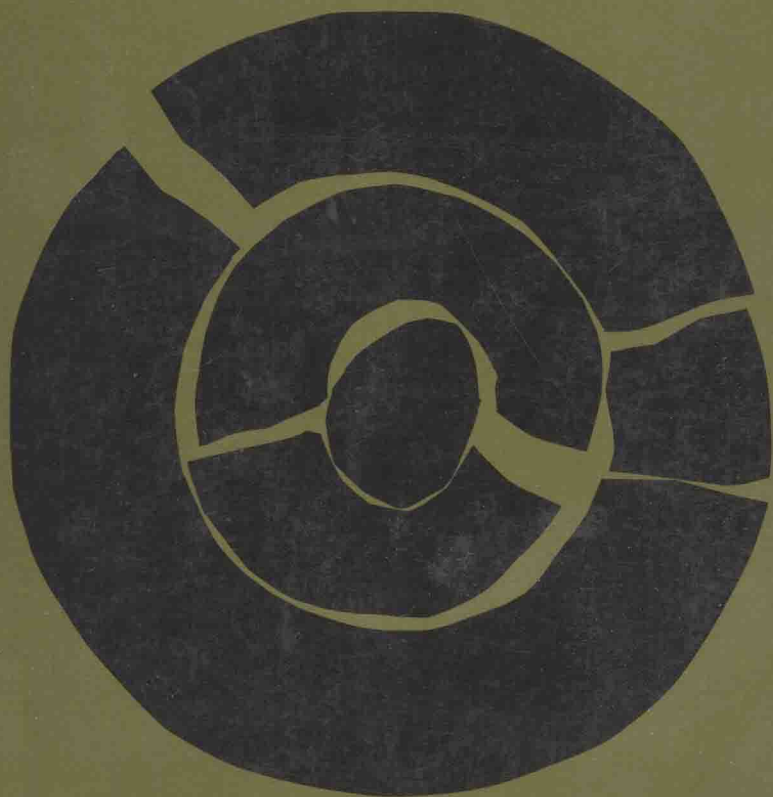


# **The Critical Circle**

**David  
Couzens  
Hoy**

Literature, History,  
and Philosophical  
Hermeneutics



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Philosophical Hermeneutics

David Couzens Hoy

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# **The Critical Circle**

## *Foreword*

*The Critical Circle* investigates the celebrated hermeneutic circle, especially as it manifests itself in historical inquiry and literary criticism. Formulated variously in different theories of hermeneutics, the circle generally describes how, in the process of understanding and interpretation, part and whole are related in a circular way: in order to understand the whole, it is necessary to understand the parts, while to understand the parts it is necessary to have some comprehension of the whole. Whereas in earlier hermeneutics the circle is used primarily to describe the understanding of texts, in the hermeneutic philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer the circle becomes a fundamental principle of man's understanding of his own nature and situation. Understanding, and with it the hermeneutic circle, becomes a condition for the possibility of human experience and inquiry. The discovery and description of such conditions are the task of critical philosophy. The term "critical" in the title, then, suggests that the circle is not a merely adventitious feature of the criticism of literary texts. On the contrary, it is a category discovered by critical philosophy to be essential and indispensable to all humanistic thinking.

The term "critical" also connotes crisis, and indeed it is a theme of the phenomenological tradition, and of Heidegger and Edmund Husserl in particular, to insist that the natural and humanistic sciences face a crisis that requires philosophical reflection on their very foundations. Whether or not the humanities in general and

the literary sciences in particular face such a crisis today is an open question. The present proliferation of interpretive methods provides some evidence that a crisis does exist. There is a general desire to rethink the very nature of literary interpretation, often accompanied by the hope of overcoming the crisis by making interpretation more objective and "scientific." But the hermeneutic circle cannot be the solution to such a crisis, since hermeneutic philosophy aims precisely to provoke reflection, and to challenge the putative certainty of established methods. Not a new method or "approach" to practical interpretation, the hermeneutical theory is more generally a prolegomenon to a philosophical poetics. Since poetry can only come to be in an understanding, the first step involves an account of the conditions for the possibility of the *understanding* of poetic works. According to the hermeneutic account, however, the understanding of a text is conditioned by the self-understanding of the interpretation. This means that the reflection on the ways in which the literary understanding has come about is a crucial moment of literary criticism. Self-reflection and a clearer self-understanding are critical if the interpretive process is to realize its essential possibilities.

