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BEYOND HERMENEUTICS? SOME REMARKS ON THE MEANING AND SCOPE OF HERMENEUTICS¹

Richard E. Palmer

The interpretation of something as something is essentially founded in forehaving, foresight, and foreconception. Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasp of something pregiven. Even when the special form of interpretation one finds in the exact interpretation of texts appeals to "what stands there," what "stands there" first and foremost is none other than the self-evident, undiscussed prior opinion (*Vormeinung*) of the interpreter, which necessarily resides in his very approach to interpretation — as that which the interpretation as such already "posits," that is to say what is pregiven in forehaving, foreseeing, and foreconception.

Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*²

For the distinction between a primary source and secondary literature, or between a "great Original" and its imitations, is the space in which traditional hermeneutics works. . . .

The decline of hermeneutics is related to a critique of any description of life which divides it into "original" and "secondary" components — vision and meditation, experience and rationalization, Bible and books. . . . We find ourselves questioning again every theory that posits a more than heuristic "beginning" — an "In the beginning" rather than a "starting point."

I think that is where we are now. We have entered an era that can challenge even the priority of literary critical texts.

Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*³

Hermeneutics would seem to be enjoying an unprecedented vogue in America today. A colleague of mine opined somewhat cynically at the hermeneutics symposium earlier this year in Lawrence, Kansas, that hermeneutics owed this popularity in part to the fact that it was a term vague enough to serve as a rallying point in the common battle against scientific reductionism, literary formalism, and positivist modes in sociology — or whatever else one might be against. This was borne out by Richard de George's remark introducing the final panel at the meeting, that hermeneutics seemed to be many things to many people — "a theory, a philosophy, a view of reality, a methodology, an approach, a hope, a promise, an ideology . . . it's probably all of those, and more depending on which speaker we turn to and how we interpret what they say." He might have added hermeneutics as a slogan, as battlecry. Then he goes on to ask, "In which of its guises does it have a future?"⁴ He might have asked: "In which of its guises is it a thing of the past?" Significantly, his enumeration omitted precisely the sense of hermeneutics I will be advocating in this paper: hermeneutics as a field of study, a discipline, as general theory of interpretation. But just this definitional vagueness also makes it difficult to know what is being asserted in the claim of those who in the face of our enthusiasm demand that we go "beyond hermeneutics." In what sense is it really possible to go beyond hermeneutics at all?

There is a certain irony about the timing of recent calls to go beyond hermeneutics, for they come at a time when hermeneutics finally bids fair to have registered in the general consciousness. Richard Rorty's recent book⁵ has pushed the topic in to the center of American philosophical discussion, and the so-called "hermeneutical quartet" of literary critics at Yale

University (Geoffrey Hartman, Paul deMan, J. Hillis Miller, and Harold Bloom) now recently has become a sextet with the appearance of Barbara Johnson's *The Critical Difference*⁶ and Frederic Jameson's "Marxist hermeneutic" in *The Political Unconscious*.⁷ Sociologists are exploring an "interpretive sociology,"⁸ psychologists are inviting hermeneuticians to spend a semester in residence to talk about methodology,⁹ communications theorists are writing articles and sponsoring colloquia on hermeneutics,¹⁰ and universities here and in Canada are sponsoring colloquia on the theme of hermeneutics, most of them with plans to publish the proceedings.¹¹

