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New Hermeneutic: O the Jarring Sound!

Never on Sunday: that is the rule I keep about reading books on the subject of the new hermeneutic. For in such books one has to wade through pages of this sort of thing:

The insistence upon the unbroken linguisticity of understanding is an insistence upon the thoroughgoing historicness of the process of understanding. Thus one may say that the new hermeneutic, guided by the basic recognition of the historicness of man and of his understanding, has elevated language and translation, the more historic dimensions of interpretation, into positions of principal significance in the understanding of hermeneutic.

To listen to the Greek term *hermeneia* as an interpretation of the subject matter of hermeneutic – and to listen to it means to translate it into our language as ‘interpretation’ in the three senses of ‘speech,’ ‘translation,’ and ‘commentary’ – is not to stay on the outside of hermeneutical reflection, merely within linguistic objectifications behind which some neglected realm of immediacy is assumed to lie. Rather it is to understand hermeneutic as best man in his finiteness can understand, i.e. within the hermeneutical structures of his own existence, of which his linguisticity is primary.

Believe it or not, that passage is not translated from the German but is one of more lucid statements made by James M. Robinson in his essay ‘Hermeneutic Since Barth’ from the volume *The New Hermeneutic*.¹ And it provokes me, personally, to a thoroughgoing linguistic profanity, the hermeneutical structures of which man in his finiteness can understand only too well, I fear, if he happens to be around. So I keep my rule: Never on Sunday.

On the face of it, nothing could be stranger than to find how a study of the use of language leads to the rapid disintegration of language into gobbledygook. The chief purpose of my paper, however, is to suggest that this lamentable state of affairs is not accidental. Nor is it to be explained wholly by the influence of Heidegger’s style of writing, although that is part of the story. My thesis is that language remains sane and supple only so long as it is anchored in concrete actuality. Like the giant Antaeus, it quickly loses its natural strength when parted from Mother Earth. (Bonhoeffer believed that the story of Antaeus was one which we today should ponder; and surely he was right.) But the way of thinking that goes by the name of the ‘new hermeneutic’ tries to make language into an ultimate – self-sustaining, self-justifying. And the inevitable result is that practice follows theory. The ‘new hermeneutic’ is presented to us in inflated terms that jar on the ear and cheat the intellect.

1. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., editors, *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 7.

Note that my complaint is not against technical language as such, which is necessary in every academic field. It is not that I feel that something basically simple has been made into something complicated; or that I am suggesting that the subject of hermeneutics is hardly so important, after all, as it has been made out to be. Quite the reverse, in fact; for (as I see it) the proponents of the 'new hermeneutic,' behind the obscurity and turgidity of their language, try to bring the complexities of the hermeneutical problem to one impossibly over-simplified solution.

In his essay 'Word of God and Hermeneutic' Gerhard Ebeling asserts that, along the road leading from Schleiermacher to Heidegger, the word *hermeneutic* has broadened its sense until it has become equivalent to 'fundamental ontology.'² No longer is hermeneutics limited to biblical interpretation. It has to do with something more important than the meaning of documents, namely the meaning of meaning. It is 'a theory of understanding,' says Ebeling. And Ernst Fuchs, in his essay 'The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem,' says that the hermeneutical problem 'presents itself' when I ask 'How do I come to understand?'³

Bultmann learned from the early Heidegger that we require a 'prior understanding' before we can probe the meaning of a text. And his essay 'The Problem of Hermeneutics' explains that such prior understanding concerns man's meaning, or '*human being in its possibilities, as the possibilities that belong specifically to the one who understands.*' The new hermeneutic starts with Bultmann, but wants to carry him along where he refuses to go, namely, to the later Heidegger and to his view that understanding is the gift of language, not something we use language to uncover. Thus *human being in its possibilities* is now explained in terms of what is called 'the word event.' Says Ebeling, '. . . the content and object of hermeneutic is the word event as such.'⁴

By directing our attention to the fact that we cannot say what a text means without implicitly assuming a theory of the meaning of meaning, this school has opened an important issue. But insisting that one particular theory of the meaning of meaning is to be accepted and identified with hermeneutics is something else again. I shall argue that the phrase 'word event' (as actually used in the 'new hermeneutic') is an impossible combination of terms which, if accepted, becomes destructive of meaning. But first, I think it may be useful to find what happens when the phrase is accepted and used to interpret the meaning of the text of the New Testament.

