Language and Hermeneutics in John Dewey’s Theory of Inquiry

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Abstract: After defining hermeneutics as the systematic and justified revelation of a meaning, I will try to demonstrate in my paper that John Dewey’s theory of inquiry is a type of hermeneutics. I consider that Dewey’s hermeneutics is highly comprehensive, since it also examines the meanings which man creates when interpreting nature. In order to prove it, I will analyse the novel Băltaful [The Hatchet] written by a famous Romanian writer, Mihail Sadoveanu, trying to show that both the main character, Vitoria Lipan, in her detective investigations, and the hermeneut, who – at a different level – looks for the hidden meaning of the novel, follow the same Deweyan “pattern of inquiry”.

1. John Dewey – a great American philosopher – developed a special logic, which he named the theory of inquiry [1]. According to Dewey, sciences are systems of related meanings obtained through inquiry. An inquiry follows a certain pattern, by transforming, in a controlled way, an indeterminate, confusing situation into a determinate one, which, thus, gets meaning [2]. A problematic situation can be clarified only if it is transposed linguistically in our mind. Still, how can we get, by means of inquiry, to the individual meaning of a concrete situation, by using the meanings already acquired in a certain field? Dewey states that individual meaning can be obtained as a result of articulating a judgment, which arises from a chain of logical propositions. They can be either (i) existential propositions (which extract the relevant data from concrete situations) or (ii) conceptual propositions (which direct inquiries towards the best way to solve the given situations). These propositions collaborate [3]. The existential ones are similar to the workers who (selectively) excavate ancient objects from ruins. The conceptual ones are like the archeologists who establish the meaning of the objects found by the workers.

2. In Dewey’s case, naturalism had a great influence on his way of understanding things; thanks to the principle of the continuum of nature and, then, thanks to the principle of continuity of research (as inquiry, be it common sense or science), we are presented with a unitary and coherent manner of seeing the world. Starting from unicellular organisms to human beings, we encounter “indeterminate situations”, which have to become determinate in order to ensure the survival of the individual (either simple or complex). As regards human beings, indeterminate situations are all those issues that they have to face in life, and which they try to solve. Dewey developed this theory with a view to helping all those who are willing to correctly think and solve problems, since thinking correctly “makes all the difference”.

Thus, according to Dewey, the theory of inquiry is a kind of “hermeneutics of the real”. I will offer here a simple and common example (provided by Dewey, in fact). If I grope in a dark room and I stumble against something, I do not realize, at first, what exactly was placed in my way. Consequently, I face a problematic situation. I come up with all sorts of hypotheses (in Dewey’s terms, they are called ideas, as “plans of action”). Only when I turn on the light, do I really see what the obstacle was. It is that moment in which I understand, meaning that “the whole situation makes sense” [4].

3. My opinion is that Dewey’s theory of inquiry (i) is a special hermeneutics, and (ii) can also be the basis of an integral hermeneutics. In order to improve it, I conjugated Dewey’s conception with two other hermeneutical conceptions, elaborated by R.G. Collingwood and by Eugenio Coseriu.

3.1. For a better understanding of the concept of “integral hermeneutics”, I will provide the following example. Let us imagine that in front of us there is a flat stone which has some scratches on its surface.

(1) Eugenio Coseriu is interested in that stone only if its scratches represent a written text in a language he knows. This is the very point from where the interpretation, namely the quest for the meaning of that inscription (be it lacunar or not) may start. The instruments of analysis are offered to us, in this case, by the text linguistics (as a hermeneutics of sense), as Coseriu theorized and applied it in many of his contributions [5].
(2) R.G. Collingwood is interested in that stone only if it was handled by man, even if the respective scratches have nothing to do with a written message. What is important here is that man used the stone for a certain purpose, as a tool, etc. A hermeneut has to determine in this case – by means of very exact questions – the purpose (How did the man use the stone precisely? Was it for a good purpose or not?). Although the object subject to interpretation does no longer belong to language proper, we are still in the realm of culture (as well as of civilization), or (according to Kant) in the world of freedom and finality [6].

