University of Thi-Qar

Title : *The Truth and Method* of
The Historicity of Texts

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The Truth and Method of The Historicity of Texts

Abstract:

This research paper attempts to initially explore Gadamer's masterpiece, *Truth* and *Method*, in the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation. The study examines the Gadamerian understanding of the historicity of texts, and how the meanings of texts are affected in their journey in time. Concepts like the situatedness of languages, the changing nature of everything textual, and the celebration of the synthetic attitude towards opposing elements are to be scrutinized in this critical endeavour.

Focal Points:

The literatures of the last few decades very significantly capture the signals of the qualitative changes characteristic of the contemporary era. Radical moves, theorizations, conceptions, and conceptualizations have marked most, if not all, of the different and divergent walks of human socio-economic and cultural life. The arena of literature and criticism is no exception to this deluge; hitherto- established, traditional notions such as 'authorial intentions', 'the genius of craftsmanship', 'autonomy of the artifact', the privileged status of art, etc. have incurred radical interrogation. The transcendental notions of literature have been replaced by their immanent counterparts; literature is no longer regarded as a secluded zodiac for mere human speculation, or an experience in artfulness or literariness, divorced from other cultural elements, and charged with a definite meaning. Rather, literature is now perceived as organically dynamic and

intimately connected with the other components of culture like language, history, religion, and myth. It is part and parcel of their interaction; it influences, and is influenced by, them. Their relationship is not antagonistic, but rather complementary to each other. Literature becomes a vibrant social discourse. Hardly can one nowadays discuss a piece of literature with no reference to its larger cultural implications; literature becomes a perennial arena, and a crucial site for discussing cultural politics. Moreover, contemporary critical approaches to literature underline the fact that exploration of meaning is endless, and pluralistic possibilities exist everywhere. Meaning is a product of a negotiation and an interaction between a number of participants across the board. The dialogic and polyphonic nature of these statements and their further implications underline the contemporary urge to historicise literature, to place it in its own context, and to read it along its socio-historical matrix. In the words of Louis Montrose, to historicise literature is "to resituate canonical literary texts among the multiple forms of writing, and in relation to the non-discursive practices and institutions of the social formation in which those texts have been produced" (6). In this essay, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," he advances two major notions: 'historicity of texts' and 'textuality of history'. He defines the former as "the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only those texts that critics study but also the texts in which they study them." The term is a designation of the attempt to read an artifact along the socio-historical matrix of its production. The other notion, 'textuality of history;, refers to "the unavailability of a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, that has not already been mediated by the surviving texts of the society in question – those "documents" that historians construe in their contexts, called "histories," histories that necessarily but always incompletely construct the "History" to which they offer access" (Montrose 8). 'Historicity of texts' represents the discursive practices that are part and parcel of the pre-natal making-process, or rather the womb within which the text gets first conceived and conceptualized. The other notion of the 'textuality of history' implies that history itself is essentially a discursive construct, and a mediated material. These elements of constructedness and mediation must be critically scrutinized in any reflection upon the past. The present study focuses on the notion of the 'historicity of texts'. It is an attempt to critically engage with this notion of the situatedness of literature, its nature, and the conditions of its possibility, particularly in the context of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his masterpiece *Truth and Method*.

The Hermeneutic Tradition: A Synopsis

Hermeneutics is essentially an approach developed to address the temporal distance between two separate entities - the past and the present, the strange and the familiar- and other relevant shades of meanings. It is an attempt designed to break the wall and to bridge the divide that may exist between these poles, with the ultimate aim of facilitating comprehension and bringing about 'understanding'. Richard Palmer and others open their discussions of hermeneutics with considerations of the various meanings of the Greek verb *hermzneuein* and its noun form *hermneia*(Palmer:12-32). The words share a linguistic root with the name of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the inventor or discoverer of language and writing. The three basic meanings of *hermneuein* are: (1) to speak (or express or say), (2) to explain (or interpret or comment upon), (3) to translate. As Palmer notes, "all three meanings may be

expressed by the English verb 'to interpret,' yet each constitutes an independent and significant meaning of interpretation" (13-14). Since the ancient Greeks, each of these three meanings has found its applications by various hermeneuticists. Hermeneutics as speaking has included not only the oral recitation of Homer's epics but also the proclamation demanded by the new hermeneutic.

