

Featured Essay

## What is Hermeneutics?

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**H**ermeneutics is the art of interpretation – we shall not forget that and we will return to it again and again, for that is what hermeneutics is – the art of interpretation. We might do well, however, to stare at the word ‘hermeneutics’ just by way of a starting point. Hermeneutics – the word goes back to a name, Hermes. Who is Hermes? Among the earliest references to him is made by no less than Plato in the dialogue, *Cratylus*.<sup>1</sup> The dialogue begins rather abruptly, with someone called Hermogenes inviting Socrates to be a party to an argument between him (Hermogenes) and Cratylus. Cratylus is therefore one of the characters in the dialogue, and it is his name that is also given to the dialogue. The other party to it is Hermogenes, a name which literally means ‘son of Hermes’. Socrates suspects that Cratylus is making fun of Hermogenes, saying that the latter is “no true son of Hermes, because (he – Hermogenes - is) always looking after a fortune and never in luck.”

Hermogenes means ‘son of Hermes’. Who, then, is Hermes? The cue is that Hermes is what Hermogenes is not, making the latter not a true son of the former, because Hermes is always looking after a fortune and is apparently always lucky, something Hermogenes is not. Hermes is always in search of a fortune and is always lucky, always fortunate. Always to be in search is always to be on the move, always to be on the way, never still, a nomad. Indeed, as the dialogue ends we hear Cratylus admitting that “I incline to Heraclitus.”<sup>2</sup> And why not? The argument between him and Hermogenes has all to do with names, with language. And it looks as though the debate between them is going nowhere, and so they are now intending to bring Socrates into the discussion, hoping that this third party will be able to come to their rescue, help them find the key and bring the restless journey to a quiet conclusion.

Even Socrates, however, true to his form, properly excuses himself. “If I had not been poor,” he says, “I might have heard the fifty-drachma course of the great Prodicus, which is a complete education in grammar and language . . . and then I should have been at once able to answer your question about the correctness of names. But, indeed, I have only heard the single-drachma course, and therefore I do not know the truth about such matters.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Cratylus*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 421-474.

<sup>2</sup> We normally remember Heraclitus for his aphorism, “No one can step on the same river twice,” and for his reference to the real as analogous to ceaselessly changing fire.

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That's the famous Socratic irony at work, naturally. What for is Socrates the wisest of men, says the Oracle of Delphi, if it is not because of all men he alone knows that he does not know? Prodicus is evidently a sophist, one who teaches for money. For fortune? For the fortune that Hermogenes cannot find? Does Prodicus then find it; does he find what Hermogenes cannot find? The irony of Socrates is to side with ignorance as much as his mortal foe, such as the sophist Prodicus, sides with absolute knowledge. "But," Socrates admits, "there is a good deal of difficulty in this sort of knowledge, and therefore we had better leave the question open until we have heard both sides."

What is this about which Socrates says "there is a good deal of difficulty"? Names. Grammar and language. Words, then. Speech, too. And when you consider this matter you are in a ceaseless motion, like Heraclitus' flux (and, later in our days, like Bergson's stream of consciousness). No wonder Hermogenes is 'always looking after a fortune' and 'never lucky.' Is luck possible in a matter like language? Can one ever catch and arrest its flow? Is speech anything that stops and rests anywhere? As the dialogue ends, if this indicates anything, we hear Cratylus saying, "Very good, Socrates. I hope, however, that you will continue to think about these things yourself."

What things? Somewhere in the dialogue, Plato (or Socrates) speaks more precisely of Hermes, as follows: "I should imagine that the name Hermes has to do with speech, and signifies that he is the interpreter, or messenger, or thief, or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language. As I was telling you, the word *eirein* is expressive of the use of speech, and there is an often-recurring Homeric word *hemeisato*, which means *he contrived*. Out of these two words, *eirein* and *meisastai*, the legislator formed the name of the god who invented language and speech, and we may imagine him dictating to us the use of this name. O my friends, says he to us, seeing that he is the contriver of tales or speeches, you may rightly call him *Heiremeis*. And this has been improved by us, as we think, into Hermes. Iris also appears to have been called from the verb *to tell (eirein)*, because she was a messenger."

To which Hermogenes is heard to admit that "Cratylus was quite right in saying that I was no true son of Hermes, for I am not a good hand at speeches." A true son of Hermes is not so much Hermogenes as Pan, "the declarer of all things (*pan*) and the perpetual mover of all things...rightly called *goatherd*, he being the two-formed son of Hermes, smooth in his upper part, and rough and goatlike in his lower regions. And, as the son of Hermes, he is speech or the brother of speech..." After saying which, Plato (or Socrates) drops the subjects of gods, even as the discussion about language and speech continues.