Yet in the midst of this growing interest in hermeneutics, we hear voices of opposition. As one might expect, there is opposition from the right: the old guard in the literary quarterlies is grouching about "the hermeneutical mafia at Yale,"¹² and the apostles of what Kuhn calls "normal science" in the various disciplines raise quizzical eyebrows about the lamentable lack of rigor of some of their colleagues who seem to be carried away with each new wind that blows from Europe. One is prepared to deal with this reactionary opposition. What one is not so well prepared to deal with is opposition from the left and from within the ranks — those who claim to know what hermeneutics is and to have gone beyond it already. Among early opposing voices, you with long memories will recall Susan Sontag's well-known book *Against Interpretation*,¹³ which rather colorfully argued that what we need now is not more hermeneutics (exegeses and commentaries about meaning) but an erotics of art. So far as I can tell, her alternative has not called forth a stampede of support — perhaps because of the difficulties of articulating an "erotics" of art. More serious but not really impugning the whole enterprise of hermeneutics were the challenges of Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas. Ricoeur criticized the lack of any viable bridge between the existential hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer and the need for norms of validity and methodology in objective knowledge.¹⁴ Habermas faulted Gadamer's ontological hermeneutics with failure to provide a ground for critique of tradition yet claiming to be a universal ontology of understanding. Such a hermeneutics, he argued, became only an "idealism of language" which could not deal with the real conditions of social exploitation, work, mass production.¹⁵ Ricoeur and Habermas both initially found in hermeneutics a means for critique of their methodologies but then felt obliged to supplement the existential-ontological hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer with psychoanalytic theory, and in the case of Ricoeur, analytic philosophy and semiotics.¹⁶ Both thinkers give hermeneutics a special character and enrich the development of hermeneutical theory, even as they enter into dialogue with the standpoint of existential hermeneutics.

But the most important challenge to hermeneutics comes not from the revisionists from within but from French structuralism and poststructuralism. The French were not slow in recognizing the contrast between the German existential hermeneutics and structuralist thinking. In fact, they were eager to emphasize it. Foucault remarks that hermeneutics and semiotics were "fierce enemies." Both Foucault and Derrida were quick to dissociate what they were doing from existential hermeneutics. In the case of Foucault it included also a total rejection of phenomenology as a pernicious focus on perception at the expense of structure. Among other things, Derrida objected to the prevailing image of text interpretation as something that somehow seeks to fold back on the text with a second and identical copy — interpretation becomes a kind of repetition. Also of course he questioned the priority of voice and philosophies of presence that seemed to be presupposed in much hermeneutics. Yet in contrast to Foucault, Derrida's critique of phenomenology and of Heidegger came from working through them with care rather than a global critique and rejection as one finds in Foucault. Finally, in a recent paper "Beyond Hermeneutics: Interpretation in Late Heidegger and Recent Foucault," Hubert Dreyfus has suggested that Heidegger himself "rejected hermeneutics, and for reasons quite

similar to Foucault's." ¹⁷ Thus we find ranged against hermeneutics a formidable set of adversaries, and the challenge becomes one that cannot be ignored. Foucault, Derrida, and (according to Dreyfus) later Heidegger call on us to transcend hermeneutics for something else — Writing, archeology of knowledge, "thinking" — with the suggestion that hermeneutics is old-fashioned, belongs to earlier stages of human thought which must be transcended if we are to grasp the nature of language, man, and society.

The challenge of this triple threat to hermeneutics gives rise to this paper. What should we do in the face of these challenges? First, it would seem that if the day of hermeneutics is over we should be good sports about it and move boldly on into the future. On the other hand, it would be foolish hastily to cast off a heritage of thousands of years without careful consideration. For instance, I think we need first to look carefully at what Derrida and Foucault mean by hermeneutics. When we do, we find them using the term in a fairly limited sense, even as synonymous with commentary. Hermeneutics is pictured as that special kind of interpretive activity that results in commentary. This is a quite traditional conception and does not at all take into account the development of hermeneutics toward metahermeneutics and philosophical analysis of interpretation. If, on the other hand, we conceive of hermeneutics as transcendental reflection on the conditions governing all interpretation whatever, then going beyond it would be going beyond such reflection. But this does not seem to be what either Foucault or Derrida have in mind when they use the term hermeneutics. Rather they have in mind a specific traditional way of relating to a text and a set of assumptions about interpretation that are themselves highly conditioned historically. Hermeneutics is described by Foucault as a quest for a secret meaning ever hidden, ever elusive. It becomes the task of interpretation to disclose this hidden meaning. In other words, hermeneutics for Derrida and Foucault, does not stand for "interpretation theory" in some kind of neutral and generic way; it stands for a specific approach or set of approaches to interpreting texts. In fact, it stands as a kind of code word for all those erroneous metaphysical notions that one must labor to overcome. It would seem then that while in some circles on this side of the Atlantic hermeneutics wears the white hat and is the good guy identified with those post-positivist qualities that everybody by now is seeking, on the other side of the Atlantic, specifically in France, hermeneutics has a very bad name, wears a black hat, and is loaded with all the regressive metaphysical assumptions that poststructuralism labors to reject.

