influenced by Gnostic and Neoplatonic conceptions of the soul, too, but these spiritually oriented philosophical ideas are characteristic for the Emersonian and Romantic tradition in American philosophy. In particular Jung's conception of *Selbst* (Self) - which represents the totality of the spiritual life of human being - has been immensely inspired by W. James and his idea of *wider self*: "we have in the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come, a positive content of religious experience which, it seems to me, is literally and positively true as far as it goes."³¹

Thus William James has inspired Jung's hermeneutically oriented paradigm expressed in his primary archetypes of *Selbst* and *Individuation* - that coherent growth and self-transformation is central to the philosophical, religious and ethical life. In this context we can find therefore analogical features between Jung's theory of *Selbst* (Self) on one side and the stress on the self-improvement, identity and moral self-development of human personality in the ethical theories of W. James's followers on the other side (as one of many examples we can state for instance the concept of "growing, enlarging, liberated self" in John Dewey's ethics).³² The use of the methodological procedures of the deep hermeneutics - whose founder C. G. Jung, as we have shown, was in his early philosophical and theoretical development in 1910s crucially influenced by W. James - enables to explain and deeply reflect the turn toward Romanticism and spiritualism in the contemporary neo-pragmatic philosophy (R. Rorty, H. Bloom, S. Cavell).³³

This type of interpretation in the deep hermeneutics, based on the communication of consciousness with unconsciousness, leads to the movement from metalanguage to language, from argumentative, scientific language to natural language, often akin to metaphorical language of art, accordingly from the constative statements to the performative ones. The use of performative language in the deep hermeneutics (but also, for instance, in various conceptions of Anglo-American neopragmatism) is not the expression of purposeless aestheticism, but it is - according

to my opinion - the embodiment of the attempt to extend the horizons of philosophical thought.

Notes:

¹ In the difference to my monograph *Filosofická hermeneutika v dějinách a v současnosti* [Philosophical Hermeneutics in the History and Present]. Masarykova univerzita and Nakladatelství Georgetown, Brno 1997, 1998, the hermeneutic conceptions of Peter Winch, Charles Taylor, Paul de Man, Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty are not analyzed in the book of Jean Grondin: *Einführung in die philosophische Hermeneutik*. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1991. Czech translation: Jean Grondin, *Úvod do hermeneutiky*. Translated by Břetislav Horyna, Pavel Kouba. OIKOYMENH, Praha 1997.

² Compare: *Understanding and Social Inquiry*. Ed. F. R. Dallmayr and T. A. McCarthy. Notre Dame - London 1977, p. 10-17.

³ T. Abel: "The Operation called Verstehen", *The American Journal of Sociology*, 54 (1948), p. 218.

⁴ P. Winch: *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. 5th ed. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London - New York 1967, p. 51-67. Compare to it: F. R. Dallmayr, T. A. McCarthy: "The Wittgensteinian Reformulation". In: *Understanding and Social Inquiry*. Ed. F. R. Dallmayr and T. A. McCarthy. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame - London 1977, p. 140.

⁵ P. Winch: *Trying to Make Sense*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford - New York 1987, p. 24. Compare to it: P. Winch: "Understanding a Primitive Society" in: *Understanding and Social Inquiry*. Ed. F. R. Dallmayr and T. A. McCarthy. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame - London 1977, p.173.

⁶ P. Winch: *Can We Understand Ourselves ?* The text of the paper at the conference on hermeneutics in Halle, Germany, September 1994, dated 21st July 1994, p. 5.

⁷ Ch. Taylor: "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man", originally in: *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1971), p. 3-34, 45-51. Here quoted according to Ch. Taylor: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. Philosophical Papers 2. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993 (reprinted), p. 19.

⁸ Ch. Taylor: *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 47.

⁹ R. E. Palmer: *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969. Compare to it: *A Gadamer Reader*. Translated and edited by Richard E. Palmer. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002.

¹⁰ P. de Man, P.: *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Second revised edition. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1983, p. 109.

¹¹ Ebenda, p. 108.

- 12 Ebenda, pp. 15-18.
- 13 H. Bloom: *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. Oxford University Press. Oxford 1973, pp. 71-80. See also T. K. Seung: *Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Columbia University Press, New York 1982, p. 168.
- 14 H. Bloom: *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 1983, p. 19.
- 15 Ebenda, p. VIII.
- 16 R. Rorty: *Essays on Heidegger and others*. Philosophical papers. Volume 2. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge 1994 (Reprinted), p. 120.
- 17 J. Rajchman: "Philosophy in America", in: *Post-Analytic Philosophy*. Ed. by John Rajchman and Cornel West. Columbia University Press, New York 1985, p. XVI.
- 18 H.-G. Gadamer: *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Gesammelte Werke. Band 1. J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen 1986, p. 286. Compare also J. Černý: "Hermeneutika v soudobé buržoazní filozofii - její rozchod i smiřování s vědou" [Hermeneutics in contemporary bourgeois philosophy - its parting and reconciling with science]. *Filozofický časopis* 29, 1981, Nr.3, p. 35.
- 19 See G. Warnke: *Gadamer. Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 1987, p. 89.
- 20 H. Bloom: *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford - New York 1983, p. 19.
- 21 R. Rorty: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. B. Blackwell, Oxford UK and Cambridge USA 1994, p. 359-360. Compare to it: J. Hroch: *Filosofická hermeneutika v dějinách a v současnosti* [Philosophical Hermeneutics in the History and Present], Masarykova univerzita and Nakladatelství Georgetown, Brno 1997, 1998, p. 169.
- 22 Compare R. Rorty: *Essays on Heidegger and others*. Philosophical papers. Volume 2. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994, p. 175-176.
- 23 Compare: H.-G. Gadamer: *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft*. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt am Main 1977, p. 10-22.
- 24 R. Rorty: *Essays on Heidegger and others*. Philosophical papers. Volume 2. Cambridge University Press 1994, s. 174., p. 174.
- 25 R. Rorty: *Consequences of Pragmatism*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1982, p. XIX.
- 26 See R. Rorty: "The Unpatriotic Academy", *The New York Times*. Sunday, February 13, 1994, p. 15.
- 27 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Vintage Books. The Library of America 1990, p. 457.

28 Ebenda, p. 215. Compare to it: Carl Gustav Jung, "Theoretische Überlegungen zum Wesen des Psychischen", in: *Gesammelte Werke von C. G. Jung*. Band 8. (Die Dynamik des Unbewussten). 2. Auflage. Olten und Freiburg in Breisgau: Walter Verlag AG 1971, p. 215. In my reflection concerning the affinities between W. James' and C. G. Jung's psychology I am grateful to PhDr. Karel Plocek and to prof. PhDr. Vladimír Smékal from Masaryk University in Brno for their advice, kind help and theoretical inspiration.

29 W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Vintage Books. The Library of America 1990, p. 457.

30 C. G. Jung, "Die Beziehungen zwischen dem Ich und dem Unbewussten". In: *Gesammelte Werke von C. G. Jung*. Band 7. (Zwei Schriften über analytische Psychologie). 2. Auflage. Olten und Freiburg in Breisgau: Walter Verlag AG 1974, pp. 195-201, 263-269.

31 W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Vintage Books. The Library of America 1990, p. 460.

32 John Dewey, *Ethics*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1981, p. 307.

33 Compare Russel B. Goodman: *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge - New York - Sydney 1990, p. 1-33, 37-46 58-89.