Among the Romans, Hermes is known as Mercury, who likewise "can be recognized by his purse or pouch, winged sandals, winged cap, and the herald's staff, the *kerykeion*."<sup>3</sup> In the first line of Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus is

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<sup>3</sup> "Hermes," in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermes>.

described in the manner of Hermes, "of many shifts (*polutropos*), turning many ways, of many devices, ingenious, or much wandering."

There is another Hermes, Hermes Trismegistus, "a mythical name associated with a certain class of Gnostic philosophical revelations or with magical treatises and recipes" and who "was, for the Renaissance, a real person, an Egyptian priest who had lived in times of remote antiquity and who had himself written all these works."<sup>4</sup> According to Frances Yates, the eminent scholar of the period, the Renaissance reader found in these writings "the fount of pristine wisdom whence Plato and the Greeks had derived the best they knew."<sup>5</sup>

This Hermes, St. Augustine contrasts with the classical daimon (or demon) whom the Greeks consider as a being in the middle, neither god nor mortal, and so serving as a mediator and communicator, thus a messenger and, if you wish, a "translator." Against this is the daimon of Hermes Trismegistus which belongs to one of two categories of gods, not the ones made by the Supreme God but the ones created by men.<sup>6</sup> The divine spark in men is responsible for "visible and tangible representations" which are "the bodies of gods."

He claims that they are animated by spirits who have been invited to dwell within them and have power either to harm or to favor those who render them reverence and divine honor. Thus, by some kind of art, invisible spirits are united with visible and material things, which then become animated bodies dedicated and devoted to the spirits that inhabit them. This, says Hermes, is what it means 'to make gods,' and this great and amazing gift has been entrusted to men.<sup>7</sup>

Contriver and creator, messenger and translator – that, among other things, is Hermes: Ever leading an exilic existence, is he god or mortal, or something in the middle, traversing climes and times, producing connections while stealing others? Like cupid, is he a daimon? Or a magician?

### St. Augustine

But St. Augustine is significant for us for more reason than his mention of Hermes Trismegistus. In his work *On Christian Doctrine*, he insists that learning certain rules for interpretation cannot be superfluous, especially not so when the text is the Scripture. These rules, he says, "might with great

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<sup>4</sup> Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Gerald G. Walsh, Demetrius Zema, et al. (New York: Image Books, 1958), 165-166.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

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advantage be taught to earnest students of the word, that they may profit not only from reading the works of others who have laid open the secrets of the sacred writings, but also from themselves opening such secrets to others.”<sup>8</sup> Augustine is, of course, a man of his time, and we do appreciate that he reminds us that “All truth is of Him who says, ‘I am the truth.’”<sup>9</sup>

Just the same, whether the text is sacred or profane, it makes sense that “to discover the meaning we must attend both to things and to signs.”<sup>10</sup> By ‘thing’ he means

that which is never employed as a sign of anything else: for example, wood, stone, cattle, and other things of that kind. Not, however, the wood which we read Moses cast into the bitter waters to make them sweet, nor the stone which Jacob used as a pillow, nor the ram which Abraham offered up instead of his son; for these, though they are things, are also signs of other things. There are signs of another kind, those which are never employed except as signs: for example, words. No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence may be understood what I call signs: those things, to wit, which are used to indicate something else. Accordingly, every sign is also a thing; for what is not a thing is nothing at all. Every thing, however, is not also a sign.<sup>11</sup>

Augustine makes no mention of hermeneutics, but what characterizes hermeneutics is all over the place – interpretation, specifically in his case the interpretation of the Scripture. “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of god and our neighbour, does not yet understand them as he ought... For there is involved in deception the intention to say what is false...”<sup>12</sup> He thus makes no bones about the need at times to correct an interpreter.