Hermeneutic philosophy also emphasizes the extent to which self-understanding is conditioned by the tradition in which it stands and the continuing community of researchers to which it relates. The present study must likewise acknowledge its debts to a number of thinkers. Without the original inspiration of discussions with Karsten Harries and Hans-Georg Gadamer this book would not have been written. The manuscript owes much to criticisms and ideas from students at Yale, Princeton, and UCLA, as well as from such colleagues and friends as Richard Rorty, Stanley Corngold, Walter Kaufmann, Edward Casey, Richard Palmer, Peter McCormick, Werner Marx, Ludwig Siep, and the hospitable Kümmerers of Tübingen, Germany. My wife, Joyce Beck Hoy, has contributed immeasurably to both theoretical and practical aspects of the realization of this book. A portion of Chapter Five is published in Marie-Rose Logan's special issue of *Yale French Studies* (No. 52, 1975) on literature and philosophy. I am grateful to Robert Zachary for his patience and encouragement, and to Ruth Hein for her editorial assistance. Research for this book was generously supported by Princeton University and the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung.

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## *Introduction*

Though Hermes was known as the messenger of the gods, he did not necessarily always carry an explicit message, nor did his appearance invariably cause joy. His appearance itself could be the message—he was said to lead the souls into the underworld at death. So the Greeks knew a long time ago that the medium could be the message, but this insight did not breed the enthusiasm that it does today. In the *Cratylus*, for instance, Socrates points out that Hermes, the god who invented language and speech, could be called interpreter or messenger but also thief, liar, or contriver (see 408a-d). Words, Socrates says, have the power to reveal, but they also conceal; speech can signify all things, but it also turns things this way and that. Hence Socrates finds it significant that Pan, the son of Hermes, is smooth and divine above and goatlike below, for language itself is divided into the true and the false—the true insofar as it approaches the divine and the false insofar as it is associated with the tragic ways of man. Hermes himself was not above playing with this conflict, and hence the gods' messages were often oracular and ambiguous.

In the absence of Hermes, the modern age needs hermeneutics. In a more limited sense, hermeneutics is the concern with speech and writing, and hence with the methodology of interpretation of texts. When hermeneutics was largely an ancillary discipline of theology, the "word" to be interpreted was that of the Bible; interpretation involved spelling out the meaning of a word that already

spoke to and claimed its hearers. Because such hermeneutics could presuppose the immediacy of the claim of meaning, it can be seen as essentially optimistic. Such optimism is radically undercut, however, by the suspicion that the surface clarity of conscious thought masks hidden struggles at deeper levels of consciousness. Such modern thinkers as Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud mark the re-discovery of the demonic side of Hermes.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequent hermeneutic theory is then charged with the task of describing the possibility of these new dimensions of interpretation, without necessarily falling into a reductivistic naturalism that explains the distortions of consciousness in terms of underlying physical or material causes. Hermeneutics becomes a philosophical problematic in its own right. The need is no longer the more restricted one of providing rules for proper interpretation; rather, a more encompassing necessity arises of explaining the conditions for the very possibility of understanding. Heidegger labels the philosophical project of *Being and Time* a hermeneutic phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> The term *hermeneutic* is not used restrictively to mean "the methodology of those humane sciences which are historiological in character" (BT 62; SZ 38). Heidegger believes this limited sense to be derivative from a more primordial philosophical "hermeneutics" that gives a philosophical interpretation of all human existence. Since philosophy is itself an aspect of human existence, the philosophical interpretation will also have to account for its own possibility. Such a philosophy will be hermeneutic in the further sense, then, of containing a circular reflection on its own conditions. In a passage that is now central to any discussion of hermeneutic, Heidegger discusses this hermeneutic circle:

Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted. This is a fact that has always been remarked, even if only in the area of derivative ways of understanding and interpretation, such as philological Interpretation. The latter belongs within the range of scientific knowledge. Such knowledge demands the rigor of a demonstration to provide grounds for it. In a scientific proof, we may not presuppose what it is our task to provide grounds for. But if interpretation must in any case already operate in that which is understood, and if it must draw its nurture from this, how is it to bring any scientific results to maturity without moving in a circle, especially if, moreover, the understanding which is presupposed still operates within our common information about man and the world? Yet according to the most elementary rules of logic, this circle is a *circulus vitiosus*. [BT 194; SZ 152]

