A PEDAGOGY OF GRACE

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Abstract: *This essay explores the manner in which James Torrance's pedagogy corresponds intrinsically to his theology of grace. It also demonstrates how his pedagogy may have been influenced both positively and negatively by Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, particularly in its expression of an intellectual empathy that bears striking similarity to the* Einfühlung *espoused by many proponents of Romanticism. Torrance's pedagogy, as this essay explains, goes well beyond Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, however, not least in its critical capacities.*

Professor James B. Torrance entered the classroom like a vision from another age. His black master's gown billowing behind him as he passed through the oaken door, chilled winds off the North Sea whipped in gusts and swirls across the quadrangle of King's College following him right into the drafty ground-floor classroom. By halfway through his lecture, what with his own whirlwind of frenzied scribbling on the ancient rotating chalkboard, Professor Torrance's gown would be dusted with chalk to compete with the snow on the college lawn. The whole classroom scene, played out in the shadow of the centuries' old chapel tower of King's College, was like something out of another time.

What was most impressive, however, and what has stayed with me, was not the picturesque vision our professor presented, but his embodiment of a potentially life-transforming pedagogy, a pedagogy grounded in a rich hermeneutical method and a theology of grace. The course which best exemplified this pedagogy was on the foundations of modern theology. Beginning with leading figures of the European Enlightenment and culminating with (then) contemporary theologians, Professor Torrance surveyed major developments in philosophy and theology from the late eighteenth century onward. The structure of his lectures was particularly crucial to his approach. He presented each major figure in two movements, to borrow a musical metaphor.

In the first movement, Professor Torrance would do his best to crawl into the skin of the theologian or philosopher whose ideas he wanted to present that week. He gave us an opportunity to glimpse reality from the perspective of that figure and to sense that person's sensibilities. Rejecting any temptation to caricature or stereotype figures with whom he might disagree (indeed, at this stage in his pedagogical cycle, we generally did not know how he regarded each thinker), he went deep into the historical context that gave rise to the thinker's ideas, exploring the inspirations, concerns, and motivations behind them and the *Weltanschauung* that shaped them. He sought to understand each figure from the inside out, and he communicated this desire to understand with remarkable sympathy. His aim was to allow us to glimpse the unique genius of that person's insights.

Whether exploring Friedrich Schleiermacher or Wilhelm Dilthey, G. F. W. Hegel, Albert Schweitzer, H. R. Macintosh, or Karl Barth, Professor Torrance embodied a kind of intellectual empathy, a generosity of thought, that inspired many of us — as soon as a morning's lecture had finished — to race across campus to the Queen Mother Library to read these philosophers and theologians for ourselves. Time and again I was reminded by these lectures that there was no philosopher or theologian on our syllabus whose thought *was not* worthy of our serious study, and I often keenly felt a judgment on my own casual, sophomoric criticism and dismissal of intellectual giants. These lectures invited me to enlarge my spirit of generosity as a scholar and caused me ever after to pause before offering a critical rebuttal to the ideas of another. But, while the first movement was more than just a prelude, it was far from the end of the symphony.

The second movement (generally played out in a class two days later) built on the first, but critically. With the dogged-determination and subtle probing of a skilled barrister cross-examining a reluctant or hostile witness, Professor Torrance analyzed every aspect of the thought of the figure before us. He would enter again into the assumptions that had shaped the thinker's ideas, laying bare hidden fallacies. He would trace out the implications of a thinker's logic, demonstrating where the arguments had broken down. He would reflect on the attitude and sentiments that gave rise to the figure's worldview. And in all he did, he accomplished his critical task without exhibiting the least rancor or contempt toward the figure before us. He treated each person with respect, as anyone would wish to be treated. Never did one sense that he had built a mere "straw man" for purely rhetorical or polemical purposes.