(3) John Dewey has the most comprehensive conception, since he goes beyond the frame of culture towards nature. A scratched stone may interest him even if it was not touched by man. According to him, a stone, if it is known as such, gets significance; however, if it is scratched and if we want to find out the source of the scratches, then we actually search for a meaning: the scratches may have been caused, for instance, by the sliding of a glacier down a mountain slope [7]. The respective meaning (provided there is no apprehension already) is obtained by means of inquiry.

Dewey’s hermeneutics (as “theory of inquiry”) can be applied to natural phenomena, but also, up to a point, to human (cultural) actions and even to texts/discourses (as concrete speech acts). Collingwood’s hermeneutics (as a “logic of question and answer”) can be applied both when researching historical events and archeological vestiges, and when interpreting texts (especially philosophical ones). Coseriu studies only language, but, in the same time, all the language, that is why his hermeneutics (out of which his text linguistics is only a part) is applicable (in principle) to any type of text and to any linguistic unit.

Since language (whose primary finality, as one of its universals, is semanticity) represents both one of the cultural forms, and the basis or the condition of culture itself, we should not commit the error to think that language has little importance in man’s world. In reality, the problem of knowledge and of “the content of consciousness” is always closely linked to language. Even in the case of natural phenomena recently researched, we actually do not “discover” meanings already existing in nature (as the Ancient Greeks used to believe), but we confer (new) meanings to the respective phenomena. Thus (according to Dewey), we permanently move in an “ocean of meanings”.

3.2. Each of these hermeneutics/theories excels in the area delimited as field of research. Harmoniously conjugated, thanks to the common parts of interference, which allow flowing from one territory to another, I believe the three hermeneutics have the ability to form a sui generis integral hermeneutics. The definition of integral hermeneutics, which I propose here, is a comprehensive one, valid, actually, for any type of hermeneutics; I thus find it reasonable to define hermeneutics as the systematic and justified revelation of a (meaningful) content [8]. The difference between the various types of hermeneutics lies in the way in which we conceive the respective “content”, namely the type of “meaning”.

I have placed John Dewey’s logic (seen as “the theory of inquiry”) at the base of the whole project since the American philosopher’s conception offers a truly integrative vision. Dewey does not seem to differentiate between solving a (real) problematic situation and revealing the meaning of a difficult (literary) text. In order to solve a (concrete) intricate situation, to get to its meaning, we need, first of all, to transpose it linguistically in our mind.

4. If the hermeneutics I promote is really an integral hermeneutics, then it should (even more) be applied successfully in the case of the analysis of literary texts as well, since we are convinced (according to G. Vico, W. von Humboldt and E. Coseriu) that logos poietikos (as artistic literature) represents the field of all the possibilities/ virtualities of human language in general. With a view to demonstrating this idea, I have chosen, as a case in point, Mihail Sadoveanu’s novel Baltagul (The Hatchet), published in 1930. This short Romanian novel illustrates the merits of the integral hermeneutics in almost all respects. At times, one gets the impression that this text was especially created to follow John Dewey’s conception about what an inquiry is.

