

## THE BARBARITY OF INTERPRETATION

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*The barbarian of interpretation*, in his barbarity, cannot be omitted from the line of 'the new barbarians'. In the following, I will underline not only the threatening side of the barbarian of interpretation, but also the fact that the entirety of modern hermeneutics appeared in order to offer a certain protection from 'the invasion' of these strange barbarians disguised as gentle scholars, commentators and interpreters. As an irony of fate, hermeneutics, the science that was supposed to protect civilization from the barbarity of interpretation, has become a terrible weapon used by these barbarians to intensify their attacks, as has always happened in history with the weapons captured by the barbarian hords from the protectors of civilization.

**I. On a Very Civilized Barbarian.** When one talks about the dialectics between civilization and barbarity the most commonly used quotation is 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.<sup>1</sup> Knowing that a great number of the atrocities committed during the Third Reich were axiologically justified using an abusive interpretation, we could think that the interpretation is also barbaric. Actually, the 'scientific' interpretation has always represented a certain form of barbarity and not only due to Auschwitz.

At the end of his thorough study of barbarity, Manfred Schneider concludes that barbarity is present in each civilization.<sup>2</sup> Barbarity was and will be for a long time not only a research area but also an authentic obsession for every 'civilized' man.

The possible number of definitions for *barbarity* is identical with the number of the present or future definitions of *civilization*. Manfred Schneider, the author of *Der Barbar. Endzeitstimmung und Kulturrecycling*, explains the fascination of Walter Benjamin's writings through the fact that Benjamin hides behind the discourse as 'barbarian of the interpretation' (*als Barbar der Interpretation*).<sup>3</sup> From this point of view, *the barbarian* becomes an *instigator*, transforming masterpieces which were considered sacrosanct into ruins. Immanuel Kant was a *barbarian of meanings* and not by chance his devastating criticism of the old metaphysical view motivated his contemporaries to name him 'the universal destroyer'. All the spectacular axiological overthrows were due to such instigators.

<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft' in *Prismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1969), p. 31. English translation by Samuel and Shierry Weber, *Prisms. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Manfred Schneider, *Der Barbar. Endzeitstimmung und Kulturrecycling* (München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997), p. 296.

<sup>3</sup> Manfred Schneider, 'Der Barbar der Bedeutungen: Walter Benjamins Ruinen' in Norbert Bolz/Wilhelm von Reijen, *Ruinen des Denkens. Denken in Ruinen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), p. 234.

When *the interpreter* is animated by the passion for destruction, there is also a dark side of *the barbarity of the interpretation*, as in any other form of barbarity. For him there are no 'boundaries of the interpretation' and no rules or laws because he 'creates the law': his interpretation is the *only* valid one. *The barbarian of the interpretation*, in the negative sense of the concept, vandalizes the most obvious meanings of an author's writings, and misrepresents the clearest thoughts in order to suit his own intentions.

To illustrate this concept, we will consider Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and one of his many *barbarians of interpretation*. In 1936, at the peak of the Nazi regime, Johannes-Müller-Rathenow published *Nietzsches Sehnsucht nach dem kommenden Führer*, an abusive interpretation of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and of the writings from *The Will to Power*, with the following dedication: *Dem großen Führer (To the Great Führer)*. As other authors, Johannes-Müller-Rathenow identifies *the Superman* with Adolf Hitler. After the First World War, Friedrich Nietzsche was seen as a critic of the republic and a prophet of the new German empire.<sup>4</sup> Beginning in 1931, when Alfred Baeumler's work *Nietzsche, der Philosoph und Politiker* appeared, we can talk about Nietzsche's transformation into a 'Nazi' writer.

I am opposed to 1. socialism, because it dreams quite naively of "the good, true, and beautiful" and of "equal rights" (anarchism also desires the same ideal, but in a more brutal fashion); 2. parliamentary government and the press, because these are the means by which the herd animal becomes master.<sup>5</sup>

Using this kind of affirmation, authors like Alfred Baeumler were able to interpret *The Will to Power* as a metaphysics of power and as a philosophical support in the battle against democracy and liberalism.

After Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, the barbarians of interpretation identified Adolf Hitler as *The Superman*. A creator of new values must be first of all an annihilator of values.<sup>6</sup> *Der Führer* as *Übermensch* has to question all the past values. He must embody the danger, and be *hard*, as *spoke Zarathustra*.

Nietzsche has in mind *the barbarity of interpretation* in the following excerpt from *The Will to Power*:

The humor of European culture: one holds *this* to be true but does *that*. E.g., what is the point of the arts of reading and criticism as long as the ecclesiastical interpretation of the Bible, Protestant as well as Catholic, is cultivated as ever?<sup>7</sup>

In another excerpt from *The Will to Power*, *the barbarity of interpretation* is clearly mentioned:

One does not consider closely enough how barbarous the concepts are by which we Europeans still live. Those men have been capable of believing that "salvation of the soul"

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Zapata, "Die besten Geister der Nation". *Philosophie und Nationalsozialismus* (Wien: Picus-Verlag, 1994), p. 193.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p.397.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für alle und keinen* in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Das Hauptwerk* (München: Band 3, Nymphenburger Verlag, 1995), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 139.

depended on a book! - And they tell me this is still believed today.

What is the point of scientific education, criticism and hermeneutics if such a lunatic exposition of the Bible as is still cultivated by the church has not yet turned the blush of shame into a permanent skin color?.<sup>8</sup>

Johannes Müller-Rathenow interprets *Thus spoke Zarathustra* as Nietzsche's longing for the future *Führer*, but Nietzsche uses this term only once, in the chapter *On science* without any political signification.<sup>9</sup> Adolf Hitler, 'der große Führer', is seen as *Zarathustra*, the herald of *The Overman*, or as *The Overman*. Even if the paternity of this term is attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, it appears for the first time in Goethe's writings in Mephisto's conversation with Faust:

'You have implored me to appear,  
Make known my voice, reveal my face;  
Your soul's entreaty won my grace:  
Here I am! What abject fear  
Grasps you, oh *superman!* ...'<sup>10</sup>

It is known that Friedrich Nietzsche conceived *Thus spoke Zarathustra* as the most beautiful German poem after Goethe's *Faust*, from whom he took the term *Overman*, (or *Superman*) (*Übermensch*) and also the idea that 'Man is something that must be surpassed is reading a poem as if it were a scientific or philosophical theory. 'In all the places, where he expresses his most secret longings, in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Will to Power* or in other writings, Nietzsche keeps in his heart *the ideal* of the great *Führer*.<sup>11</sup> The essential characteristic of his soul could not be anything else but *the will to power*.<sup>12</sup> *The Führer's* entire axiological universe gravitates around this value. Zarathustra, identified with *the Führer* in Johannes Müller-Rathenow's view, gives a profound signification to *blood and race*: 'Of all that is written I love only what a man has written with his blood. Write with blood, and you will experience that blood is spirit'.<sup>13</sup> The barbarian of interpretation could use any text, such as Nietzsche's, according to his needs. The spirit of the race and also the spirit of the individual creates 'the blood', that is why 'like spirit like blood. The blood is the carrier of the ego, as it is proved by fear and shame'.<sup>14</sup>

Without detailing the interpretation of Nietzsche's work as it appears in *Nietzsche's Sehnsucht nach dem kommenden Führer*, it is worth mentioning that Johannes Müller-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust*, in the English translation by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Johannes Müller-Rathenow, *Nietzsches Sehnsucht nach dem kommenden Führer* (Leipzig/Strassburg/Zürich: Heiz Verlag, 1936), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 41. In the English translation by Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), p.152.

<sup>14</sup> Müller-Rathenow, *Nietzsches Sehnsucht*, p. 29.

Rathenow, as a true barbarian of interpretation, chooses from *Thus spoke Zarathustra* and from *The Will to Power* those paragraphs which, extracted from context, were suited to Adolf Hitler's created image. Zarathustra values 'the deep midnight'<sup>15</sup> more than the light of day. In this context, Johannes Müller-Rathenow's reference to Novalis' *Hymns to the Night* seems to be natural. Friedrich Nietzsche is just a late Romantic. The barbarity of the interpretation begins when *Romanticism* as a way of being is projected over the *Führer*: 'Here, the future *Führer* proves to be a romantic, even though Nietzsche virulently rejected The Romanticism'.<sup>16</sup>