In my view, Heidegger in 1927 ¹⁸ significantly broadened the conception of hermeneutics beyond the model of the philologist seeking a hidden truth behind a cryptic text. Heidegger's concern is with the articulation of existential understanding. There is no already articulated and written text that he is seeking to penetrate. Rather Heidegger is occupied with describing the preunderstanding at work in all one's interpretations, whatever their variety. Here we are indeed concerned with the nature of interpretation. Hermeneutics is reflection on the nature of interpretation itself. It asks what is going on in all linguistic articulation. It asks about the matrix of elements that make up the interpretive situation. In doing so, Heidegger lays the foundation for a truly philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer in his 1960 masterwork ¹⁹ again operates on this level, leaving aside, for better or worse, any pretense of aiding the interpreter in obtaining verifiable interpretations. Following in the phenomenological tradition, Gadamer does speak of the operativity of history in consciousness as well as in linguistic structures, so that his theory of interpretation is oriented to interpretation as an activity of a human subject, even though in attempting to follow the lead of the later Heidegger he attempts to avoid subjectivist thinking.

What is important, I think, is that hermeneutics here is defined as philosophical reflection on interpretation. It is defined not as a disciplinary matter, nor does it function as a help-discipline for the humanities. It is philosophy of interpretation. As philosophical reflection on interpreta-

tion it is fully made on the philosophical level — such as poststructuralist descriptions of interpretation. It certainly has to deal with the issue of subjectivity, specifically the question of whether consciousness can be made a philosophical foundation for interpretation. All these issues are not just a challenge from outside hermeneutics that demands total capitulation and a brand new name. Rather, they are issues *in* philosophical hermeneutics, so that poststructuralist thinking may be one form of philosophical reflection on interpretation in competition with the existential hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, but it is still preoccupied with the problematic of interpretation, the interpretive situation, the matrix of elements that constitute the hermeneutical situation, and as such has not gone “beyond hermeneutics.” In my view the most obvious way to go “beyond hermeneutics” is to stop thinking about the interpretive situation at all, to stop wondering about the nature of language in relation to the event of understanding and articulation. While it is true that historically hermeneutical reflection has operated with presuppositions that derive from the philosophical standpoint of the times in which the interpretation is occurring, there is no inherent reason why hermeneutical reflection should not change and develop in the light of such standpoints as those represented in poststructuralism — so long as they present themselves for open philosophical debate.

This does not mean that I think interpretation theorists identified with philosophical hermeneutics should simply swallow poststructuralist assertions lock, stock, and barrel. These represent validly adventurous thinking on the frontiers of philosophical reflection, but they must be weighed on the basis of the rules of philosophical rationality. Just a little reflection is sufficient to show that if one assumes a particular metaphysical stance, then one's model of the interpretive situation will conform to it. On the other hand, if one takes a resolutely antimetaphysical stance, then the model of interpretation will be different. Yet certainly both Derrida and Foucault have a view about what it is to interpret a text, and in my opinion it makes no sense at all to define theorizing about textuality and the play of differences in language as somehow outside the sphere of philosophy of interpretation — i.e., beyond hermeneutics. In fact, you may be interested in another subtitle I considered for my paper, since it illustrates the point I am making: “Hermeneutics as Theory of Interpretation.” As theory of interpretation, which is what I think it has been in the philosophical tradition since Heidegger, it cannot exclude those developments in Derrida, especially, which extend, develop, or correct Heideggerian thinking and which most directly bear on the definition of man's interpretive-linguistic being-in-the-world. Even when “man” (or “person”) is denied (as in Foucault) and interpretation is said to occur as a self-guided process, or when Heidegger argues that “*die Sprache spricht*” and man is merely the vehicle of this speaking, the speaking itself is hermeneutical, and the theory of that speaking belongs to hermeneutics. To say, as Dreyfus does, that Heidegger is not doing hermeneutics any more because Heidegger no longer makes assumptions about a deep, hidden truth, or that he has started thinking historically and therefore he is not doing hermeneutics any more, all seem to me an effort to freeze a definition onto hermeneutics at precisely a time when its scope and meaning are expanding to encompass the general problematic of interpretation in all its ramifications. That different schools of thought should approach the interpretive situation differently is only natural, but this is itself simply a part of the continuing debate over issues that must be a part of philosophical hermeneutics. To say that hermeneutics and semiotics are fierce enemies is true enough if one has in mind the existential hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer in contrast to the tradition of semiotics. That is to say, there are deep issues here, and it may be that these two positions are irreconcilable. Furthermore, I agree that it is not helpful to gloss over differences that themselves are the very ground of discussion, but I fail to see that these issues can be excluded from the history of philosophical reflection on interpretation; rather, as such they become a part of the development of philosophical hermeneutics.