Here the most direct answer comes in Fuchs' essay 'The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem.' When we take our point of departure in the phenomenon of language, Fuchs remarks, we discover that what is distinctive about language is its concentration upon time. It says 'what time is for.'⁵ In the teaching of Jesus we find that the time of the coming of God's kingdom is announced, and lived in love.⁶ This Kingdom was present with Jesus in his

2. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

6. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 130.

daily life – so the New Testament shows us – and equally for those who followed him. Faith in Jesus meant for his followers letting *love simply reign*, even in the face of death. They knew that, if *love is right, then death is wrong*.⁷ Thus we can see, concludes Fuchs, that the New Testament is itself a textbook in hermeneutic.⁸ It teaches the language of faith and encourages us to try this language ourselves, to prove that *love does guarantee itself*.⁹

At one point Fuchs asks whether his point of view – particularly in its stress upon the historical Jesus and his teachings – may not be taken as a sliding back into liberalism. He assumes that cannot be so. But why not? Is his reading of the New Testament anything more, when the chips are down, than an exhortation to live love and see how love makes the world go round? The example of Jesus shows us that the universe really must be on the side of love rather than on the side of death. ‘Now,’ urges Fuchs, ‘let one replace the word “love” with the word “God”.’¹⁰ But whatever for? That replacement, on his terms, must be meaningless, a hermeneutical bungle, a hangover from language that says more than what time is for. If love guarantees itself and endures (as we are told) always and everywhere so long as there are small children and parents to love them, then ‘God’ is the most superfluous word in the world – a word that knows only improving the hour. ‘*The language of man belongs in the sphere of love*,’ Fuchs explains, and so, he continues, ‘*is able to bring our life into the light of a truth that really fits us*.’¹¹ Because we have human language we have light, truth, and love defeating death. Then why call in a phantom word ‘God’ to give its ghostly blessing to such an admirable state of things that runs itself, by itself, so successfully?

Using the reductionist method of old-fashioned liberal moralism, Fuchs has resolved God into a high-sounding name for an ideal quality of life, and faith into works. The most satisfying experience a person can have, he blandly remarks, is to share in the works of God.

The text on hermeneutics which Fuchs should use is not the New Testament but Longfellow’s ‘A Psalm of Life’:

Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.

That expounds nicely the Gospel of What Time Is For.

If Fuchs, at any rate, leaves us in no doubt about his belief that to speak about God is to speak about some datum of human experience, Fuchs’ friend Ebeling is more cagey. As Helmut Gollwitzer has remarked, Ebeling frequently falls into using the traditional language of the Church, ‘which simply will not fit’ into the framework of his theory of man’s existence.¹² Basically,

7. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 140.

8. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 141.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 143.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. H. Gollwitzer, *The Existence of God as Confessed by Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 177 f.

though, he seems to agree with Fuchs that faith is a reality that guarantees itself by arising out of man's own experience. So in 'Theological Reflexions on Conscience' he writes: 'theological language, whatever way it may speak, speaks of what unconditionally concerns and conclusively affects man in the reality that concerns him, and thus it relates to what concerns every man because it is given along with his existence.'¹³

What Ebeling has in mind here is illustrated by the Christology developed in his book *Theology and Proclamation*. There he writes: 'The question of certainty is man's basic question, because it is identical with human being as being that is questioned.'¹⁴ For Ebeling, man lives in uncertainty, his future clouded by the threat of death. Existential certainty is indeed present to man partially as an idea; though his conscience is always in a state of uncertainty because all his works cannot be successful. But the life of Jesus was based on certainty; and in demonstrating his power to lead others into certainty he showed himself to be God's representative. Confronted in this way by certainty, man's predicament becomes full of promise, and 'that which concerns him ultimately becomes that which he willingly affirms.'¹⁵

Once again we see the new hermeneut treading in the footprints of the old-fashioned liberal: finding Jesus to be the archetypal example of fulfilled manhood; establishing the truth of Christian experience by pointing to its liberating effects; and explaining how the values of faith confirm the intuitions of the universal human conscience.