“Among signs, words hold the chief place,” says Augustine.<sup>13</sup> “But because words pass away as soon as they strike upon the air, and last no longer than their sound, men have by means of letters formed signs of words,” he explains, “Thus the sounds of the voice are made visible to the eye, not of course as sounds, but by means of certain signs.”<sup>14</sup> This is how writing comes to the rescue of speech, and once a text is written it becomes open to the

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<sup>8</sup> In the *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18, ed. by Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 621.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 623.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 624.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 625.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 634-635.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

possibility of translation into different languages. The task is thus to decipher the meaning of what is written, and “hasty and careless readers are led astray by many and manifold obscurities and ambiguities, substituting one meaning for another; and in some places they cannot hit upon even a fair interpretation.”<sup>15</sup>

How is it best to make oneself ready to encounter a text and understand it? Augustine's reply: “The great remedy for ignorance of proper signs is knowledge of languages.”<sup>16</sup> He is not averse to the use of translations. On the contrary, such a diversity of interpretations (for a translation, you may say, is already an interpretation) is useful. For him, “the examination of a number of texts has often thrown light upon some of the more obscure passages...When the meaning of two translators is compared, a more likely sense of the words suggests itself...For it is difficult for interpreters to differ so widely as not to touch at some point.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, “the great number of the translators proves a very great assistance, if they are examined and discussed with a careful comparison of their texts,” he says, adding however that “all positive errors must be removed.”<sup>18</sup>

For a man as fervently Catholic as Augustine, it is refreshing to hear that “No help is to be despised, even though it (may) come from a profane source.”<sup>19</sup> It is not only the knowledge of languages which is helpful; just as helpful is the knowledge of things, and for this knowledge one needs everybody's help whose expertise one might not have. Many times we find it difficult to understand a text (the Scripture to Augustine, a novel or poem to us) because although we might know its language we lack the experience of the very thing it speaks about. Help from the other arts and sciences is here not to be scorned; rather, it must be welcomed, even sought. History, natural sciences, the mechanical arts, logic and mathematics are among the profane disciplines which are here explicitly mentioned.<sup>20</sup> “Whatever has been rightly said by the heathen, we must appropriate to our uses,” is Augustine's liberal counsel.<sup>21</sup>

### Friedrich Schleiermacher

Who mentions hermeneutics by name is the eighteenth-century German Protestant theologian and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), whose founding role is now widely recognized.<sup>22</sup> As a pioneer, he amazes one by what insights he comes up with, insights which one would initially think are original with contemporary hermeneutes. For lack of a luxury

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 638.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 641.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 643.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 646..

<sup>20</sup> See *Ibid.*, 650-655.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 655.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Bowie, Introduction to his translation of Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics and Criticism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), vii.

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of time, however, we shall be content with only three of these insights which are pervasive in his works. First, he says that "all understanding consists of the two moments, of understanding the utterance as derived from language, and as a fact in the thinker."<sup>23</sup> The first he would call philological or grammatical, and the second he would call psychological or technical. In short, understanding entails two things, language and thinker. There can be no understanding, that is, no understanding can take place if one does not think (that implies the thinker) and if one does not have words by which to think (that makes for the language). It is not only that we cannot think without words; it is also that what we try to understand is normally couched in words, whether oral or written.

Clearly, then, there are these two things to consider in the situation of understanding, a knowledge of the language and a knowledge of the person, and the first we shall call grammatical or philological, and the second we shall call psychological or technical.<sup>24</sup> The successful practice of the art, claims Schleiermacher, depends on two talents, "the talent for language and the talent for knowledge of individual people."<sup>25</sup> In other words, one who interprets a text is dealing with utterances, and that is language, but also with what those utterances might mean in the mind of him who utters them, and that is the writer or the thinker. On the one hand we try to decode the words, and on the other hand we try to read a mind.

Understanding the words is, everyone will agree, itself a toil. One not only has to learn the grammar of the language, but also the meaning, use and construction of words. The latter leads one to the psychology of the person, whose context is wider than the individual and extends to a whole society, even an entire epoch. No wonder, in the end Schleiermacher concludes that "the totality of understanding is always a collective work."<sup>26</sup> In my own discipline, for example, it is not possible to understand Martin Heidegger if one fails to reckon with the two-thousand-year history of the West. And, indeed, one has to listen to what countless writers on Heidegger are saying if one is adequately to understand what he means.

That's the first point I'd like to say about Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, that to understand your author you should be adept in his language and indeed know his person as well as you can. That, in itself, is a tall order, perhaps an infinite one. The second point is not much unlike the first, for it requires of interpretation a certain circularity, such that "each particular can only be understood via the general, of which it is a part, and vice versa."<sup>27</sup> In other words, to understand a text implies that one has understood the whole of it, which in turns implies that its parts are understood, and vice versa. One

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> "For the grammatical side to be completed on its own there would be a complete knowledge of the language, in the other case (the psychological) a complete knowledge of the person." *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

cannot understand a part of a text independently from the other parts, that is, without understanding the whole, and vice versa. One is here caught in an inevitable circle,<sup>28</sup> a hermeneutic circle in the language of later hermeneutes, a circle from which one cannot escape if one is properly to understand the text one is reading.