Heidegger goes on to point out, however, that the circle is only vicious given a certain ideal of knowledge—the ideal of objectivity. Objectivity is not meant simply in the weak sense of “not purely subjective,” nor in the moderate sense of “unbiased” or “disinterested.” These senses often presuppose a much stronger sense in which scientific proof is said to be objective. The ideal in this stronger sense involves an epistemological model that has dominated the Cartesian tradition. It postulates the task of finding elements so fundamental that they cannot be further subdivided, using these simples as an incontestable starting point for rigorous deduction.

Not all human understanding has this kind of knowledge as its ideal, however. For instance, when the understanding takes place within a system of relations and consists of their detailed explication, there is nothing vicious about passing through the starting point again in the course of explication.<sup>3</sup> Heidegger maintains that such circularity underlies all understanding, and that the methodological ideal of scientific objectivism is merely derivative, appropriate only for a limited range of cognition:

*But if we see this circle as a vicious one and look out for ways of avoiding it, even if we just “sense” it as an inevitable imperfection, then the act of understanding has been misunderstood from the ground up. . . . What is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way. This circle of understanding . . . is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.* [BT 194-5; SZ 153]

In this discussion of the hermeneutic circle Heidegger has in mind the historical sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) rather than the natural sciences. He thinks it is a mistake, however, to denigrate the former and to insist on a radical difference in scientific rigor between them (BT 195; SZ 153). Historiography, in fact, is of special importance to Heidegger because it is the paradigm case for his attempt to push philosophical inquiry beyond the procedures of particular disciplines to the fundamental categories of all understanding and experience as such. The category he discovers in this case is that of historicity—the distinctive ontological mark of man, whose existence is always temporally and historically situated.<sup>4</sup> Historicity is an essential feature of the hermeneutical circle, and of philosophy as well. In contrast with the dream of Cartesian

"First Philosophy," on Heidegger's view there is no presuppositionless knowledge. All understanding presupposes a prior grasp, a preunderstanding of the whole. Since preconceptions always condition our knowledge, it is impossible to suppress every "subjective" determinant of understanding.

Heidegger's critique of the ideal of objectivity and his argument for the primacy of a circular interpretive understanding awaken fear of the ultimate dismissal of objectivity. Can scientists and scholars any longer speak meaningfully of the truth or validity of their conclusions? Can researchers engage in rational debate about the appropriateness of methods, and can they appeal to "scientific" standards in the face of wild speculations?

Heidegger tries to allay these fears by granting some legitimacy to objectifying research and by insisting that the preunderstandings that influence research and inquiry should not be based on "fancies or popular convictions," but rather should be worked out in terms of "the things themselves" (*die Sachen selbst*—*BT* 195; *SZ* 153). Heidegger himself only exploits the polemic value of his critique, however, remaining cryptic about its positive consequences. Further analysis of the nature and procedure of the various humanistic and scientific disciplines is needed.

A more complete hermeneutic theory—one that devotes considerable discussion to the interpretive disciplines and yet incorporates Heidegger's account of understanding and the hermeneutic circle—is provided by the Heidelberg philosopher and former student of Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>5</sup> Any student or scholar of the humanities will want to know whether this new philosophical hermeneutics gives a reasonable description of the processes of understanding and interpreting. For humanists, the central question concerns the grounds by which their interpretations can be said to be valid and their insights true. Any hermeneutic theory should account for the possibility of adjudicating between conflicting interpretive understandings. A theory unable to do so will be called radical relativism and most probably dismissed as useless. **Whether Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics can carry through its critique of objectivism without falling into relativism will be the central concern of this book.**

