Principles and methods for the understanding (=interpretation) of (medieval) literature

I. Principles

1. (Medieval) literature is written for communication; a literary text will establish and propagate a (general, special, ideological etc.) understanding of parts of a world or of a whole world; it will usually demand (critical) identification (with the hero or heroine, with convictions, ideals or attitudes propagated etc.).

2. In the middle ages, the prevalent reception of a literary text is that of joint listening: this mode of reception will usually exclude particular, individual ways of understanding a text, as the understanding will have been controlled and guided by debate and discussion immediately following the text's reception.

3. In order to be understood at all, what has to be understood must refer to the pre-understanding [Vorwissen, Vorverständnis] of an audience; otherwise, understanding would be impossible [theory of understanding of critical hermeneutics]. It follows, that the common and shared pre-understandings of the audience a literary text is intended for, are a *necessary pre-condition for the possibility to understand it at all*; the author will presuppose that the individual members of his audience have these pre-understandings at their disposal while listening to his text (lyric, poem, narrative, play etc.); that is: for the author and his audience, these pre-understandings are, so to speak, self-evident. Though they are a necessary pre-condition for any understanding, they will however as a rule not be referred to explicitly in the text itself (as they are "selbst--verständlich"); they will at most show up implicitly. The modern reader does no longer share in those pre-understandings of a medieval audience which were self-evident (e.g. definition of the self-understanding of social groups by ideals and norms of behaviour, the knowledge of particular literary traditions, participation in certain rituals of the faith, knowledge of Christian dogmas etc.). He may therefore only come to understand what once was "selbst--verständlich" by re-constructing the self-evident pre-understandings, by historical research - that is: by interpretation; in order to understand, he must "interpret" the text.

4. It follows that interpretation is nothing else but an attempt at re-constructing understanding where it is no longer self-evident, according to a set of rules guiding this attempt at re-constructing the authentic meaning of the text. The "authentic meaning" is the understanding which that audience will probably have had for whom the text was originally written or composed. As we will never be able to re-construct the "authentic meaning" in all its details, we have to rest content with the "virtual meaning" (coming as close as possible to the "authentic meaning," but including understandings which the original audience may not have had at their disposal).

II. Methods

1. ***Important!*** A profound knowledge of the text, together with a first attempt to understand it directly [werkimmanente Methode], is a trivial principle of "first steps" towards understanding (medieval) literature which nevertheless has to be remembered; keep it in mind. At this stage of your understanding, you should *only use those secondary works which help with the language of the text* (dictionaries, editions); secondary literature interpreting the text *should only be consulted after* steps 2-7 have been applied to the text, always reflecting critically on what you do [Schritt: Texterarbeitung].

2. To structure your text, divide it into parts according to sub-themes [Einteilung in größere Sinnabschnitte]. Make first statements about what is said and may be meant in these parts, and then refer these to the text as a whole in order to arrive at first tentative (hypo)theses about the overall meaning of the text [Schritt: erste Thesen über Teile und das Ganze des Textes: erkennntisleitende These(n)].

3. Test your general thesis or theses ([erkenntnisleitende Thesen] e.g. that *The Poet's Repentance* is a poem about writing nasty poetry about women, or that Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is a literary rejection of the softy type of medieval lovers, or that *Magnus Herodes* is a biblical drama about the disruption of social order by the misuse of soldiers, etc.), by referring them back to the text. Try to make the text give answers to questions following from your general thesis/theses. The dialogue structure of question and answer is the one we use in everyday communication when we do not understand, and therefore have to interpret a statement we do not understand, unless we can ask questions about it immediately (and get answers). But *remember that* your partner in your dialogue with a literary text is a collection of dead letters on a sheet of paper; *the text may only say what you make it say* - therefore give it a benevolent hearing (i.e. be very critical about your own theses and hypotheses, test them again and again; a monologue structure will necessarily lead to misunderstanding). Usually, your first (hypo)theses will have to be modified in one way or another, or may even have to be abandoned in favour of better ones which are more plausible, and better explain greater parts of a given text [Schritt: Test der erkenntnisleitenden These(n)].

4. Your theses have to be founded on and to refer to the relevant linguistic signs of the text. As the overall meaning as well as the meaning of the parts of a text are mediated linguistically, they can be analysed systematically by using traditional concepts of literary criticism such as metre, rhyme, effects of sounds, rhetorical figures, imagery and the like [mainly relevant for lyrics, for which cf. e.g. H.W. Ludwig, *Arbeitsbuch Lyrikanalyse*, Tübingen 1981], or plot, characters, narrator, setting [mainly relevant for narrative texts, for which cf. e.g. H.W. Ludwig, *Arbeitsbuch Romananalyse*, Tübingen 1982], or action and characters [in drama, for which cf. e.g. M. Pfister, *Das Drama*, UTB 580, München 1977 u.ö.]. The results of your analy-

ses should again be tested critically, referring them back to the subject of your analysis [Schritt: Analyse der linguistischen Organisation des Textes in Bezug auf die erkenntnisleitende(n) These(n)].