Many of those who sat in his classroom have remarked subsequently that James Torrance's greatest legacy to his students was not so much the astonishing

scholarship he contributed to a fresh understanding of "the covenant of grace" or his championing of theological figures like John McLeod Campbell, important as such contributions undoubtedly were and indebted as we are to his research and lucid writings. Rather, his greatest legacy to his students was the quality of character he communicated to us in and through his teaching. This has variously been described as "pastoral," "gracious," or simply "humane." And these descriptors ring true. But there was also a methodological sophistication to his intellectual empathy and a theological commitment that gave rise to it.

The hermeneutics of empathy

Perhaps the place in James Torrance's literary corpus that provides the best understanding of his pedagogy is his essay "Interpretation and Understanding in Schleiermacher's Theology: Some Critical Questions" published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1968). In this essay, in the process of presenting his arguments, Torrance follows the pedagogical rhythm with which his students became familiar: he moved from something like a sympathetic, even empathetic, identification with a thinker in service to a careful, descriptive explication of his thought to a critical engagement with *and* examination of that thought; all of which occurs within a framework in which grace prevails. In the substance of the argument in this perceptive essay, Torrance shows where he follows and precisely how he departs from Schleiermacher's hermeneutical model and along the way demonstrates those qualities we saw in his pedagogy.

Beginning with an affirmation of Schleiermacher's decisive role in establishing the idea that it is impossible to separate "theological inquiry from the task of hermeneutics," Torrance observes that, for Schleiermacher, "the task of theology" is to scrutinize "the relation between the language in which we articulate our faith, and the 'faith', 'piety', 'feeling', 'self-consciousness' which find outward expression in such language." As he explains memorably: "The genetic task of tracing religious language to its source in feeling, Schleiermacher saw to be fundamental to hermeneutics."[1]

Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach emerged from his experience as a seasoned translator and interpreter of various literary texts, as Torrance notes:

> From his studies of the Pauline letters and the Platonic dialogues which he translated into German, Schleiermacher saw that to understand a text we must see it as the outward literary creation of a living mind. Therefore the

1 James B. Torrance, "Interpretation and Understanding in Schleiermacher's Theology: Some Critical Questions, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 21 (Sept. 1968), No. 3, 268.

> interpreter must penetrate through the outward text, by an act of empathy and imagination, and enter into the mind of the author to understand both the author and his work in their wholeness. Consequently what is needed is a twofold understanding, what Schleiermacher called a grammatical and a psychological or technical understanding.[2]

Friedrich Schleiermacher (and, of course, Wilhelm Dilthey, also, following Schleiermacher) stands in a stream of Continental thinkers who were exploring how one can read and understand the literary products of that "foreign country" we call "the past."[3] Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach, at least at its empathic and imaginative roots, is similar to that of Giambattista Vico, Johann George Hamann (who was influential for Søren Kierkegaard) and Johann Gottfried Herder[4] (the significance of whom is noted in chapter eight of Barth's

2 Ibid., 269.

3 E. P. Hartley's famous opening passage from his novel, *The Go-Between* (1953): "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

4 As Sir Isaiah Berlin has chronicled, Giambattista, Johann Georg Hamann, and Johann Gottfried Herder also, with their own distinctive emphases, argue for a hermeneutic of empathy. Berlin says of Vico: "His deepest belief was that what men have made, other men can understand. It may take an immense amount of painful effort to decipher the meaning of conduct or language different from our own. Nevertheless, according to Vico, if anything is meant by the term 'human', there must be enough that is common to all such beings for it to be possible, by sufficient effort of imagination, to grasp what the world must have looked like to creatures, remote in time or space, who practiced such rites, and used such words, and created such works of art as the natural means of self-expression involved in the attempt to understand and interpret their worlds to themselves." (Isaiah Berlin, "Giambattista Vico and Cultural History" in The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas, Henry Hardy, editor (London: John Murray, 1990), 60.) Berlin profiles Vico, Hamann and Herder as key representatives of a "counter-Enlightenment." Berlin describes Vico's optimistic epistemology over-against strict relativists like Spengler and Westermarck who believed humanity to be "encapsulated in a box without windows and consequently incapable of understanding other societies and periods" of history (60). For Vico, as Berlin explains in his earlier essay, "The Counter-Enlightenment," "it is possible to reconstruct the life of others societies, even those remote in time and place and utterly primitive, by asking oneself what kind of framework of human ideas, feelings, acts could have generated the poetry, the monuments, the mythology which were their natural expressions." One particularly feels the kinship between Schleiermacher and others laboring in the hermeneutical vineyard of the period in Berlin's description of Herder who believed that we can bridge the hermeneutical gap by engaging our capacity for what he called "Einfühlung (feeling into)," an effort that includes both an empathetic imagination and careful, disciplined scholarship to understand the expressions of another culture. (Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in Against the Current: published 1979, 10.)

Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century[5]), as we see in Torrance's description of Schleiermacher's *interpreter who penetrates through the outward text* "by an act of empathy and imagination." Schleiermacher further described this hermeneutical approach as "an act of divination," as much or more an art than a science. Although the interpreter must "scrutinize the texts," attentive to grammar, literary structure and syntax, equipped with the best scholarly knowledge available to philology and cultural history; and while the interpreter needs "psychological or technical understanding" in order "to discern behind the outward appearance of the text the creative individuality of the author's mind, his ideas, his apperception of reality, the inner structure of his thought," ultimately Schleiermacher's hermeneutics requires a "sympathetic imaginative intuition" to "divine what is in the author's mind," perhaps even "to understand an author better than an author understands himself." Torrance writes, reflecting the Romantic soul of Schleiermacher's perspective, "it may take a genius to interpret a genius."[6]

As with Vico, Hamann, Herder and Dilthey, Schleiermacher's hermeneutic is indeed grounded in the spirit of Romanticism, rejecting a purely mechanistic approach to the text's yielding of meaning. "The greatness of Schleiermacher," writes Torrance, "was that he saw that hermeneutics is not simply a literary technique, but raises the whole question of the nature of understanding and is therefore basically a philosophical or theological discipline."[7]

Torrance's pedagogy reflects at this point a measure of respect for Schleiermacher's hermeneutics (and the strain of romanticism in which Schleiermacher stands), recognizing that everyone has a "susceptibility (*Empfänglichkeit*) for the experience of other people and therefore the possibility of understanding what other people have said."[8] The respect Torrance reflects for the humanity of the figures he attempts to interpret assumes the human capacity to recognize ourselves in others. But it is precisely at this point that we must also be attentive to the second movement in the rhythm of Torrance's pedagogy that takes it beyond even the most enlightened cultural relativism demonstrated in Schleiermacher's hermeneutic.

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5 Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century,* Brian Cozens and John Bowden, tr., Colin E. Gunton, intro. (New Edition, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 2002), 299-326.

6 Torrance, " Interpretation and Understanding," 270.

7 Ibid., 271.

8 Ibid., 271.

Hermeneutics and the question of truth

Torrance observes that "any attempt to evaluate Schleiermacher's contribution both to hermeneutical study and to theology would demand an examination of his epistemology and his views on the nature of human consciousness in terms of which he interpreted faith."[9] First, Torrance writes, we must see that "our words are the external expression (*Ausdrücke, Lebensäusserungen*) of our innermost feelings and consciousness, and therefore the outward words and actions of an author (or a particular church) give to the interpreter the clue to the mind and purposes of the author (or worshipping community)."[10] Secondly, we must recognize that "language is the medium of communication between one subject and another and it is only in terms of our own self-understanding … that we can understand the mind of another."[11] So far, so good, Torrance says, for Schleiermacher.

Torrance appreciates the fact that both Schleiermacher and Dilthey "brought out into the open a fundamental feature of human speech, that in large measure our statements are the overt expression of our inner subjectivity, and that this inner relation between language and speaker is of major importance in the quest of 'meaning.'"[12] We would affirm the fact that theological language is human language, that it is expressive of the faith of persons, and that the faith expressed is historically and culturally conditioned. We can, therefore, empathetically enter into some degree (perhaps even some large degree) of understanding of the meaning of another's expression of his or her faith, or that of a whole community, though temporally and spatially removed from them, because we recognize a common humanity between them and us, and because we sense in ourselves, through the exercise of imagination and sympathy, the possibility of similar feelings and actions. What a human mind has conceived, we may (through disciplined literary and historical methods, but also through imagination and sympathy) comprehend. "But," Torrance continues, "the question must be asked whether this preoccupation with the subjective reference of language and the accompanying view of faith do not preclude Schleiermacher from an adequate consideration of the 'objective' 'factual' reference of theological statements."[13]

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9 Ibid., 271.