James Robinson thinks we must call the new hermeneutic a genuinely new theology.¹⁶ Yet, if we are to judge it by its fruits, the new hermeneutic *qua* theology repeats the liberal pattern – and repeats it because it adopts from idealism the notion that the Christian gospel can be reduced to its essence in a general idea.

Since they stress a 'worldly' way of speaking of God, Fuchs and Ebeling are often said to be taking up the concerns of Bonhoeffer. Yet their Christology certainly contradicts Bonhoeffer's. In his Christology lectures Bonhoeffer points out how taking the Jesus of history as our starting-point is no guarantee of our confessing the reality of the God-Man. Indeed, if we find the value of the historical Jesus simply in his presenting an illustration of a general or eternal value manifest in human existence, we are producing merely a modernized version of the docetic heresy. Brushing Bonhoeffer's argument to one side, Ebeling asserts that to prove the historical existence of Jesus 'is *eo ipso* to prove his humanity. There is, for us, no longer any danger of docetism, whilst orthodox Christology, however much some may protest, cannot easily be cleared from such a charge.'¹⁷ He thus aligns himself, in opposition to

13. G. Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 408.

14. G. Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 85.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

16. Cf. *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 67.

17. Ebeling, *Theology and Proclamation*, p. 35.

Bonhoeffer, with Schleiermacher, who originally brought the charge of docetism against orthodox Christology and whom Bonhoeffer regards as the modern docetist *par excellence*. And having done so, he goes on to elaborate a Christology, following the method described by Bonhoeffer as 'the typical liberal reduction process.'

Ebeling's Christology is 'docetic' in Bonhoeffer's sense because it abstracts from the life of Jesus one quality (in this case 'existential certainty'), assuming that the saving work of Jesus is to bring to light this essential quality of human existence. Thus the human person Jesus is ignored except in so far as his life serves to manifest an eternal idea, which we then grasp on the power of our latent spirituality. Such a Christology abolishes the paradox of the God-Man and absorbs revelation into illumination. It sees the divine mission of Jesus as the actualizing of human potential. God has no word to speak *to* us, only a word that speaks *in* or *through* us.

Ebeling puts conscience in the centre with respect to man's quest for certainty, because for him all understanding of the meaning of the word 'God' arises out of man's experience of the phenomenon of conscience. There man asks what attitude he takes to himself and whether he identifies himself with himself responsibly. 'To identify ourselves with ourselves is to answer for ourselves,' he writes in 'Theological Reflexions on Conscience.'¹⁸ Quite to the contrary, Bonhoeffer insists that reflection on the self in conscience is made possible only by turning from the self in repentance to Christ. 'Repentance,' he says in *Act and Being*, 'is no longer the final attempt to grasp oneself, but repentance in the confidence of forgiveness – *contritio passiva*.'¹⁹ For Ebeling, understanding arises out of the experience of the self reflecting upon existence. 'The hermeneutical principle is *man as conscience*.'²⁰ For Bonhoeffer, self-understanding misunderstands the meaning of faith:

In the existential event of revelation the existential structure of existence is attacked and transmuted. There is here no second mediator, not even the existential structure of existence. . . . Inasmuch as it consistently observes man without regard to the event of revelation, the phenomenological definition of existence according to its existential structure . . . is, for revelation, no less an abstraction and hypothesis than a merely biological definition of man. That is why, finally, the interpretation of existence is also irrelevant to theology.²¹

The nub of the matter is that the new hermeneutic tries to operate within the perspective of the old idealism, which is perpetually at odds with Christian faith because it deals in abstraction, while the Christian gospel is concrete. Christian faith confesses Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Idealism can admit no more than Jesus *as* the Christ, a particular appearance of the idea. Christian faith confesses the event of the incarnation, the Word made flesh. Idealism

18. Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, p. 418.

19. D. Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being* (London: Collins, 1962), pp. 178 f.

20. *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 110.

21. Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, p. 75.

can admit no more than a Christ-event, the incarnational idea manifest in existence. Christian faith confesses the transforming Word of God. Idealism can admit no more than a word event, a manifestation of meaning that breaks through from a timeless realm into the world of time.