The advantage of the reader is that he can go back to the text again and again, and thus his understanding of it can grow at each reading. This leads me to my third point. "Complete understanding," says Schleiermacher, "is an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself."<sup>29</sup> The task is "to understand the utterance at first just as well and then better than its author."<sup>30</sup> A great writer has a lot of wealth hidden even from himself, and the interpreter's work is "to bring much to consciousness that can remain unconscious to him," namely, the author. The greater the author, the more infinite the task, because "it is an infinity of past and future that we wish to see in the moment of the utterance."<sup>31</sup>

### Hans-Georg Gadamer

The man who definitively figures in contemporary hermeneutics is the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002). His book, *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, published in 1960, which is a "revival of the expression *hermeneutics*, with its long tradition," is not intended, he says, "to produce a manual for guiding understanding . . . (nor) to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedures of the human sciences."<sup>32</sup> The title is thus not to be mistaken for an attempt to provide a method for the discovery of truth; indeed, any method is almost surely to lead one to the opposite of truth, at least the truth of the humanities which is not to be confined to formulas. One can see that he is indeed coming from Martin Heidegger, who in turn is coming from Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology. Here, again, we see how hermeneutics is itself a product of a continuous dialogue with a whole community of thinkers rigorously following each other's trails. We can try to single out here two of these continuities.

The first is the idea of intentionality, according to which consciousness is always consciousness-of-something (*Bewußtsein von Etwas*). In the past we used to think of subject and object as a dichotomy. Objectivity, we thought, could be attained through a manner totally detached from the subject. Now we know better, thanks to the formidable *Critique of Pure Reason* of Kant. Husserl has not forgotten this lesson and makes sure that we no longer

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<sup>28</sup> "Even within a single text the particular can only be understood from out of the whole, and a cursory reading to get an overview of the whole must therefore precede the more precise explication. This seems to be a circle . . ." *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), xxviii.

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consider the *Bewußtsein* in isolation from the *Etwas*; he even coins two words which are faces of the same coin, so to speak: *noema* and *noesis*, if only to insist on the inseparability of the *cogito* from its *cogitatum*. From now on it would be naïve to think of reason as a pure thinking substance in the manner of the Cartesian *cogito*, like a mind floating in empty space.

Consciousness is always consciousness of something. There is no thinker without the thought. Subject and object are indelibly linked, so that the one cannot be there without the other. This relational context can be broken only through cessation of the activity, say, the activity of reading. A text is a text only to a reader; one is a reader only if a text is being read. There is an I-Thou relationship in the act of understanding. And, moreover, in the collision of I and Thou there occurs a *fusion of horizons*. The reader is not a *tabula rasa* even before he sets his eyes on the text; he is not, as Husserl presumes he can be, a 'pure or presuppositionless consciousness.' Here is where Gadamer agrees with his friend, Martin Heidegger, who speaks of a *Vorstruktur*, a fore-structure of consciousness, which I bring with me as I approach a text: this is my own horizon. The text, meanwhile, is a product of its author's own work, which carries with it a world of its own; it has its own horizon, the horizon of its author. Reading as interpretation is a fusion of these horizons which belong to me as a reader and to the text as something being read; there can be no separation of these two horizons. They collide in the act of reading. As I enter the world of the author, that world is transformed by me.

Two dynamic worlds that fuse in a way that makes for a lived experience: this is what transpires in the act of reading. Otherwise no understanding, not even misunderstanding, takes place. This fusion which I call a collision of horizons is an event of the spirit, of the *Geist* which is perpetually restless, never static, ever living and ceaselessly in flux. Even if, in naïvete, we take each horizon separately, this is not to be taken as a one-sided formula which is flat and bare; each item in the relationship is a fuzzy world that shifts and turns not so much in space as in time. Each is a historically advancing entity that progressively changes, especially as it creatively collides with the Other and produces Interpretation. By its very nature, interpretation is only that - an interpretation whose sides are not stitched tight, nourished as it is by the serum of life, what Bergson calls the *elan vital*.