The eighteenth century witnessed the process of codifying the rules of this discipline of knowledge; it was to formulate the broad rules for the understanding of all texts. Yet, the true manifestations of this engagement with the rules of interpretation occurred in the nineteenth century. Although the classical philologist Friedrich Ast was primarily concerned with the mediation of the classical authors, he developed a notion of 'spirit' (Geist) that has wider implications for the hermeneutic enterprise. Ast holds the view that the task of all understanding is to find the spirit of the whole in the individual occurrence and to grasp the individual through the whole. An encounter with a hermeneutic circle is visible in the work of Ast (Holub 50).

Hermeneutics as commentary has a long and varied history in biblical exegesis, from third-century Alexandrian allegorization to nineteenth-century historical-critical method. Hermeneutics as translation may be seen not only literally in traditional philology but also metaphorically in Bultmannian "demythologizing." Yet one may note, with Palmer, that in all three cases "the foundational 'Hermes process' is at work: in all three cases, something foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar, present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation, or translation is somehow 'brought to understanding'-is 'interpreted'' (14).

The philologically based approach of hermeneutics found in Ast's work was furthered and broadened by the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, the progenitor of the modern hermeneutic tradition. His hermeneutics, which "involves preventing misunderstanding, sees interpretation as a subject-object relation in which all that is strange in a text is to be made familiar" (Hoy 53). Schleiermacher is the first to universalize the question of understanding: his hermeneutics is tantamount to an epistemology of objects from historical and intellectual life. It consists of two levels. The first is grammatical and has to do with understanding the text as part of a linguistic universe. The interpreter is called upon to understand the supra-individual aspects of language use as well as their particular application by the individual author (Holub 50). The second level is the psychological or technical, which entails the individual contribution of the author as psychological subject. The interpreter's task here is to understand the author better than he understood himself. As an exemplary of the romantic hermeneutics, Schleiermacher conceives of hermeneutic interpretation as a recovery or reconstruction of the original meaning of the text. The past needs to be experienced in its own terms and on its own grounds. "Every idea in a text has to be related back to its context in the personal life of its author, as a moment in his life" (Gadamer 474).

The hermeneutic theory of Wilhelm Dilthey represents a continuation of and a regression from Schleiermacher's work (Holub 51). Owing to the paucity of the key works, Dilthey developed only the psychological aspect of his predecessor's theory, to the exclusion of the linguistic dimension that became extremely central in the twentieth-century hermeneutics. For Dilthey, understanding is based on recovering the psychology of the author, on approximating his or her experience through sympathetic reactions to

textual cues. He, therefore, calls for working backward through texts to arrive at the original experience of their authors. According to Holub, Dilthey's major contribution is his separation of knowledge into two spheres, one for the natural sciences and one for the social or human (Geisteswissenschsften) (51). Affirming a methodology based on a subject-object relationship for scientific explanations, Dilthey proposes that historical knowledge, by contrast, is acquired hermeneutically through emphatic understanding. On account of the pressure of nineteenth-century positivism and the success of natural sciences, hermeneutics in his works retreats slightly from the universality it had achieved with Schleiermacher, but it becomes the only valid method for scholarship vis-à-vis historical past (Holub51).

Palmer sums up the various stages in the development of the hermeneutic theory of interpretation up to the twentieth century. "From the beginning," he writes, "the word has denoted the science of interpretation, especially the principles of proper textual exegesis, but," Palmer adds, "the field of hermeneutics has been interpreted (in roughly chronological order) as: (1) the theory of biblical exegesis; (2) general philological methodology; (3) the science of all linguistic understanding [Schleiermacher]; (4) the methodological foundation of *Geisteswissenschaften* [or "human studies"; Dilthey]; (5) phenomenology of existence and of existential understanding [Heidegger and Gadamer]; and (6) the systems of interpretation, both recollective and iconoclastic, used by man to reach the meaning behind myths and symbols [Ricoeur]" (Palmer 33). Furthermore, Palmer draws the important conclusion that "each of these definitions is more than an historical stage; each points to an important 'moment' or approach to the problem of interpretation" (33).