4.1. The plot of the novel is the following: Nechifor Lipan, a shepherd, had left far away from home, to the region of Dorna, to buy some hundreds of sheep, but he never came back. His wife, Vitoria, extremely worried, suspects that he was murdered in order to be robbed. After having waited for him for a while, she sets off in quest of her husband, retracing his route, as if she were a real detective. During her investigations, she discovers Nechifor’s corpse in a ravine. With great skill, she reconstitutes the way in which the murder was committed, and she finally exposes the killer (Calistrat Bogza),
as well as his accomplice (Ilie Cuțnii). Here is the reconstruction of the murder, in her words: "Some might say that he was coming down the mountain. But I know better: he was going up it. And he was not alone! He had the dog with him. And there were two men besides. One of them had spurred on his horse towards the top, to see whether any one was in sight. The second walked behind Lipan, leading his horse by the halter. And it was not yet night. Only darkish. Some think that such deeds are done in the night, but I know that this was done while there was still daylight, towards sunset. When the man on the hill top signalled to show that no one was about and his companion need have no fear, the man who walked let go of his horse’s reins and drew the hatchet from under his left arm. Advancing stealthily along the path in his leather sandals, he came right behind Nechifor Lipan. He struck him just one blow – but a mighty one as would have cleft a tree trunk. Lipan threw up his hands, not having even the time to shout; he just fell forward, his face in the horse’s mane. Turning the hatchet, the man pushed the horse with it into the ravine. It was then the dog sprang at him. He kicked it in the jaw. The horse had been frightened and when it was pushed, it rolled down the slope. The dog went that way too. At first it had barked furiously, and the man had tried to hit it with his hatchet but the mastiff had leapt aside and gone slithering down the ravine after its master. That was all. The man who had remained behind mounted his horse and hastened to join the man at the top of the mountain, and they were gone. Nobody has discovered them to this day.” [9].

Undoubtedly, there is a major difference between (i) to remark (and to know empirically) such things and (ii) to develop a theory which offers the justifications and the principles that we need for correctly interpreting both difficult texts and intricate situations. The integral hermeneutics could be a solution for an efficient approach of the whole domain (possibly) subject to interpretation.

4.3. Let us examine carefully the story of Sadoveanu’s The Hatchet and see the extent at which Vitoria Lipan follows what Dewey calls “the pattern of an inquiry”. First of all, the heroine has to confront a “problematic situation”, a feeling of anxiety and confusion. This is exactly what is indicated in the aforementioned novel: “She had gradually drawn away from the world and had retired within herself. […] And yet she would find a way – her mind would plan and his [Gheorghită’s] arm carry out her plan. Her whole being was beginning to concentrate on these, as yet confused, plans whence light must issue. That was what one might call a problem – a word and a notion which were absolutely unknown to this woman of the mountains.” [11].

Next, a hypothesis (an idea) has to be launched in order to orient the inquiry in a certain direction, but not before having in mind (according to Dewey) a suggestion (that is vague meaning). Sadoveanu shows us how such a hypothesis is born in Vitoria’s mind: “So far nobody had brought her any light in that place of darkness they called Dorna. Although the icons knew, they were silent. And of the men she had spoken to, the servant of the King had alone breathed the truth. That truth was within herself but she did not dare stir it up. Evil men had killed Nechifor.” [12].
We cannot extend too much the analysis at this point. One of the greatest contributions that Dewey brings in his treatise (Logic. The Theory of Inquiry, 1938) is to reveal the way in which the interrelated system of meanings (of knowledge) or the “rational discourse” is (or can be) oriented to the individual, concrete situations. Thus, he makes an original classification of the types and subtypes of logical propositions (ranging from particular and singular propositions to generic and universal propositions), starting from criteria different from those of traditional logic. Obviously, the respective propositions refer mainly to the scientific inquiry, but, up to a point, they are valid for the common sense as well.

Vitoria’s judgments (rendered in the third person, by means of “internal focalization”) sometimes highlight such propositions, which are very similar to the universal and generic ones from Dewey’s classification: “No news had come from him, not even news about his death. And that meant that the robbers had pitched him into a well. If things were thus, nobody could discover the man’s corpse without a light from On High. So Saint Ann in the Bistrița monastery was still the mainstay of her hope. It was the Saint’s will that understanding should come to her today. And after this understanding, the Saint somehow would determine which way they should take, and where to direct their search.” [13]. “Understanding” has here precisely the meaning looked for, which has the effect of a revelation: “Although she now knew that Nechifor Lipan was dead and felt a poignant sorrow, she seemed to have emerged from darkness.” [14].