Gadamer calls it *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*, literally translated as 'historically effected consciousness,'<sup>33</sup> a consciousness whose quality is history, better yet historicity, not a simplistic being what it is once and for all, but an evolved and evolving consciousness which touches ground with another living and dynamic consciousness, the result of which is a collision of horizons that makes new horizons possible. In reading, neither the reader nor the text is dead. The encounter is between an I and a Thou that are equally in the midst of their own lived experience, where each affects the other, indeed changing each other in such a way that neither is the same again. "Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness," says Gadamer,

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, in Translators' Preface, xiv.



"involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present . . . . This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present."<sup>34</sup>

Reading makes for transformation, the "transformation into the true."<sup>35</sup> The true, however, is not a product of a calculative procedure measured in terms of a cut-and-dried formula or a rule of thumb which, if followed sheepishly, will inevitably lead to an exact result. That would not amount to a living truth, a truth of the spirit or what Hegel calls *Geist*, the *Geisteswissenschaft*, which is more akin to play than to method. "The being of all play," according to Gadamer, "is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has its telos within itself. The world of the work of art, in which play expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. In and through it everyone recognizes that that is how things are."<sup>36</sup>

To Gadamer, "literature is the place where art and science merge . . . . Nothing is so strange, and at the same time so demanding, as the written word . . . . The written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity. . . . That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us."<sup>37</sup> The being of a work of art, he says, is play.<sup>38</sup>

If that is so, then is interpretation or understanding a careless activity? We may agree with Gadamer that "Interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation."<sup>39</sup> And what happens in interpretation? "No one can stage a play, read a poem, or perform a piece of music without understanding the original meaning of the text and presenting it in his reproduction and interpretation," says Gadamer, "But, similarly, no one will be able to make a performative interpretation without taking account of that other normative element – the stylistic value of one's own day – which, whenever a text is brought to sensory appearance, sets limits to the demand for a stylistically correct reproduction."<sup>40</sup> Gadamer calls that "the miracle of understanding."<sup>41</sup>

This is what makes me flinch, for example, when my Chair asked me for the first time to speak on hermeneutics if possible as it applies to literature, for the literary bits and pieces that I have consumed are not enough to

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

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constitute a genuine understanding of it. It is true I enjoyed the little of Homer and Shakespeare and James Joyce and George Bernard Shaw that I have read, but those are more for my own amusement than anything else, for I cannot pretend to have really understood them. Whoever understands any of them must have read their entirety, both whole and parts, and must have listened adequately to enough voices that have discoursed on them. That would have given one a degree of authority to claim true understanding, something I can own for philosophy but not for literature, not even for one great figure of literature.

Thus, hermeneutics is also a task. And the more one has toiled over an author, the higher becomes one's expertise on his behalf, the more is the understanding, and the greater too is one's enjoyment of each and all of his works. Such an enjoyment of beauty initially requires much hard work. Toil makes for the type of breadth and depth that accompany authentic understanding, that understanding which is what is called objectivity in times past. The presuppositionless consciousness which Husserl speaks of in his phenomenology is reached through the medium of thorough immersion in the writings of an author one hopes to understand, and not through a simplistic exclusion of the tedium of toil. Truth is thus earned, as Hegel already said in his phenomenology of mind. This is what makes for what Gadamer calls the guiding concepts for the human sciences: *Bildung* (or culture), *Sensus Communis* (or the communal sense for what is right or wrong), *Judgment* (which is a basic intellectual virtue), and *Taste* (which is a communal sense that is never quite wrong).<sup>42</sup>

### Jacques Derrida

There are many illustrious names after Gadamer who have contributed to the discussion and debate on interpretation, and we are in no position to mention them all. Among those that deserve mention and whom I shall not even be able to give a glance to are Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas. I leave it to some of our students to discuss later more fully with you the thoughts of these two philosophers inasmuch as they have given them a closer treatment in their own respective graduate papers.

My choice of a parting philosopher in our discussion this afternoon is Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), and I shall focus on my own view of his very famous deconstruction as it is explained in an essay entitled "Violence and Metaphysics" in a collection gathered together as *Writing and Difference*, considered now a landmark of contemporary French thought. Let us look at the long opening line of this essay in search for clues to the meaning of deconstruction:

That philosophy died yesterday, since Hegel or Marx,  
Nietzsche or Heidegger – and philosophy should still

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-42.

wander toward the meaning of its death – or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying (as is silently confessed in the shadow of the very discourse which *declared philosophia perennis*); that philosophy died *one day, within history*, or that it has always fed on its own agony, on the violent way it opens history by opening itself to nonphilosophy, which is its past and its concern, its death and wellspring; that beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future, or even, as is said today, is still entirely to come because of what philosophy has held in store; or, more strangely still, that the future itself has a future – all these are unanswerable questions.<sup>43</sup>