To the end of Nietzsche's *Sehnsucht nach dem kommenden Führer*, 'the barbarian of interpretation' is no longer satisfied by the imposed equality between *Zarathustra* or *Übermensch* and *The Führer* to whom the work is dedicated, and he falls into a hermeneutical delirium. Nietzsche's writings are no longer considered as a pretext for an interpretation abuse. *Zarathustra* is forgotten and *The Führer* becomes 'the great German' as 'the measure of all things ... From this point of view, the great leader of the nation (*der große Volksführer*) could become the leader of humanity'.<sup>17</sup> Thus spoke Johannes Müller-Rathenow, one of the barbarians of interpretation, in the case of Nietzsche's work.

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**II. Freedom of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Injustice.** The freedom of interpretation of the sacred text, openly proclaimed for the first time in the Protestant cultural space, also brought a series of dangers. Modern Hermeneutics, created also in the Protestant world, underlines the moral side of interpretation. Flacius Illyricus said that in the interpretation process the sources of evil are *error* and *dishonesty*.<sup>18</sup> In the first Hermeneutics written in German<sup>19</sup> it is mentioned that there are 'dishonest interpretations'; that is why Georg Friedrich Meier creates the principle of hermeneutical fairness (*hermeneutische Billigkeit*), which emphasizes the necessity that the interpreter must approach the object of his interpretation with good intentions. Jean Greisch notices that the fairness of the interpretation consists in the agreement of the interpretation and the author's inten-

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, p. 355. In the English translation, p. 339.

<sup>16</sup> Müller-Rathenow, *Nietzsches Sehnsucht*, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Matthias Flacius, *Über den Erkenntnisgrund der Heiligen Schrift*, übersetzt von Lutz Geldsetzer, (Düsseldorf: Janssen Verlag, 1968), p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> Georg Friedrich Meier, *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst* (Düsseldorf: Stern-Verlag, 1965), p. 48.

tion expressed in his writing.<sup>20</sup> Obviously things seldom go this way. That is why in the second part of *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst*, Meier speaks about the injustice of an interpreter (*Die Unbilligkeit eines Auslegers*).<sup>21</sup> When the interpreter is morally unfair, he doesn't just commit a hermeneutical error, but also 'he acts out of hate towards the creator of the signs'.<sup>22</sup>

The moral aspect of interpretation was essential for the creation of modern Hermeneutics. 'Even the title of the first writing about general hermeneutics, *Idea boni interpretis et malitiosi calumniatoris*, clearly indicates a moral side.'<sup>23</sup> Flacius Illyricus in *Clavis scripturae sacrae*, also mentions that 'the interpreter... often darkens even more the writing instead of clarifying it, and this happens out of ignorance or mischief'.<sup>24</sup> He underlines the fact that often the interpreters analyze a written work with dishonesty. Using a verse from the *New Testament*, Flacius says that these are they who 'seeing see not; and hearing they hear not' (Mathew, 13.13).<sup>25</sup>

Abusive interpretation was limited and even more cut out from the moment it was seen as a danger. Flacius Illyricus, one of the first representatives of Protestant Hermeneutics, in his writing *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*, draws attention to the 'barbaric misinterpretation' of the biblical text<sup>26</sup>, misinterpretation which originated in either the ignorance of the languages of the sacred texts, or in the interpreters' doctrinal or other kind of interests. Flacius, quoting an excerpt from Paul's *Epistle to the Colossians* (2.8), says 'The Apostle speaks here not just about pseudophilosophy but also about the abusive use and usurpation of the true philosophy'.<sup>27</sup> Precisely to avoid errors and interpretation abuses, Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, establishing as a hermeneutical principle the lack of any principle: *sola scriptura*.<sup>28</sup> Luther considered that the accurate translation of the biblical texts is sufficient to understand them without the help of an interpreter like a priest or the theologian. He also thought that by removing the various, accumulated interpretations the original text again becomes legible. But as it is known, the German reformer in the translation process couldn't abstain himself from some excesses. Martin Luther adds or cuts out words from important excerpts of the Bible in order for the translation to correspond with his ideas about free will, grace and predestination. He admitted these interventions, deviations from the original text, but he justified it by saying that he

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Greisch, *Hermeneutik und Metaphysik. Eine Problemgeschichte* (München: Fink Verlag, 1993), p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Georg Friedrich Meier, *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst*, p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver R. Scholz, 'Die allgemeine Hermeneutik bei Georg Friedrich Meier' in Axel Bühler (Hrsg.), *Unzeitgemäße Hermeneutik - Verstehen und Verstehen und Interpretation im Denken der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1994), p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> Matthias Flacius, *Über den Erkenntnisgrund der Heiligen Schrift*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band XIV (Göttingen: Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), p. 599.