Gadamer's Truth and Method: An Overall View:

Gadamer's Wahrheit und Methode (1960) [Truth and Method] is considered a landmark in the twentieth-century hermeneutical tradition; it explicitly represents the 'ontological turn' of the epoch. This hermeneutics makes the radical move from the epistemological arena in which previous theories of understanding had operated to the area of 'fundamental ontology' (Holub 52). Understanding, according to this modality of thought, is perceived as an essential way of being-in-the-world, as the fundamental way one exists prior to any cognition or intellectual activity. Ontological hermeneutics thus replaces the question of understanding as knowledge about the world with the question of beingin-the-world. Truth and Method is clearly a continuation and an explanation of Heidegger's Being and Time. However, Holub comments that unlike Heidegger's own use of 'and' in the title of his book, Gadamer's conjunction should not be read in its connective but in its disjunctive sense (53). Rejecting Husserl's notion of consciousness, Heidegger sought a new basis for phenomenology by investigating temporality, thus connecting being with time. Gadamer's title, by contrast, must be read as an implicit dissociation of 'truth' from 'method'. Like Heidegger, the question of truth for Gadamer is prior to or outside of methodological considerations. He fulminates against all method; method does not guarantee the manifestation of truth, but in fact hinders it. Method is not the only certain road to truth. Method does not exhaust truth; truth cannot be limited to what is confirmed by method. Truth exceeds all method; "truth transcends the sphere of the control of scientific method" (Gadamer xii). As a matter of fact, Truth and Method is a critique of the methodological practices of the nineteenth-century scientific mode of thought, which claims a monopoly on truth. Science cannot be denied its significant contribution in the knowledge-making process; it has its own perception of and path to truth. Yet its own version of truth should not be considered the absolute truth outside of which there is no other truth. Gadamer's critique is directed at this hegemonic attitude of the scientific methods (xii). He proposes to counter the pernicious association of truth and method, and

to project hermeneutics as both a corrective and a metacritical orientation that would oversee the whole field of methodology. Like Heidegger, he claims for hermeneutics a universal status; understanding is conceived and conceptualized as the essence of being-in-the-world. *Truth and Method* is an "attempt to mediate between philosophy and natural science by going beyond the narrow horizon of scientific enquiry" (Holub 54).

In his attempt to question methodology and its relationship to truth-- "to go beyond the concept of method held by modern science (which retains its limited justification) and to envisage in a fundamentally universal way what always happens" (Gadamer 466) --Gadamer adopts a trajectory of two narratives: the first narrative revolves around the difference between a pre-Cartesian and a post-Cartesian modality of thought while the second narrative centres on the history of hermeneutics. In the pre-Cartesian narrative, Gadamer contends, the dualistic mode of thinking of the hegemonic paradigm of science does not function at all. Subject and object, being and thinking are not conceived as two separate entities, radically severed from each other. But with the advent of Cartesian dualism, the alienation of Western human beings becomes the cornerstone of Western philosophy. According to this view of the history of philosophy, there is an ongoing project of promoting, perpetuating and recirculating the alienation of mind and matter, subject and object, by constructing a philosophical basis for the scientific method. Kant's Critique of Pure Reason is considered a remarkable manifestation of this tradition, since "he applies the most ingenious epistemological apology for the natural sciences" (Holub 55).