To end this long opening statement and perhaps to give it emphasis, Derrida writes a short clear sentence: “By right of birth, and for one time at least, these are problems put to philosophy as problems philosophy cannot resolve.” We recall something similar, also an opening line, this time from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. “Our reason (*Vernunft*) has this peculiar fate that, with reference to one class of its knowledge, it is always troubled with questions which cannot be ignored, because they spring from the very nature of reason, and which cannot be answered, because they transcend the powers of human reason.”<sup>44</sup> If these are questions which cannot be answered because they transcend the powers of the very human reason that initially asks them, so why ask them at all? Shouldn’t we rather declare a moratorium to these questions and send them finally to the grave?

I know of no discipline which dares to criticize its own self so hard as philosophy even to the point of bringing itself to the brink. Perhaps the most influential of these is René Descartes, whose universal doubt has become a household name, repeated even more rigorously at the beginning of our century by Edmund Husserl through his famous *epoché*. When both somewhat failed to let go of the some classical traces, there came Immanuel Kant in the last century and Martin Heidegger in ours to complete the work of devastation. After Kant and Heidegger, there’s no more reason to say that any more remnants are left for us to hold on to. The work of radical nihilism is now complete.

Why am I mentioning all this to you in connection with hermeneutics? The reason is because all this lends support to Jacques Derrida’s radical deconstruction. A friend of mine, used to Homer’s *Odyssey* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, is unable to appreciate James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Foe*. My suspicion is because he has difficulty letting go of the structural requirement of classical literature; the only reason he cannot completely throw

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<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79.

<sup>44</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by F. M. Müller (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), xxii.

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tantrums against Joyce and Coetzee is because of the wide reputation both have.

Has the English language changed, or is it our taste? Are there new rules of writing, or do they ever change? In any case, what Derrida says is that "beyond the death, or dying nature, of philosophy, perhaps even because of it, thought still has a future." Might not the same be said of literature? That, as the Bible tells us, it is by letting go that we save our self? The deconstruction of Derrida is a radical deconstruction of the text, and one might say that it is precisely this radical quality that makes his deconstruction so fruitful. It is because Nietzsche's death of God spares nothing that it makes the *Übermensch* to live. If God is the God of life, then it is only a death that knows no excuses which can secure the future of life. Says Derrida, ". . . the death of God alone can reawaken the Divine."<sup>45</sup> Schleiermacher, too, has no fear of this, for he believes that "every truly learned (is necessarily) devout and pious."<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

Allow me to conclude this far from finished exposition of hermeneutics. First of all, let us repeat that hermeneutics is the art of interpretation. Because it is an art, we are hereby not constructing a set of fixed and rigid guidelines for a valid interpretation of a text. In this we are only following the cue from the hermeneutes we have mentioned in this paper, especially Gadamer himself whose book *Truth and Method* might as well have been entitled *Truth Against Method*. In a way, method kills the art, especially since art requires a creative spirit. Each creation is a free process whose source is the interplay of faculties unique to each artist. The author thus follows a procedure which cannot be mechanically reproduced inasmuch as every artistic product is a singular and inimitable achievement. This is the case with both artwork and interpretation. An interpreter follows his or her own inspiration, and mechanical rules are hereby out of the question. The encounter of both reader and text is an event that one can neither foresee nor define. Here are two worlds that fuse, even collide, in a way that creates a world that surpasses even the author's expectation such that the text now takes a life of its own. The greater the work, the richer is the meaning which is for generations of its readers to disclose. The author then receives the stamp of a classic.

What one understands of such a text is thus a product of long years of collective readership and its meaning is therefore the work of history. At this point understanding has become a task. Toil in this regard brings about culture and taste, as well as judgment and common sense, which connect with what the Germans call spirit or *Geist*, both individual and collective, making the whole enterprise truly a *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*. Now we finally get to know Hermes, neither god nor mortal, but a messenger – cupid and Mercury –

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<sup>45</sup> Derrida, *op cit.*, 184

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. by John Oman (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), 32.

traversing distances, "of many shifts, blandly cunning, a robber, a cattle driver, a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night, a thief at the gates, one who was soon to show forth wonderful deeds among the deathless gods." Whoever dares to arrest this blithesome spirit deserves in turn to be arrested, wrecked and, as Derrida says, deconstructed. Reading thus continues to be a pleasure as readers, like players, deserve each other's delightful company.

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