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It is well to bear in mind that hermeneutical reflection, that is, reflection on what interpretation is and does, dates back not just to the renaissance and reformation but to antiquity. I see hermeneutics as extending over a period of two and a half millenia, so it does not immediately seem plausible to argue that a contemporary current of French thought has suddenly brought this development to a halt. On the contrary, there are indications that even as radically as poststructuralism may have criticized hermeneutics, it is itself quite one-sided as a theory of interpretation. David Hoy makes this quite clear in a number of recent articles, including his contribution to the Ottawa hermeneutics symposium, where he compares the grammatical interpretation of Derrida with more phenomenologically oriented hermeneutics.²⁰ In fact, he suggests that such interpretation tends to rely on or presuppose the very intentionality and unity it tries to deny.

My approach would be not to try to wall Foucault and Derrida outside hermeneutics and pretend that they are simply doing something else. This would permit me to continue reflecting on interpretation without considering what they have to say. But the fact is that they are testing the traditional assumptions of interpreters, and interpretation theory will have to come to grips with the challenge these systems of thought offer.

While space does not allow me to discuss some of the limitations of structuralist and post-structuralist thought, I would call your attention to a recent book by Manfred Frank, *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare*.²¹ Frank argues persuasively that the poststructuralist emphasis on the self-activating system and the interaction of powers totally outside the individual (Foucault) which are (joyfully) taken to exclude man from the interpretive situation altogether, also has the disadvantage of denying the individuality of the text and of the person interpreting it, as well as looking past the event-character of the interpretation itself as a process. When a theory dealing with the interpretation of texts cannot offer a satisfactory account of factors manifestly present in interpretation, then it does need a supplement. Frank has recourse to Schleiermacher's view that understanding is not just a mechanical application of rules but it also involves the grasp of the "style" of the text, the individuality that is not due to adherence to rules but their violation, and the ability to grasp the meaning of this violation. The text is not just a play of differences, but the saying of an individuality operating at a particular historical time and place. Of course, Gadamer has persuasively shown that the idea of recovering the mind of the author is philosophically untenable, but what Schleiermacher and Frank mean by the understanding of individuality is something quite different. Such understanding need not be taken in a psychologistic sense, and Frank goes far in demonstrating its importance in the interpretation of texts. Nor is the moment of application irrelevant in interpretation. Even semiotics provides for it in the idea of the productivity of interpretation. A theory of interpretation that reduces interpretation to a play of differences or to the interaction of social forces within a larger system runs the risk of eliding the moment of activity, decision, and creativity in the interpreter. It seems to belong to systems to be synchronic and to underplay the diachronic, so that the event of understanding becomes simply an instance of a rule. But precisely the point of understanding as an interpretive process is (as Frank argues) to understand not just the place of the thing said within the universe of rules but individuality, spontaneity, specificity — the "unsayable."

When a theory omits such elements or makes them impossible to deal with, when it projects an image of man which does not include them, then it is time to go beyond that system. For this reason, among others, it seems plausible to suggest that we may be more likely to go beyond poststructuralism than beyond hermeneutics.

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NOTES

1 My title, "Beyond Hermeneutics?", is in part a response to a paper by the same title (without the question mark) by Hubert L. Dreyfus, and now in the subtitle to a book Dreyfus co-authored with Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

2 Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1963 (10th ed.), section 32, p. 150, my own translation.

3 Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975. pp. 16-17.

4 Papers from this symposium on the future of hermeneutics are published in: Gary Shapiro (ed.), *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). Among the participants were Anthony Giddens, Paul DeMan, Hayden White, Hubert Dreyfus, David Hoy, and Richard Rorty.

5 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), and now more recently *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-80* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

6 Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981.

