

# The Theories of Understanding and Interpretation in European and Anglo-American Philosophy

Richard Palmer

## The Liminality of Hermes and the Meaning of Hermeneutics

According to Martin Heidegger the Greek words for interpreting and interpretation - *hermeneuein*, *hermeneia* – can be traced back to the god Hermes.<sup>1)</sup> 1) M. Heidegger: *On the way to language*. Transl. Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 29. However questionable the etymological connection between Hermes and *hermeneuein* may be, hermeneutics, as the art of understanding and of textual exegesis, does stand under the sign of Hermes. Hermes is messenger who brings the word from the god Zeus, thus, the early modern use of the term was in relation to methods of interpreting holy scripture. An interpreter brought to mortals the message from God. Although the usage was broadened in the 18th and 19th century to take methods of understanding and explicating both sacred **and** secular texts from antiquity, the term „hermeneutics“ continued to suggest an interpretation which discloses something hidden from ordinary understanding. Ancient texts are, for moderns, doubly alien: they are ancient and they are in *another language* . Their interpreter, poring over a text in Hebrew, Greek or Latin, cannot fail to convey

the impression that he has access to a body of knowledge from elsewhere, is a bridge to somewhere else, he is a mediator between a mysterious other world and the clean, well-lighted intelligible world in which we live and move and have our being.

Hermes is just such mediator. He is the messenger between Zeus and mortals, also between Zeus and the underworld and between the underworld and the mortals. Hermes crosses these ontological thresholds with ease. A notorious thief, according to legend, he crosses the threshold of legality without a qualm. “Lord of dreams”, he mediates between waking and dreaming, day and night. Wearer of a cap of invisibility, he can become visible or invisible at will. Master of night-tricks, he can cover himself with night. Master of sleep, he can wake the sleeping or put the waking to sleep. Liminality or marginality is his very essence.

“Liminality” is a term given currency in 20<sup>th</sup> century by Victor Turner of the University of Chicago. *Limen* in Latin means threshold, and anthropologists like turner have become interested in a certain state of persons as they pass over the threshold of one stage of life to another. For instance, Turner notes that the rite of passage at puberty has three phases: separation from one’s status as a child in a household, then a *liminal stage*, and finally reintegration into as a full and independent member with rights and responsibilities that the initiate did not have before. During the liminal stage, the between stage, one’s status becomes ambiguous; one is “neither here or there”, one is “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification”, 2) 2) Victor Turner: ***Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society***. Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1974, p. 232. and thus the form and rules of both his earlier state and his state-to-come are suspended. For the moment, one is an outsider; one is on the margins, in an indeterminate state. Turner is fascinated by this marginality, this zone of indeterminacy. He argues that it is from the standpoint of this marginal zone that

the great artists, writers and social critics have been able to look past the social forms in order to see the society from the outside and to bring a message from beyond it.

This marginality is the realm of Hermes. Paul Friedrich in his book *The Meaning of Aphrodite* remarks on the multiple liminality of Hermes and his links with Aphrodite. 3) 3) Paul Friedrich *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978, p. 205. He notes that

1. Hermes moves by night, the time of love, dreams, and theft;
2. he is the master of cunning and deceit, the marginality of illusions and tricks;
3. he has magical powers, the margin between the natural and supernatural;
4. he is the patron of all occupations that occupy margins or involve mediation: traders, thieves, shepherds, and heralds;
5. his mobility makes him a creature betwixt and between;
6. His marginality is indicated by the location not just anywhere but on roads, at crossroads, and in groves;
7. even his eroticism is not oriented to fertility or maintaining the family but is basically Aphroditic - stealthy, sly, and amoral, a love gained by theft without moral concern for consequences;
8. Hermes is a guide across boundaries, including the boundary between earth and Hades, that is, life and death. 4) 4) Ibid.

For Heidegger, it is significant that Hermes is the messenger of the gods and not just other humans; for the message brought by Hermes is not just any message but “fateful tidings” (die Botschaft des Geschickes) Interpretation in its highest form, then, is to be able to understand these fateful tidings, indeed the fatefulness of the tidings. To interpret is first to listen and then to become a messenger of the gods oneself, just as the poets do, according to Plato’s *Ion*. Indeed, part of the destiny of man is precisely to stand in a hermeneutical relation to one’s being here and now and to one’s heritage. Human beings,

insofar as they are human beings, says Heidegger, are used for hearing the message .. they are to listen and belong to it as **human beings.** 5) 5)M. Heidegger: *On the way to language*. Transl. Peter D. Hertz. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p.40.

When we turn to the chapter on Hermes in Walter F. Otto's **The Homeric Gods**, we can read for instance this remark: "It is Hermes' nature not to belong to any locality and not to possess any permanent abode, always he is on the road between here and there." 6) 6) Walter F. Otto, **The Homeric Gods: The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion**. Translated by Moses Hadas. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979, p. 117. When one is on the road, one may encounter sudden good fortune or sudden misfortune. Hermes is the god of the windfall, the quick, lucky chance. Thus, the traveller or trader who suddenly comes on good fortune will thank Hermes, who as cattle-thief knows how to get rich quick and how to make poor quickly also. Walter Otto argues: "He is the god not only of sly calculation but also of lucky chances. Everything lucky and without responsibility that befalls a human being is a gift of Hermes." 7) 7) Ibid., pp. 108-109. We may say that the Hermes of sudden lucky breaks, of "deft guidance and sudden gain" is an appropriate god of text interpretation in that the solution to a problem or a burst of insight will come in a flash. 8) 8) Ibid., p. 111. And the amorality of Hermes suggests the moral neutrality of understanding as a pure operation of the mind in grasping the point of something. The truth or insight may be a pleasant awakening or rob one of an illusion, the understanding itself is morally neutral. The quicksilver flash of insight may make one rich or poor an instant. Hermes is the god of sudden interpretative insights that come from an ability to approach daytime reality with liminal freedom.

Small wonder it is advisable to have Hermes as a guide. The guide character of Hermes is central. F. Otto notes a parallel to the Vedic guide-god Pushan who

comes to rescue of those. A knower of roads like Hermes, Pushan have a special way of helping men: his manner of giving treasure to men is that he permits men to find it.” 9) 9) Ibid., p. 121.

Again, this has a parallel in hermeneutic methods, in that they are designed to enable the text to yield its treasure, but the interpreter only leads the reader to the treasure and then retires. As a guide, the interpreter remains a liminal figure, an outsider, a facilitator.

Hermes, then, remains a god of roads, crossroads, thresholds, boundaries. It is at these locations in ancient times that one found altars to Hermes. He was considered the patron god of migrant skilled and unskilled workers who, in going from place to place, became professional “boundary crossers”. 10) 10) Norman O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief: The Evolution of a Myth*. New York: Vintage 1969, pp. 32, 51. Hermes is the god who presides over all transactions held at borders. Thus he is the god of translation and of all transactions between realms. And it would seem to be the essence of hermeneutics to be liminal, to mediate between realms of being, whether between god and human beings, wakefulness and sleep, the conscious and unconscious, life and afterlife, visible and invisible, day and night. The dimensions of the mythic god Hermes suggest a central element in the meaning of hermeneutics: that it is the mediation between worlds. And in the strongest instances, Hermes’ message is “world-shaking”: it brings, as Heidegger says, “a transformation of thinking.” 11) 11) M. Heidegger: *On the way to Language*, p. 42.