10 Ibid., 271-272.

11 Ibid., 272.

12 Ibid., 272.

13 Ibid., 272.

Herein lies the critical distinction between Torrance and Schleiermacher with reference to the hermeneutical task. For Torrance, "Christian doctrines are not only expressions of inner faith. They are either true or false, and they derive their truth or falsity in large measure from those realities which are other than ourselves but to which we are objectively related in faith. Our statements about reality have a denotative semantic meaning as well as a subjective 'interpretic' meaning."[14] Indeed, Schleiermacher himself believes in the objective truth of the core matters with which our faith contends.

Torrance makes it quite clear that he sees Schleiermacher as a Christian theologian concerned with seeking the truth. He recognizes Schleiermacher as a theologian devoted to articulating Christian doctrines in a manner that bears witness to the person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ. For Schleiermacher, God is objectively real and Christianity cannot be understood in abstraction from the historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth whom we believe to be the Christ. But, Torrance asks, when "faith is defined non-cognitively as the feeling of absolute dependence, and carefully distinguished from any kind of subject-object relationship, how is it possible to do adequate justice to the truth content of Christian doctrine?"[15]Perhaps the most critical question Torrance raises in this essay is raised in this context: "Is it not the weakness of Schleiermacher, as of the romantic tradition in general, that his preoccupation with the relation of language to human self-consciousness, for epistemological and other reasons, commits him to a position where questions of truth and falsity are subordinated to the question of subjective meaning?"[16]

A hermeneutic that stops at the point of establishing a sense of empathy in understanding the meaning of a text, even a hermeneutic that stops at the point of imaginatively divining the mind of the author (if such a romantic goal really is possible) has misunderstood its task, at least if it is a hermeneutic concerned with theological matters. When it comes to theological realities, Torrance argues, we have a responsibility to look "beyond our formulations of the truth to the Truth which we encounter through them, and which gives our statements the truth or falsity they have."[17]

His critique of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic culminates in the description of the character of theological language which, Torrance believes, "has a threefold reference demanding a corresponding threefold understanding." Theological

14 Ibid., 272-273.

15 Ibid., 273.

16 Ibid., 273.

17 Ibid., 275.

language, he argues, is concerned ultimately with the life and character of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. It is, in this sense, "objective, factual, denotative reference directing" to God. Theological language is human language, but it is not merely speculative language because theology (a word about God) is reflective of the act of the Word who is God. God's self-revelation opens the door to speak truthfully about who God is. "This must," Torrance writes, "be primary and control everything else if our language is to be in any way transparent of the Truth."[18] Theological language is also, of course, "a formal, coherent, connotative, syntactical reference, as in the systematic formulation of doctrines or the formal structures of worship." Finally, it is certainly "subjective, existential reference where our language expresses the faith of the heart and mind of the Church."[19] According to Torrance, Schleiermacher reflects the fallacy of Romanticism at large, "to subordinate" (or even, we might add, to abrogate) the first understanding in favor of the second or (even more likely) the third. But, this hermeneutical approach un-tethers Schleiermacher's engagement of theological texts from a cognitive, objective claim to ontological truth about God as God is in Godself.[20]

The reason Schleiermacher's hermeneutical approach is delimited in this fashion, Torrance argues, relates directly to the epistemological solution he offers to the intellectual world inherited from Immanuel Kant. While he rejected Kant's attempts to "ground belief in God in the practical reason, the moral will," Schleiermacher "sought to identify faith with the affective side of human existence, assigning it to a moment in consciousness more inward and anterior to the deliverances of both the theoretical and practical reason and therefore beyond the subject-object relationship of cognition and conation."[21] But his attempt to ensure the autonomy and integrity of religious faith in this manner – understanding religious faith as the "feeling" or intuition "of absolute dependence (*schlechthiniges or allgemeines Abhängigkeitsgefühl*)" – has the unfortunate effect of meaning that "[o]ur statements about God are statements about the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him . . . But we cannot speak of God as in any way given as an object of cognition, for this would be to identify faith with the sensibly determined self-consciousness."[22] Our statements of faith, consequently, are statements about ourselves. Torrance