What is more, Dewey’s logic pays great attention to natural signs and to their relation, as well as to the way in which inferences occur with their help. The Hatchet also abounds in references to these natural signs, which, if correctly related to Victoria’s inferences, help solve the problem that bothers her.

4.4. One has to determine the extent to which the “presuppositions” theorized by Collingwood (in his book An Essay of Metaphysics) can be invoked in this discussion, since the world in which Vitoria Lipan lives is one in which people are guided by various beliefs and “absolute” convictions (a world in which Christianity coexists with reminiscences of Paganism). On the other hand, Vitoria often gives the impression that she reconstructs Nechifor Lipan’s thoughts. She knows her husband so well that she guesses what he could or could not have done (that is why she sometimes pretends to have talked with the dead).

4.5. So far, we have had in mind a “hermeneutics of the real”. Vitoria did not evaluate a text, by looking for its meanings, but a real problematic situation whose meaning she tried to discover, in order for her and for the dead’s soul to find their inner peace. Undoubtedly, so that she could think over the whole situation, the heroine needed to represent it linguistically (that is discursively) in her mind. This was the only way to solve it. We can now move beyond the happening proper to the meaning (or meanings) of the novel itself, while its quest and revelation is the task of text linguistics. We should no longer insist on the fact that this search is also an inquiry and that it is conducted (or should be conducted) – at least for a hermeneut/literary critic – with scientific means. A hermeneut should justify the identified meaning, to prove the way in which the meaning is articulated. In the case of a text (as the Sadovenian novel analysed here), the logic of question and answer is inevitably applied by a literary critic.

Of all the hermeneut analyses devoted to The Hatchet, the most interesting and convincing interpretation (in my opinion) and, at the same time, an excellent application of text linguistics (similar to Coseriu’s hermeneutics of sense) is the analysis made by Alexandru Paleologu in a book about Sadoveanu’s works. After having remarked that the theme of the novel The Hatchet is love (“a novel […] of a woman’s burning and crazy love”), Paleologu demonstrates by means of numerous arguments (which I will not resume here) that the story is built on a mythical scenario (which has little in common with the ballad Morita (of an Egyptian origin: the myth of Isis and Osiris (also mentioned or suggested by Sadoveanu in other literary works). There are a lot of correspondences: Nechifor is Osiris, the one killed by Seth (=Bogza) and thrown in the Nile (that is in the ravine); Vitoria, the one who looks for him, is Isis; Gheorghită, their son, is Horus; Lupu, the dog, is Anubis; the descent into the ravine is a “descent into the Inferno” meant to initiatic, etc.

The proofs that Al. Paleologu brings to support his thesis reveal exactly how the respective meaning is gradually articulated, on different levels. In this regard, he notes: “The active substratum of the novel, which sends us further, beyond the narration proper, is this ‘virile initiation’ of Gheorghită. The meaning of the book is to be found here; in fact, we believe that it was written envisaging this very crucial moment.” [15].
Finally, concerning his own “hypothesis” (as an idea – “plan of action”), which generated the investigation in question, the Romanian essayist states the following (in complete accordance with Dewey’s theory): “We reckon that deciphering the Isis – Osiris theme in The Hatchet is convincing enough. [...] If ‘the penny hadn’t dropped’, as the saying goes, it would have surely ‘dropped’ to someone else one day.” [16].

5. This movement of translation from logic (as the theory of inquiry) to hermeneutics was possible thanks to the major interest that Dewey manifested for language in general and for meaning in particular. For this very reason, I am convinced that Dewey’s logic can be considered not only a hermeneutics like many others, but also the basis of an integral hermeneutics, which is worth being developed and applied.

References

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[10] Ibid., pp. 81-82; here and in what follows, the italics are mine.


[12] Ibid., p. 61.


[14] Ibid., p. 64.


[16] Ibid., p. 150.