Not all hermeneutic theorists follow the lines of Gadamer and Heidegger, and this study begins by examining some recent objec-

tions to what is considered the dangerous historical relativism still lurking in Gadamer's philosophy. In the important book *Validity in Interpretation*,<sup>6</sup> E. D. Hirsch develops a very different hermeneutical answer from Gadamer's to the questions of the nature and locus of meaning in literary texts, and the validity of the interpreter's understanding of such meaning. In contrast with the principles of the American New Criticism, Hirsch strives to guarantee the objectivity of interpretation by reviving the notion of the author's intention. Gadamer's and Heidegger's apparent historicism—their insistence on the historical conditions of knowledge and thought—would be undercut by this attempt at breaking out of the hermeneutical circle and anchoring the chain of interpretation in the bedrock of the author's intention and the one right interpretation following from it. The sharp divergence between Gadamer and Hirsch on the methodology of interpretation is the result of the same fundamental disagreement about the nature of philosophy that led Heidegger to break with Husserl's more Cartesian phenomenology and to label his own distinctively anti-Cartesian philosophy a hermeneutical one. Hirsch combines a sympathy for Husserl with one for the more traditional line of hermeneutics running from Schleiermacher and Dilthey to the contemporary Italian theorist, Emilio Betti.<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, on the other hand, follows Heidegger in abandoning the foundationalist enterprise that looks for a presuppositionless starting point in the self-certainty of subjectivity, and in stressing instead the interpretive and historical character of all understanding, including philosophical self-understanding.

This difference becomes clear in the discussion of Hirsch's views about the intention and meaning of literary texts in Chapter One, which serves as a propaedeutic for the exposition of the basic concepts of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in Chapter Two. Gadamer's most original contribution to the history of hermeneutics is his linguistic turn. In contrast with hermeneutic theories that view understanding as a psychological process mediating the private experiences of separate subjectivities (such as a writer and a reader), Gadamer thinks of understanding as a linguistic phenomenon. Whereas previous hermeneutics may have appealed to a concept like empathy to close the gap between text and interpreter, Gadamer develops the idea of what he calls the linguisticity

(Sprachlichkeit) of understanding in order to eliminate the very problem of such a hermeneutical gap. Other recent philosophers in the Continental tradition have also advanced theories of the nature of writing (Jacques Derrida) and of the semantic dimensions of interpretation (Paul Ricoeur). In Chapter Three Gadamer's concept of linguisticity is tested both against these theories and against the special problems presented by the self-conscious linguisticity of literary texts.

Gadamer's attempt to explain away the traditional problem of the hermeneutical gap by substituting a linguistic model for the Cartesian psychologistic one should not be taken as a dismissal of historical and cultural differences. In Chapter Four it becomes clear that no thinker is as willing to emphasize such differences as Gadamer. Traditional hermeneutics conceived interpretation as rendering familiar everything that at first appears strange and unfamiliar. Such a theory thus applies a rather authoritarian and dogmatic principle of charity that assumes that the set of true beliefs is everywhere and always largely the same, and that it is also identical to one's own beliefs. Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, on the other hand, is structured to preserve the differences and tensions between the text's and the interpreter's horizons of belief, while at the same time affirming the possibility of the interpreter's claim to have understood the text. Unlike Kant who thinks he understands Plato better than Plato understood himself, Gadamer believes we cannot claim to understand Plato's texts better, only differently.

Some philosophers will object that this apparently historicist principle undercuts the very possibility not only of valid interpretation but, more important, of legitimate criticism. Jürgen Habermas, who acknowledges Husserl but not Heidegger as a philosophical parent, criticizes Gadamer for not supplying more explicit grounds for criticism. In their famous debate, recounted in Chapter Four, Habermas contests Gadamer's claim that his hermeneutical philosophy has universal scope because of the involvement of linguisticity in all aspects of human activity. From Habermas's more Marxist perspective, Gadamer's insistence on the universality of language in understanding and knowledge overlooks social determinants of knowledge such as power relations and the work structure. Habermas himself, however, works out a

theory of communication that is far more detailed than Gadamer's account of linguisticity, and he too claims universal status for such a theory (calling it "Universal Pragmatics"). He also posits a transcendental and thus apparently unhistorical notion of truth (based on Peirce's consensus theory) that applies in all rational dialogues or discourse situations. Gadamer in turn strongly resists this unhistorical notion of rationality, and insists that there is nothing paradoxical about his own thesis of the historical character of all understanding.

