

What Is Radical Hermeneutics?

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In *Radical Hermeneutics* I established what Kierkegaard would call “my point of view as an author.” In my view, hermeneutics is only possible as deconstruction and deconstruction is only possible as hermeneutics. Hermeneutics can be true to itself only if it is fully exposed to deconstruction, and when deconstruction is true to itself, it discovers it is a kind of hermeneutics. I deliberately made hermeneutics the noun and radical the adjective because the radical is always the radicalization *of something*, of the pre-given, of what is always already there (*immer schon*), what is presupposed, over which we have had no say. The radical always comes as the inflection, the deflection, of something else, of something which goes under the name of the “hermeneutic situation.” That is the situation in which we find ourselves (*sich befinden*), always and already (*immer schon*), as Heidegger put it. It is the inescapable presupposition within which any position or de-positioning takes place. The radicalization is parasitical upon the situation which it de-situates, disturbs, or destabilizes. A “radical deconstruction” would be redundant because deconstruction is the radicalizing agent and as such belongs in the adjectival or adverbial position. Deconstruction is more a how than a what, less a set of positions, more a set of cautions about how to hold or not hold a position. To embrace the strategies and the resources of deconstruction is a way to come to grips with the hermeneutic situation, not a way to escape it, an escape I never desire, never thought even possible. The day you succeed in escaping the hermeneutic situation is the day they will mark on your tombstone. The whole idea of radical hermeneutics is to show that if you start with the deconstruction of hermeneutics, you will end up with the hermeneutics of deconstruction, which is the title of a game-changing article—for me, at least—I wrote in the mid-1980s.

I had several ways of putting this. Radical hermeneutics issues from the tension between what I called the deconstructive left, which is the destabilizing agent, and the hermeneutic right, which provides the measure of stability in what is being destabilized. This is not entirely unlike the tension between Dionysus and Apollo, or what James Joyce called the “chaosmos,” the disorder in the order. The point is not to spread pure chaos but to keep the future open. It is to sustain a perilous position of optimal disequilibrium, a state of built-in unrest, flux, instability, just enough to keep things sufficiently off-balance without tipping over. This is a neo-peripatetic philosophy which, like walking, is a kind of falling forward without landing on your face. I also called it “cold” hermeneutics, meaning it views with suspicion the heart-warming assumption that the reason traditions endure is their deep truth, not their violence.

The “radical” in radical hermeneutics does not mean radically rooted or grounded but radically exposed, willing to take the truth straight up, unattenuated, unsweetened, ameliorated. Both hermeneutics and deconstruction are theories of reading, not in the empirical sense, which is confined to reading books or other written materials, but in the widest, transcendental, or rather quasi-transcendental sense of interpreting, construing. Hermeneutics takes up what is readable in deconstruction while deconstruction points out what is unreadable in hermeneutics, where the readable and the unreadable are joined at the hips and mutually condition each other.

The “hermeneutics” in radical hermeneutics goes back to Heidegger’s hermeneutics of facticity,” not to Protestant biblical interpretation or to Schleiermacher and Dilthey. As soon as I come to be, I find that I am already there, Heidegger claimed—in the middle of a time and place, of a language and a culture, of a body and a geography, of a time of life and an historical age, and so on, all making up the prevailing background understanding. That is the hermeneutic situation, where we find ourselves, like it or not, whatever our other aspirations, however angelic or spiritualistic, transcendent or transcendental. Philosophizing is not a matter of escaping this inescapable pre-giveness but of penetrating it all the more thoroughly, searchingly—radically—as far as that is possible, since it is, in fact, impossible to ever do a complete search, which does not discourage us but makes it all the more compelling. It was Schelling who first made this point in the famous Berlin lectures—which were pitched against Hegel and attended by Kierkegaard—under the name of *das Unwordenkliche*, literally, the un-pre-thinkable, meaning that being is always and already (*immer schon*) up and running by the time thinking arrives on the scene. Contrary to the most profound assumption of Kant and the Enlightenment, it is not thinking that sets forth the conditions under which things may be but being which sets the

conditions with which thinking must come to grips. Being deals the cards thinking is given to play. The ultimately unconditional condition is being, whatever else thinking may have had in mind. Being is the unconditional, the wall against which thinking bounces. That spelled the end of German Idealism and the beginning of the hermeneutics of facticity.