The second narrative embedded in *Truth and Method* concerns the history of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics evolves as a discipline in the pre-romantic era with the

tradition of biblical exegesis and humanism. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is essentially originated as to find out the correct sense of texts; it is an attempt to reveal the original meaning of the texts. Pre-romantic hermeneutics is presented in terms of a threefold power: subtilitas intelligendi (understanding), subtilitas explicandi (explication) and subtilitas applicandi (application). The point Gadamer raises in this connection is that hermeneutics in the course of its development forgets its threefold power, and is stripped eventually of its explicatory and applicative functions (Holub 55). It is this hegemony exercised by one element (understanding under the scientific control) over the other elements that has deprived hermeneutics of its traditionally vital role, and has, as a result, motivated the desire to re-think the very structurality of this field of inquiry.

Punctuated with the above-mentioned desires, *Truth and Method* presents radical thoughts and counter- arguments only with a view to bringing about a proper understanding of the nature of the truth as projected by scientific methods—"an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of world" (Gadamer xiii). The book has also the purpose of rehabilitating and empowering hermeneutics so as to emerge not as an alternative discourse to science, but to develop into a fully-fledged discourse, a competent guide in human pilgrimage on earth and their search for truth.. In the words of Weinsheimer: "*Truth and Method* is a book of philosophy directed primarily to philosophers, yet its significance reaches far beyond the confines of that discipline" (ix).

Historicity of Texts: A Gadamerian Understanding:

In his endeavour to address the 'crisis of historicism,' Gadamer seeks to disclose the grounds of the possibility of true interpretation—"How is understanding possible" (xviii). This engagement with the nature of understanding and the conditions of its possibility as the key to overcoming the present dilemma of the humanities in the face of the hegemonic attitude of the scientific discourse is conducted along the Heideggerian insights crystallized in *Being and Time*. Fundamental of all is Heidegger's notion of 'Dasein': "The being that is concerned with its being presents itself through its understanding of being, as a way of access to the question of being' (Gadamer 476). This focus on existential understanding as the true meaning of being and the essence of existential sanity underlines the temporality and historicity of all human existence in an ontological sense. "Gadamer's topic," writes Weinsheimer, "is not what we do but what happens to us. His subject is what befalls us beyond what we do or want to do, beyond the will to power, and beyond methodological control" (32). Gadamer adopts Heidegger's 'hermeneutics of facticity' as the starting-point for his discussion. Hermeneutics, perceived along these lines, "denotes the basic being-in-motion of Therebeing which constitutes its finiteness and historicity, and hence includes the whole of its experience of the world" (Gadamer xviii). Gadamer, thus, examines understanding from a philosophical point of view. For him, understanding is the 'touchstone' for a meaningful and healthy human existence, and therefore, needs to be deeply scrutinized. In this reflection upon understanding in terms of its nature and the conditions of its possibility, Gadamer discusses a number of issues the centrality of which goes to tradition, language dialogue, and the fusion of horizons.

Considering in view the fact that all knowledge and experience are historically conditioned, it is obvious that there is nothing like perspective-free history nor is there a disinterested approach. No one is "able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment, and his national situation, etc" (Gadamer 465). A human being is a product of a certain socio-historical matrix, a certain "effectivity," and, hence, his or her mentality is constructed by, and pregnant with, the ideas and ideologies of that 'structure of feeling', to use Reymond Williams's phrase. Thereupon, all understanding is an 'effect of history.'

The larger drama in which we cannot choose to play is history. Human being exists historically....All interpretation of tradition (as of everything) occurs within tradition....There is no presuppositionless, nontraditional interpretation. Rather, understanding always begins within and returns to an already given horizon of understanding. (Weinsheimer 14).

Tradition is the larger framework within which all the mental pre-natal processes take place. "In fact, history does not belong to us, we belong to it" (Gadamer 276). It is the womb that gives birth to, and shapes up one's essential ways of seeing. In the words of Weinsheimer: "Insight, in brief, is not fundamentally the subject's doing, but an effect of history on those who belong to and participate in it....Hermeneutics is a passion" (40). Tradition, or one's history, is an indispensable factor in the making of one's character and attitude in life; it furnishes the stream of conceptions in which one stands. Bernstein affirms that "we belong to a tradition before it belongs to us: tradition, through sedimentation, has a power which is constantly determining what we are in the process of becoming" (142). The way one behaves or thinks is contaminated, or rather energized, by one's tradition, one's past as an essential conditioning element in the construction of the self. Belonging to tradition, Gadamer writes, "is clearly not so much a limiting condition