<sup>27</sup> Matthias Flacius, *Über den Erkenntnisgrund der Heiligen Schrift*, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Schleiermacher filosofo dell'interpretazione* (Milano: Mursia, 1968), p. 20.

only gives back more accurately the original spirit of Christianity.

Even more, his hermeneutical principle *sola scriptura* opened the way to some greater abuses than those that he wanted to stop. The Bible, accessible to all German readers, was interpreted in the most bizarre ways, and the consequences of these interpretations have been dramatic. In the Germany of those years many preachers walked across cities and villages with the Bible in their hands, telling the people that some economic, social and political aspects do not appear in the sacred text. As different as these interpretations were, corresponding to the preachers and interpreters' interests, they all called upon the same principle: *sola scriptura*.<sup>29</sup> The freedom of interpretation, which was one of the protestant principles, has to be limited by using a certain dogma.<sup>30</sup>

In the name of the Christian fraternity, armed peasantry attacked and ransacked the secular and religious properties, torturing priests and noblemen. The most horrible crimes were committed in the name of the Bible, interpreted to justify these acts from a moral and religious point of view.<sup>31</sup> By elaborating a set of efficient rules, abusive interpretations could have been avoided. As Logic was created to put an end to the sophistic excess of reason, so was Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, created to put an end to abusive interpretation. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, as all protestant hermeneutics until his time, was the result of such a necessity. Establishing rules and hermeneutical laws did not end this phenomenon, but amplified it. Any interpretive abuse could have been justified by referring to a certain 'science'.

We must notice that Schleiermacher, considered the founder of general hermeneutics, never spoke about a *science*, but about an *art of interpretation*, which he actually never published, perceiving its fragility. From the fragments and notes published after his death, his hermeneutics could never have become a science, as was believed to be possible by some early Protestant thinkers.<sup>32</sup>

**III. Interpretation 'Within the Limits of Reason Alone'.** In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Immanuel Kant created a certain philosophical theory of interpretation. It naturally follows the line of other Protestant hermeneutics. As in Flacius and Meier's writings, the moral aspect of interpretation is essential. The freedom of interpretation must be accompanied by a certain responsibility of the interpreter. In the matter of the philosophical theory of interpretation, Immanuel Kant, unlike his predecessors, does not elaborate a series of rules of interpretation; instead he creates a high instance which must control every interpretation of the sacred text. This high instance does not simply allow certain artificial interpretations, even more it encourages them. As shown in the sixth chapter of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, this hermeneutical high instance is

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Jörg Schreier, *Hermeneutik - Wahrheit und Verstehen. Darstellung und Texte* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1988), p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Detlef Plöse (Hrsg.), *Buch der Reformation. Eine Auswahl zeitgenössischer Zeugnisse 1476 – 1555* (Berlin: Union-Verlag, 1989), pp. 398-401.

<sup>32</sup> Johann Martin Chladenius, *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften*, (Düsseldorf: Stern-Verlag, 1969), p. 96.

‘religion of pure reason’. From Immanuel Kant’s point of view, if the interpretation of a text is realized according to ‘the universal practical rules of a religion of pure reason’ then there will be no *hermeneutical injustice*, even if this interpretation is obviously abusive and with no connection to the literary meaning or the author’s intention. This idea is clear in Kant’s own words:

Frequently this interpretation may, in the light of the text (of Revelation), appear forced – it may often really be forced; and yet if the text can possibly support it, it must be preferred to a literal interpretation which either contains nothing at all [helpful] to morality or else actually works counter to moral incentives.<sup>33</sup>