The basic tenet of idealism – so Bonhoeffer suggests in his Christology – is that expressed by Schelling's *dictum*, 'Individuality is sin.' Persisting through all the variations of the idealistic creed is the belief that pure Being can only 'appear' through the ambiguities of existence, that Spirit is always veiled in matter, and that the particular cannot bear the full weight of the universal. What we must look for, then, is the place where the finite is most fully transparent to the Infinite, and where the most perfect epiphany of the eternal Idea banishes for the moment the obscuring mists of sensory existence; where Jesus disappears in the Christ; where the subject-object dichotomy is overcome; where inauthentic existence gives way to authentic existence; and where words are dissolved into pure meaning. So Ebeling assures us that the contrast between God's word and man's word lies, not in the character of the word concerned, but in whether the word is misused and corrupted by man, or appears as a word 'sound, pure, and fully realized,' and whether it is a word that is destructive or 'one that brings wholeness and gives life.'²²

It is now possible to bring into focus the core concept of the new hermeneutic: 'word event.'

'Word event' is a phrase which betokens a flight from the concrete reality of words to an ideal realm where what words *do* does not have to be *done*, but simply *is* eternally. There meaning, which in the world of the senses arises out of the correspondence between signs and things signified, posits itself in limpid purity beyond all possible expression. In Heidegger's phrase, which Ebeling endorses, it calls out of silence. According to the idealistic view, meaning cannot arise out of the universe of individual things, but must be glimpsed as manifestation through the veil of existence, as an inexpressible thing-in-itself, as *being* in its own right. Language, therefore, does not interpret things, it *is* interpretation-itself. The new hermeneutic finds its inspiration in the change from the earlier to the later Heidegger. That is why it at once accepts and quarrels with Bultmann who has refused to move beyond Heidegger Phase I. (Ebeling's *Theology and Proclamation*, for instance, is subtitled *Dialogue with Bultmann*.) Then Heidegger saw being shining through the structures of human existence; now he senses being reverberating through the structures of human language. As his not very happy metaphor describes it, man is the loudspeaker for the silent tolling of being. So it follows that Fuchs is found saying that language 'lets being be,' and Ebeling is found saying that 'where words happen rightly, existence is illumined.'

But the point is that only in the abstract realm of Heideggerian philosophy does language itself speak, becoming a transparency through which being appears as a shining light in an otherwise opaque world. As a matter of fact, language is used by people. It is never language-as-such bringing meaning-as-

22. *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 102.

such. Different languages meet the needs of different communities, changing as they change. Words are not events. They do not happen. Words enter into events as speakers use them in order to say what *they* mean. Words issue in events, as (for example) the *Communist Manifesto* made possible the spread of world communism; yet they do so only when persons receive the meaning of speech or document composed by other persons. What particular event stems from words depends quite often as much on the individual who speaks as on the intelligibility of the words that are spoken. A Brutus may put more solid sense into his words than an Antony – yet it is Antony who sets the crowds running.

I have made much – it may seem far too much – of the ugliness of the language of the new hermeneutic. Nevertheless, I would insist that, in the matter of handling words, aesthetic, moral, and theological values, though not, of course, indissolubly fused, are connected. Heidegger's rapturous welcoming of Hitler as the embodiment of the spirit of the German people was bound up with his refusal to find value in the individual person. When we hear Ebeling saying that 'the precise *purpose which the word is meant to serve is that man shows himself as man*,'²³ we rebel viscerally rather than simply disagree, if we care at all for words. And, if we are Christians, we cannot help feeling that his statement reveals contempt for the marvellously rich universe which God has called forth by his word. The fact that man can use words may be the mark of his humanity – though I personally would prefer to say, *one* mark. But humanity does not speak. Men do. And the precise purpose which the human word is meant to serve is *all the manifold purposes of men*. Granted, Christians believe that language serves one over-arching purpose, in that it allows the creature to glorify his Creator, both by enjoying the abundance of the gifts he has been given and by turning in gratitude to the Giver. 'O that men might praise the Lord for his goodness and for his wonderful words to the children of men!' Nevertheless, the reason we can bring an offering of our words to God is that God has given us a world where language makes sense on a thousand levels, all the way from the heights of

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed . . .

down to 'This Way Out.' It is not with the abstract idea of 'man's historicness' that words have to do, but with the concrete complexities of existence.