as one that makes understanding possible" (329). Called 'effective-historical consciousness,' it is that consciousness which is at once 'affected by history' and is open to its effects. The present is conditioned by the past insofar as the present stands in a tradition that includes the past (Hoy 167). As a corollary, all one's efforts of interpretation are mediated by the 'prejudices of the time.' And interpretation, according to this modality of thought, can neither be claimed to be purely subjective, nor can it be thought of as completely objective. Within the same individual, understanding is a negotiation between the subjective and the objective; it is a dialectical process of 'tradition' and the 'individual talent.'

Besides, reconstruction of the other in his otherness and apart from what he or she means is not the procedure of understanding that Schleiermacher thought; quite the contrary, it is in Gadamer's view the abandonment of the attempt to come to an understanding, to reach a shared meaning on a topic of common concern. Positing the alterity of the other is a symptom of the failure of understanding, not the principle of its success. For Gadamer, understanding is communication: it is either the expression of a common sense regarding a common concern or else the attempt to reach such a commonality. And this coming to an understanding or a commonality crystallizes understanding as a productive activity; it involves mediation, integration and assimilation. Understanding entails neither suppression nor repression of the other, but assimilation, integration and increasing embrace and inclusiveness.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer accentuates the role of language in the construction of the self, and the initiation of dialogue. For him, language is not the instrument of subjectivity, nor does language fulfill itself in the self-contemplation of an infinite

intellect; language is instead finite and historical, a repository and a carrier of the experience of being which had come to language in the past (Palmer 213). Being is the element in which one lives. Language is the house of being. Language and being are interfused. The Linguisticality of being is its ontology and the medium of its historicality. Language is an essential component of one's history, identity and way of thinking. The limits of one's language are the limits of one's world. Therefore, "the linguistic experience of the world," contends Gadamer, "is an absolute" (426). Moreover, this emphasis on the essential status of language in the very nature of understanding is accounted for, or rather necessitated by, the fact that language is the medium of the hermeneutical experience in which one's identity is imbued with his or her tradition. This hermeneutical experience is grounded not in the consciousness of an individual subject, but in the language game called dialogue or conversation. Thereupon, to come to an understanding necessitates the presence of a shared code, a common language; in dialogue a common language is formed to make understanding possible. One converses in order that truth might manifest itself in the to and fro of the question and answer.

The hermeneutic experience is an encounter between a heritage in the form of a transmitted text and the horizon of the interpreter. Linguisticality provides the common ground in which and on which they can meet. Language is the medium in which the tradition conceals itself and is transmitted. Experience is not so much something that comes prior to language, but rather experience itself occurs in and through language. Linguisticality is something that permeates the way of being-in-the-world of historical man. (Palmer 207)

The 'fusion of horizon' is the point of encounter between the self and the other, the interpreter and the text, or between the two parties in a conversation. The interpreter's horizon of understanding first excludes the truth claimed by the text or the artifact. The

interpreter opens up to the horizon of the other (the text or the artwork) by allowing it to question the interpreter's own prejudgments about the matter at issue. What ensues is a dialogue of question and answer where the interpreter not only questions the truth claimed by the work but also allows what the interpreter prejudges to be true to be put into question by the work. The fusion of horizons that ends the dialogue occurs when the interpreter understands differently. This may require altering the interpreter's prejudgments in line with what has been learned from the text or artifact.. But it may also mean reaffirming the original prejudgments for different reasons since they have survived the challenge by another way to judge the matter at issue. The fusion of horizons is a remarkable crystallization of a joint understanding and a joining of traditions. "We describe the conscious act of this fusion as the task of the effective-historical consciousness" (Gadamer 274). That is, one is always already 'effected by history,' and has to be open to its effects. The implication seems to be that the present is a product of the past. Yet, the present should not be a closed object, but should be open to the challenges of the future. The horizon of the present is being continually formed as it has always to be test against the challenges of the future. "The true historical object," maintains Gadamer, "is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship in which exist both the reality of history and the reality of historical understanding" (267).