The outcome of these discussions has consequences not only for literary criticism but also for other fields of the humanities. Most of these fields involve an essentially historical dimension. The methodological questions raised in hermeneutics probe into the very possibility of thinking historically. Thus, whether history is viewed as continuous or as discontinuous (involving radical ruptures or paradigm shifts) will make a difference to the kinds of explanations a discipline gives and to the extent to which it searches for causes and general principles. While Gadamer's theory maintains that the interpretive understanding is different, not better, and thus recognizes the possibility of discontinuity between the interpreter and what he interprets, it also makes a central principle of the fact that the interpretation stands in and is conditioned by a tradition. Is it paradoxical to insist both on the possibility of historical discontinuity and on the necessary continuity of the interpreter with his own historical tradition? This must be discussed in detail, especially in the case of the poetic work of art that, as a unique creation, apparently acquires its aesthetic status through its unexpected novelty and its radical transformation of the history of literature. In general, however, it should be clear that by challenging humanist disciplines to think not only about the historical character of their object of study but also about the historical character of their own discipline, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics makes a better self-understanding in these disciplines an essential precondition for the legitimacy of their enterprise.

While hermeneutical philosophy offers a theory of understanding and interpretation applicable to all fields of human inquiry, each field has distinctive methodological problems. Applying hermeneutics to jurisprudence or theology, for instance, will require different considerations from those demanded by philology. The

field of literary scholarship, however, is a particularly crucial test for a hermeneutical theory. Not only is it clearly concerned with the interpretation of texts but the texts it interprets are the most problematic kind. As works of art, literary and poetic texts appear to stand apart from other, more ordinary uses of language, where the language itself tends to disappear into its use rather than emerge and become visible for its own sake. The resulting philosophical problems about the meaning and value of these aesthetic entities are compounded when the activity of literary criticism enters the picture. The tension is heightened by such contrasts as those between ordinary and poetic language, description and evaluation, and historical influence and aesthetic novelty. Literary criticism finds itself drawn to both poles of these distinctions. It must ask itself whether it is bound to the flow of historical sequence, or whether it can break up time and rearrange the units, either conflating them into an eternal synchrony, as structuralism seems to do, or even inverting the flow through the discovery of backward causations, as Harold Bloom's theory implies.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics intends to revise significantly the fundamental concepts of aesthetics. The practical relevance of these philosophical revisions is most apparent in the new light they project on the basic tenets of interpretive procedures such as formalist literary criticism. Under increasing attack in recent years by literary theorists such as Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, formalism is diagnosed as a method that begins and ends with the observation and analysis of the formal properties of art and thus tends "to isolate the aesthetic fact from its human content."<sup>8</sup> Formalism is thus a catchword that links diverse approaches to literary criticism, ranging from American New Criticism to linguistic structuralism. If I. A. Richards is the original representative of the former, Roland Barthes is exemplary of the latter. Barthes will be considered in the course of this study in order to heighten the contrasts between structuralism and hermeneutics.

Formalism develops as a legitimate reaction to the abuse of historical philology and such methods as biographical and source research, methods that appear irrelevant to the *poetic* aspects of literary texts. Even if this reaction is appropriately motivated, however, it is also an overreaction that tends to eliminate historical



dimensions from poetry and its interpretation. Both Hartman and de Man think the task of contemporary criticism is to go beyond formalism, but not in a way that retreats to the historical methods and the theory of language of preformalist philology. A crucial test of the viability of contemporary criticism is whether it can formulate a program of literary history that uses the strengths of formalism and yet avoids its current impasse. The relevance of hermeneutics for recent literary criticism, to be seen in Chapter Five, is that it offers a theoretical formulation of literary history which overcomes the paradoxical tension between the historical nature of interpretation and the aesthetic nature of the poetic text.

Practical criticism itself moves beyond both Cartesian psychology and purely synchronic linguistic theory in the recent development of "reception theory," also to be discussed in Chapter Five. Such a theory explores the consequences of maintaining that literary meaning is not a function of its genetic origin in an author's psyche, nor of purely intrinsic relations between the printed marks on a page, but of its reception in a series of readings (and misreadings) constituting its history of influence. This kind of theory follows philosophical hermeneutics in seeing literary history not as a paradox but as a paradigm for all interpretation. The relative success or failure of this approach is less important than the fact that it represents a development in the history of criticism which parallels the movement in the history of hermeneutics away from psychologism and toward a theory of language that also stresses the temporality and historicity of understanding and interpretation.

Before these connections between practical criticism and philosophical hermeneutics can be discussed in detail, however, the strengths of the alternative positions that insist on formal properties and objective guarantees must be examined and tested. The first chapter, therefore, raises the question of the objectivity of interpretation and investigates the theoretical problems issuing from the representative position of E. D. Hirsch.