7 Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

8 See Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (eds.), *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) and his essay in the Rabinow and Sullivan anthology; and Anthony Giddens' several works and articles, including *New Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

9 Hans-Georg Gadamer was invited to spend a semester at the University of Dallas in connection with a graduate program in psychology (Robert Sardello), and the graduate program in existential-phenomenological therapeutic psychology at Seattle University once invited me to spend a semester there pending the funding of a grant proposal.

10 I am thinking specifically of the papers and colloquia at Southern Illinois University organized by Stan Deetz, and the colloquium at the 1981 annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy organized by Michael Hyde of Northwestern University on "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric."

11 For example, the colloquium in November, 1978, at Ottawa on hermeneutics and classical texts organized by Stephan Kresic of their classics department, subsequently published as a book, *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts* and as the 50th anniversary double issue of the *University of Ottawa Quarterly* (nos. 3-4); the symposium on "Hermeneutics and the Humanities," in November, 1981, featuring Hans-Georg Gadamer, Patrick Heelan, Gianni Vattimo, David Hoy, and Hubert Dreyfus, organized by Tom Ewens at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (proceedings not to be published); the symposium on the present and future prospects of hermeneutics organized by Gary Shapiro and others at the University of Kansas in April, 1981, featuring presentations by Paul DeMan, Hayden White, Anthony Giddens, Richard Rorty, and Hubert Dreyfus, among others edited by Gary Shapiro, from University of Massachusetts Press in 1984; the present symposium; a symposium oriented to hermeneutics organized by James Swearingen of the English Department of Marquette University, "Agenda for Literary Studies," October 9-10, 1982; a symposium on hermeneutics at Wheaton College, October 23-25, 1982, featuring Hubert Dreyfus; and a symposium on "Plato and Hermeneutics" organized by Gerald Bruns of the University of Iowa consisting of three sets of papers presented in sessions at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in December 1982.

12 See William Pritchard, "Hermeneutical Mafia at Yale," *Hudson Review*, 28 (Winter, 1974-75); pp. 601-10. Pritchard refers to the "extraordinary troubled men of Yale" who are trying to "frisk students of their principles" (p. 603), who find the complexities of structuralism, eristics, and hermeneutics "no more than ordinary language on ordinary evenings in New Haven" (p. 602). In the same vein, see David H. Hirsch, who refers to the "hermeneutical mafia" at Yale in his "Deep Metaphors and Shallow Structures," *Sewanee Review*, 85 (Winter, 1977): pp. 153-66, esp. 162, as well as his "'Hermeneutics' as Free-Floating Fantasy" two issues later in the same journal (Summer, 1977), pp. lxxi-lxxix. Pritchard is utterly turned off by the

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“depressing highjinks” of Geoffrey Hartman in *The Fate of Reading* and blames it all on “the abominable Hegel and his hermeneutics” (p. 605).

13 New York: Dell, 1966.

14 See especially his *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

15 Gadamer replies to these charges in his essay, “Hermeneutik, Rhetorik und Ideologiekritik,” which I have translated under the title (with Gadamer’s approval), “The Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). A general discussion of the Gadamer-Habermas debate in English appears in Josef Bleicher’s *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 153-57. Ricoeur also analyzes the dispute in his 1973 essay “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 63-100.

16 For a short sketch of Ricoeur’s thinking as it develops over three decades, see Thompson’s introduction to *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*, just cited, and Ricoeur’s own remarks in the appendix to *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). I touch on the development of Ricoeur’s thinking in my own survey of the course of hermeneutics from 1966 to 1978, “Hermeneutics,” in *Contemporary Philosophy: A New Survey* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), Vol. 2, pp. 453-505; bibl., pp. 488-505.

17 Page 10 of the manuscript version of the essay, presented at the symposium cited in footnote 4 above and to appear in published form shortly as indicated.

18 In *Being and Time*, translated into English in 1960.

19 *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), translated into English as *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury) in 1975.

20 “Must We Mean What We Say?” pp. 91-106 in the volume edited by Stephan Kresic cited in footnote 11 above.

21 *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare: Studien zur neuesten französischen Hermeneutik und Texttheorie* (Frankfurt, Boston: Suhrkamp, 1980).