The framework of Gadamer's position on the question of immanence, historicity, and context can be summarized. He does not hesitate to state that the context of the interpretation of the immanent text is the interpreter's context. This does not mean that interpretation is arbitrary and subjective, since the interpreter's own context is itself

conditioned by the tradition in which he stands, and the text is part of this tradition. Without paradox, it can thus be said that the immanent text is both context-free and context-bound. It is context-free in the sense that the text is its own reference, and context-bound in that the text appears to its readers in a horizon of interest, in a context implicitly brought to the text by the reader. Such a context can be revised in terms of the text, but will always be only partial because of the basic asymmetry between the immanence of the text's language and the necessary historicity of the emergence of the meaning of that language in interpretive understanding.

Concluding Note

Having thus projected understanding as a historical, linguistic, and dialectical process of interaction of self-understanding with what is encountered, Gadamer's perspective of the 'historicity of text' is clear. His notion of understanding—its nature and the conditions of its possibility— is taken as the moment of confrontation, the moment of the encounter, and more precisely the moment at which the process of crossfertilization takes place. Cross-fertilization is the moment of the interactivity of the assumptions or the schematic knowledge of the reader with those of the text. It is the most crucial moment across the continuum of interpretation: author, text, and reader. And for this moment to occur, all the previous conditions of understanding and its very nature have to be met: an interpreter, a tradition, a shared code, a text, an effective-historical consciousness, and a fusion of horizons. Reading is thus an event, a happening that takes place in time, and meaning is the product of the integration of the fusion of horizons. This fusion is the ultimate condition for the dialogue of the self and the other, the interpreter and the text, the past and the present, or any two parties in a conversation. Thereupon, for the dialogical process to come into effect, there are those prerequisites to be fulfilled. Gadamer has thus charted a philosophical path of profound significance to one and all in their pilgrimage on earth, and their search for truth. Truth is not located in the past, nor is it in the present. The past is not a completed, closed and finalized project, nor is the present a self-born and self-sufficient entity, bereft of its roots in history. Neither one of these dimensions of time is pregnant with truth if each continues to assume autonomous existence and show indifference to the other, and if their relationship continues to be marked by antagonism. However, for the past and the present, and by

implication the self and the other, the interpreter and the interpreted, to prosper and fructify, to become agents in the truth-making process, their relationship has to become one of complementarity; each should complete the other. For the present to move forward, it has to look backward. Like the speaker and listener in a conversation, the present is an "effect" of the past; the present is a consequence of the past as the past is the cause of the present. The consequence "belongs" to its cause. The present has something true to learn from the past. The presentness or the presence of the past should be the guiding principle for any endeavour to map an approach to meaning, knowledge, or truth..

The idea of past and present as alienated spheres, closed to each other, is misguided. The historical consciousness of the differences between past and present contains implicitly the hermeneutic awareness that the present is conditioned by the past insofar as the present stands in a tradition that includes the past. (Hoy 167)

Guided by self-knowledge, informed by the 'conversation' of time, and manifested in the participation of the past and the present in a modality marked by increasing embrace and inclusiveness, understanding fructifies as the ultimate goal of the *Truth and Method* of the 'historicity of texts.'

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الحقيقة والطريقة في الصفة التأريخية من النصوص

الملخص

هذة ورقة البحث تحاول استكشاف قطعة (قدامر) النادرة الحقيقة والطريقة التقليد التفسيري للتفسير 0

تفحص الدراسة فهم (قدامرين) للصفة التاريخية من النصوص وكم معاني النصوص متأثرة في رحلتهم بمرور الوقت () مفاهيم مثل هذا الواقع للغات الطبيعة المتغيرة لكل شيء نصي واحتفال الموقف الصناعي نحو معارضة العوامل سيفحص بدقة في هذا المسعى الحرج ()