I find this thesis supported by a recent work on general hermeneutics, Eric D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*. Hirsch writes, 'A determinate verbal meaning requires a determining will';²⁴ for, as he points out, a text which we attempt to interpret did not write itself and will not read itself. 'The text,' he

23. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

24. Eric D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 46.

comments, 'has to represent somebody's meaning – if not the author's, then the critic's.'²⁵ Somebody's meaning, note! The new hermeneuts say that the text is there for the sake of the event of interpretation, and that this 'word event' is 'a bringing into truth' and 'a spiritual occurrence of the oral word.' Instead of 'prior understanding' they now speak of applying one or another 'hermeneutical principle.' The question is, of course, *whose* principle? Obviously, the 'word event' does not happen by itself; someone applies a 'hermeneutical principle' or way of bending a text to make it the vehicle of the critic's meaning. What happens is that Fuchs decides that for him the word 'God' means 'love-relationship' or Ebeling decides that the word 'God' means 'salvation' – in the sense of supplying the conscience with the assurance of inner certainty. Whether or not 'God' means these things in scripture is irrelevant, since meaning arrives only in the 'word event.'

Biblical hermeneutics is possible only on the basis of a belief that God has made his will known in scripture in such a way that his word does not stand under the control of our words. Otherwise the text of scripture can have no determinate meaning until we impose our own meaning upon it. To say this is merely to pose the problem of biblical hermeneutics, certainly not to solve it. But it is a beginning – and I would say no insignificant one – to know where we ought to start. There is a story about a tourist in the Irish countryside who asked a farmer how he could get to Balagarney. The reply was: 'If I were after wishing to go to Balagarney, it's not from here I'd be starting.' One real place, presumably, can be reached from any other real place. But if we start from an idea which we have abstracted from our consciousness, we can never reach the actualities of historical existence, even if we call our stance 'radical historicity.' We can never make the transition to actual events, even if we name our ideal constructions, when we verbalize them, 'word events.' Christian faith is concerned with a saviour, not with a salvation-state; with our obedience to the will of God, not with man's ultimate concern; with God who spoke by the prophets and by his Son, not with the God who is revealed in the interpretation of conscience or in saying Yes to life. The word of life, as the First Epistle of John reminds us, was no 'spiritual occurrence,' but an actual person who could be (and was) heard, seen, and touched.

The new hermeneutic recognizes word events alone, yet as a movement it is actual enough, and therefore must have its beginnings in an actual event. This event seems to have been Heidegger's decision one day that the works of the Romantic poets reflected the kind of interpretation of existence that he wished to propagate. (Romantics in general like to play God and construct a universe out of their own consciousness.) So he proclaimed that to listen to them is to hear being speaking; and some theologians believed him. The result was unfortunate, because Heidegger's views find no place for the actualities of historical existence, and Christian faith has its roots in history. Heidegger and his disciples dismiss all statements about the world of the actual as "subjectivism," and exalt the world of myth as the place of 'the speaking forth of

25. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

being' through the 'naming of the gods.' Myth and history thus change places in the new hermeneutic. The belief that God has revealed his name in history is viewed as the 'objectivizing' of a myth. In naming, we will 'God' (that is, create our own myths) which is declared to be calling forth from the text that which it has to say. The new hermeneutic, so Fuchs explains, exhibits 'the historicness of existence as the linguisticity of existence.'²⁶

Here, most surely, is the parting of the ways for hermeneutics. Either, as with the new hermeneutics, theology becomes swallowed up by a hermeneutic of myth in which the text of scripture is read as an extended code message about the human consciousness, to which we hold the key in the form of self-evident 'hermeneutical principles.' Or theology is concerned with a message about an actual God who has been, and is, active in the actual world in which we live; and the text of scripture is the medium through which God speaks his word to the church. If the latter alternative is accepted, then there will be no hermeneutical principle that is 'obvious in itself,' but one must be patiently sought within the believing community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

26. Quoted by Robinson in *The New Hermeneutic*, p. 55.