18 Ibid., 276.

19 Ibid., 276.

20 Ibid., 277.

21 Ibid., 279.

22 Ibid., 280-281.

discerns in Schleiermacher a desire to preserve "the otherness of God" and to "recognize the absolute difference between the non-givenness of God and the givenness of the sensible world," but his attempt to do this "throws theology back upon the self and the deliverances of the self;" thus Schleiermacher "commits himself to that anthropological determination of the content of doctrine which has brought the charge of subjectivism."[23]

Beyond empathy to a pedagogy of grace

As Torrance leans into his closing interrogation of Schleiermacher – and the questions he raises remain today some of the most perceptive ever posed, not only of Schleiermacher, but of modern (and, now, postmodern) theology as well – Torrance demonstrates the core of his own theological understanding that takes us beyond a hermeneutic of empathy to a hermeneutic (and, therefore, a pedagogy) of grace. One can almost visualize the barrister leaning across the railings, thundering his questions in the face of a recalcitrant and hostile witness:

> "Why identify perception with sense-perception and cognition with subject-object relation appropriate to sense-perception?" he asks Schleiermacher. "Why identify objectivity with sensory objectivity or the objective realities of faith with the objective world of a myth-making consciousness? Where such identifications are made, what alternative has theology but to resort to some programme of demythologizing or regarding doctrines anthropologically as accounts of the religious affections set forth in speech?"[24]

Then, unexpectedly, our interrogator relaxes his features. The barrister mops the sweat from his brow, and perhaps glances at the judge for a moment. He turns to the court and unexpectedly speaks *for* the defendant in the dock. He begins to defend the man he has just peppered with questions. Torrance says, "It is clear, as we have seen, that Schleiermacher's *practical intention* is not to reduce all statements about God to mere statements about the self, but rather to say nothing about God which could not be derived from our religious self-consciousness." In doing this, he is attempting to reinterpret Christian doctrine in his own time, in terms that can be understood by his audience, including also (we are left to assume) "the cultured despisers" of Christian faith. What Schleiermacher has done has had the unfortunate consequence of undermining our best attempts to bear witness to Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God

23 Ibid., 281.

24 Ibid., 281-282.

the Father. This we are duty-bound to recognize. However, Torrance seems to say, Schleiermacher's failure must be understood in the context of what he attempted to accomplish.[25]

It is at this point that an understanding, a *specifically theological* understanding, seems most evident in Torrance's approach. And it is this understanding which, I believe, provides the impetus to his pedagogy. In order to understand someone, we must love them. This is not simply a statement of devotional sentiment, but an expression of enormous theological consequence. This insight runs through Torrance's covenantal thought, through his appreciation of John McLeod Campbell and forms the core of his critique of the contractual conditionality of federal Calvinism. One never comprehends that which one holds in contempt, but grace provides the framework in which understanding can flourish. The sympathy and empathy Torrance demonstrates for those with whom he critically engages was not ultimately the product of a hermeneutical method, humanistic or romantic, though it was not unrelated to this. Rather his hermeneutic as a whole seems to argue a theological point, that if we wish to understand others (and this includes even our most ferocious and antagonist interlocutors), we must know them as they are known by God, and God is love. And so it was that every thinker James Torrance examined seemed to his students larger and more worthy of our study at the end of his examination, and the theological work in which we were engaged was enlarged as well by grace.[26]

25 Ibid., 282.

26 Torrance's interest in hermeneutics dovetailed with his teaching also when he served as an external examiner for Anthony C. Thiselton. Thiselton's book, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1980), represents an edited version of the Ph.D. thesis which Professor Torrance examined. He also wrote the "foreword" to the published text.