Immanuel Kant says that the Greek and Roman moral philosophers frequently used this kind of forced interpretation of their mythology. Also ‘the later Judaism, and even Christianity itself, consist of such interpretations, often very forced, but in both instances for ends unquestionably good and needful for all men’.<sup>34</sup> I name this forced interpretation, but for noble purposes, for which Immanuel Kant pleads, *theodicic interpretation*<sup>35</sup> because it is the exact type of interpretation used by Leibniz in his *Theodicy*. Even though it is an abusive interpretation, it is not what Georg Friedrich Meier in *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst* named hermeneutical injustice, because, from Immanuel Kant’s point of view, the deviation from the author’s intention has a noble purpose: the moral transformation of the human being. Knowing that the moral improvement of men, constitutes the real end of all religion of reason, it will comprise the highest principle of all Scriptural exegesis.<sup>36</sup>

Although Immanuel Kant considers pure reason<sup>37</sup> as the highest instance of interpretation, he cannot avoid the suspicion of *hermeneutical injustice*, as Georg Friedrich Meier defined the concept. No interpreter can be absolutely neutral from an axiological point of view: he cannot be only pure reason; he is a man in flesh and bones, with human weaknesses—all too human. Immanuel Kant is no exception and it is easy to see that his hermeneutics as it is presented especially in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* is, on the one hand, a typical Protestant creation, and, on the other hand, directed against the traditional Catholic way of interpreting the biblical text.

**IV. Four Types of Intentions.** Even though *the author’s intention* was widely discussed, we cannot say the same about *the interpreter’s intention*, which is not one of the ‘Three types of intentions’ – also the name of a subchapter of Umberto Eco’s *The limits*

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<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Translated by Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/religion/religion-within-reason.htm>. 30.09.2009.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 176.

<sup>35</sup> Nicolae Rambu, *Axiologische Unangemessenheiten. Beiträge zur Kulturphilosophie* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2007), pp. 49- 80.

<sup>36</sup> Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

*of Interpretation* – intention auctoris, intentio operis and intentio lectoris<sup>38</sup>, which many have researched. The ‘Lector’ is not an interpreter in the restricted sense of the word, or if he is, he is an interpreter for himself. The interpreter is not a simple reader; he addresses an audience for whom he tries to facilitate the understanding of a text or he just wants to manipulate the audience. From this point of view, the interpretation is not a goal, but a means. Especially in totalitarian regimes, interpretation was used as an instrument of torture. During the communist regime the following expression was frequently used: ‘Take care what you say or write because everything is interpreted!’. The fate of a man depended on the interpretation of a speech, gesture, attitude, interpretation which had no connection to the author’s intention. Let’s take a single example. Constantin Noica, a Romanian philosopher, wrote *Narrations on man* with the intention to offer the reader an introduction to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, one of the most difficult books in modern philosophy. *Narrations on man* was ‘interpreted’ in a document of the Romanian secret service as ‘one of the most dangerous ideological books in the country’, with ‘real anticommunist and mystical nature’. This was one of the reasons used in Noica’s trial which resulted in his condemnation to many years in prison. In Romania, instead of burning the books, there was a process which had two stages: first the books of the authors considered dangerous and unwanted for the new political regime were forbidden, and then the public had free access to every book, but this freedom was an illusion or just a controlled freedom. Every important book had an ‘official’ interpretation. Plato, Kant, Hegel and many other important authors were translated in Romanian but their interpretation was decided by a specialized organization of the communist regime.

There are various cases of abusive interpretation, a technique frequently used by the Nazis and before them by many other refined assassins. Perhaps the association between *interpretation* and *assassination* seems totally unsuitable, but we must remember that in the past first some people talked innocently about burning books and then this thing really happened in the case of *Bücherverbrennung*, as the Nazis expressed it. Heinrich Heine noticed in his time that “**Where they burn books, they will ultimately also burn people**”. This is the best quotation for the setting in Berlin where, in 1933, 20.000 volumes of the authors who were victims of the barbarity of interpretation were burned. Let us follow Heine’s lead in order to explain this concept more accurately: where thoughts are slaughtered, any abuse is possible.

It is obvious that a work is enriched by its interpretations, as Gadamer demonstrated in his *Wahrheit und Methode*, but we must not forget the fact that the value of the same work can be diminished or even destroyed through a barbarity of interpretation.

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<sup>38</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).