5. The categories and classifications of this structural analysis will lead to a description of observable characteristics of a given text (as these are mediated linguistically). After observing and describing these (the "how" of the linguistic organisation), a reasonable next step would be to ask "why," that is: unless you are content with a simple inventory of observable characteristics which do not in themselves lead to an understanding of a literary text, you must combine these observations with statements about their function and effect, as to the parts and the whole of the text, in order to arrive at meaningful and well argued statements about the meaning [Schritt: Zusammenführen der bisherigen Einzelbeobachtungen und -analysen zu einem sinnstiftenden Ganzen, Abschluß der werkimmanenten Methoden].

6. When applying steps 2-5 critically, always reflecting on what you do, the result will be a preliminary interpretation leading to statements about the overall meaning of a given literary text which may be tested further, and debated. In a next step, this preliminary understanding has to be "enriched" with information about the text's literary context (genre, literary traditions) which will in turn modify your theses (stick to dialogue structure, asking questions about this context, and thereby getting answers). In order to get answers to your questions, *you may now use relevant secondary studies, but again: use them critically*. Situating the text in its literary context will help you to recognise innovative as well as conventional aspects (of motifs, imagery, themes) which is an important step towards reconstructing the virtual meaning of a literary text; your theses will again be modified [Schritt: Text in literarische Tradition setzen].

7. Reference to literary traditions will help to clarify their reception by the author: an analysis of his use and modification of previous literary patterns is a necessary step towards drawing conclusions as to the literary experience of his audience, and as to the (literary) pre-understandings an author assumed his audience to have in order to understand his text (e.g.: in his *Parlement of Fowles*, the poet Chaucer refers to lovers of the tradition of courtly love by mentioning their names only; the poet Lydgate, a few decades later, tells the whole story when he refers to them; evidently both authors assumed different degrees of literary learning in their respective audiences; why?).

The next and probably most difficult step would be to relate the text to an audience: you will have to find out why a literary text with a general meaning x may have been relevant for an audience y, and in which way this audience may have identified with parts or the whole of the text [for the term "identification" and possible ways of identifying oneself in a literary work cf. H.R. Jauss, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik 1*, UTB 692, München 1977, chapter "Interaktionsmuster der Identifikation mit dem Helden" (revised German version in *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1982, English version of the earlier German version in *Aesthetic experience and literary hermeneutics*, Minnesota 1982, chapter "Interaction patterns of identification with the hero")].

Historical reconstruction will help towards situating the text and its offers of identification in a historical context. Your theses about the identification patterns, and about the way in which they establish the virtual meaning of the text, will be all the more plausible if your historical reconstruction is not restricted to a use of the clichés of Geistesgeschichte (of the type "der mittelalterliche Mensch dachte immer so" etc.), but rather tries to demonstrate that the central problems a given text deals with, were relevant there and then. The kind of secondary literature you need in this step, is dependent on the questions the text deals with, and the questions you yourself want to answer. Your interpretation will again be modified [Schritt: Identifikationsangebote und Publikum: historische Rekonstruktion].

Remember, that understanding literature is a progress; and keep the following statement of the English historian Collingwood in mind: "You have understood a text, when you have understood the question to which it wants to be an answer."

8. It is only now that you should turn to interpretations of your text in scholarly journals and monographs. The secondary literature will help you to check your own understanding once again, and perhaps to modify it. As your own understanding and interpretation is - let us hope! - by now well-founded, and you are able to justify (most of) your conclusions, you will also be able to use the secondary literature with its many contradictory views of the text's meaning in a more satisfying way, and with greater profit (Müller, Meier, and Schulze will no longer convince you so easily that their sweeping statements are the correct ones, as they would have been able to had you read their contributions before taking steps 1-7!). However, you will often have to find out that Müller, Meier, and Schulze, twenty and more years ago, already published what you just dug out in the sweat of your brow; but then remember: you found it out yourself!!

Kurzversion: 1. Textimmanente Interpretation (in verschiedenen Schritten);
                 2. Historische Situierung (lit. Traditionen, historischer Kontext)
                 3. Applikation (ideologische Kritik, hier nicht behandelt).

[Die erkenntnistheoretischen Grundlagen beruhen auf drei Bereichen der Theoriebildung über Literatur: Literatur als formalästhetisches Produkt (z.B. Schritt Analyse der linguistischen Organisation der Texte); Literatur als pragmatisches Produkt (z.B. Schritt Identifikationsangebote); Literatur als mimetisches Produkt (z.B. Schritt Identifikationsangebote, Rekonstruktion Publikum).]   W.G. Busse