I am arguing that this is a new way to think not only about hermeneutics but also *about deconstruction*. While we may not often think about it this way, deconstruction in fact shares this commitment to the hermeneutic situation, and this despite the fact that Derrida himself keeps his distance from hermeneutics. But that is because he is thinking of the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, not Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity, with which, I was maintaining, deconstruction is of a piece. The inescapable hermeneutic situation continually shows up in deconstruction. It is found when Derrida says we always begin where we are, *in medias res*, in the middle of a language which is already up and running; and when he says there is nothing outside this (pre-given hermeneutic) context, which is what he means by a *texte* in the famous, even notorious declaration that there is no (*il n'y a pas*) getting outside one (*hors-texte*). The misunderstanding here is to take *texte* in the empirical sense of a bit of paper, papyrus or pixels, instead of the transcendental sense of a formal set of differential relationships, such that significance is achieved only by situating oneself within a differential system and learning to work its levers (like learning how to speak) in order to produce differential effects. The differential system is the pre-given situatedness, and it is not only linguistic; it is also social, cultural, historical, gendered, found in any kind of "coded" system at all, up to and including biological (DNA) codes and global-environmental systems. Derrida is saying we never get to say or do something *outside* of a preestablished differential system or quasi-system, which does the work of setting up our (hermeneutic) presuppositions.

In *Of Grammatology* the concern was not to find a way to *escape* these systems but to keep them *open-ended*, so that everything is not pre-programmed. When he described that deconstruction as an "exorbitant" method, that presupposes the orbit; deconstruction is the *productive* reading which presupposes a meticulously *reproductive* reading. The argument of "Violence and Metaphysics," his monumental article on Levinas, is that the *tout autre* cannot be absolutely *tout autre*, that such a thing makes no sense, that the *tout autre* is always *tout autre* relative to a differential system. A surprise is something which shatters our horizon of expectation, which it requires. An absolute surprise it makes no sense; it requires a hermeneutic horizon which it overtakes (*sur* + *prise*). Furthermore, Derrida did once employ the word "hermeneutics" to say that deconstruction occupies the distance between the impious

hermeneutics of the poet and the pious hermeneutics of the rabbi, between poetry and theology, between the prankster Hermes and the obedient messenger boy, between the two interpretations of interpretation, between what we can command when we speak or act and what we cannot command.

In *Radical Hermeneutics*, deconstruction pushes the hermeneutics of facticity to the limits, explaining how even our most precious and profound inherited notions—like world, being and truth, God and self, all the texts and traditions, beliefs and practices, laws and institutions, sciences and ethics, all of the accouterments of culture, all our notions of origins, essence, meaning, identity and presence—are so many constituted factual effects. This does not mean embracing anomie or anarchy, skepticism or despair; it just means facing the facts, the facticity of the facts we inherit (the tradition). What I was saying, without saying it like this—that would come ten years later, in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*—is that radical hermeneutics is an act of confession, of the circum-fession of our factual condition, described most memorably by Augustine’s *quaestio mihi magna factus sum*. This represents a radical questioning of any possible autonomous or interior “self,” and that self-questioning is who the self *is*. I, the “I,” is the one who is a question to itself, the I who cannot say I, the we who cannot say we. Hermeneutics has to do with understanding, and in particular with reaching a self-understanding, and in radical hermeneutics the understanding is the impossibility of ever reaching a satisfactory understanding—and understanding that this does contradict the possibility of a self-understanding; it *constitutes* it. This inability to understand the being which we ourselves are *is* who we are. This is not the abjuration of hermeneutics but the radicalization of it. You get the best results by facing up to the worst, to the “difficulty of life,” as Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus says. That is radical hermeneutics.