

academic criticism frequently so emphasized the groundless freedom of reading that interpretation became an action without context or constraint. Once again, we stressed the situated, responsible nature of interpretation.

The Promise of Hermeneutics develops key themes of our earlier book but does so with an eye to the particular needs of the present situation in the Church and the academy. Where the earlier volume stressed the responsibility of human agents, this book shifts the emphasis to the promise that hermeneutics holds for us.

In speaking of promise, we are thinking, first, of what we might call the secular promise of hermeneutics. The work of continental philosophers, theologians, and speech-act theorists offers extraordinary resources for thinking constructively about the complex problems of human understanding. Such thinkers as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and John Searle offer compelling accounts of the act of interpretation in its many dimensions.

In more specific theological terms, this volume argues that interpretation is an activity that Christians engage in within the context of the promises of God. More important than the question of human certainty is that of divine fidelity. For the sake of human understanding and the future of the Christian church, it is more important for God to be seen as the maker and keeper of promises than it is for us to perfect the procedures we employ as we interpret texts and the world about us.

The Promise of Hermeneutics, in short, offers a sustained literary, philosophical, and theological analysis of contemporary theories of interpretation. In addition to making a critique of a number of those theories and the practices that issue from them, the book proposes models of human understanding that demonstrate the lasting promise of hermeneutics.

Interpreting Orphans: Hermeneutics in the Cartesian Tradition

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“Do You Play Alone?” asks the ad for the Asolo climbing boot, one of several products promoted in a recent campaign to sell the goods of the Benetton Sportssystem. “When there is nothing but you and the mountain,” the ad’s copy intones, “don’t feel abandoned. You have something strong to believe in. Asolo — Count on it for extreme performance.”

What give this ad and others in the Benetton series their highly provocative edge are the visual images that accompany the scant copy. In the Asolo ad, that means a single hiking boot depicted against a background of white on one side of the page and a picture of Christ upon the cross on the other side. As Roman centurions hoist the cross into place, they are cast in shadows, while Christ is bathed, in his agony, in sunlight.

In a press conference called to introduce the latest in a series of controversial campaigns mounted by Benetton, the company’s creative director, Oliviero Toscani, marshaled the rhetoric of romantic individualism to defend his exploitation of the crucifixion of Jesus. “Creativity is not based on security,” he argued. “Once you’re secure, you’re doing something that’s already been done.” According to Toscani, the problem is that modern advertising keeps producing “the same old thing” to sell products. “They spent billions and billions, and in the end there’s no difference between Coke and Pepsi, Avis and Hertz, American Express and Visa. We try to go another way.”

For Toscani, “going another way” means trading upon famous im-

ages of terror and suffering, including such things as pictures of refugees marooned on makeshift boats at sea, of a solitary Chinese student defying the tanks in Tiananmen Square, and of German athletes raising the Nazi salute during the 1936 Summer Olympics. He said that using the crucifixion to sell hiking boots was no more shocking than reading a daily newspaper and finding "in the same pages war, AIDS, love, hate, sport, life, death, product." After all, the goal in advertising is to tap into the values of the age to sell the goods. "Sport is very much linked with life," Toscani observed. "Survival is the name of the game."

In linking the experience of Christ upon the cross to the travails of mountain climbing, the Benetton ad trades shamelessly upon our fears of loneliness and abandonment and upon our need to "have something strong to believe in" in the face of those terrifying realities. And in depicting the anxieties of metaphysical abandonment, the Asolo advertisement confronts one of the most profound spiritual traumas of our postmodern world. At the same time, in offering a hiking boot as healing balm for that deepest of wounds, the ad exposes the spiritual poverty of our age.

Both the crucifixion ad itself and the Benetton creative director's commentary upon it reveal a web of theological and cultural influences stretching back over several centuries. The portrayal of the crucifixion and the discussion of abandonment, belief, and extreme circumstances call to mind the dread of cosmic loneliness that haunts so much of the music, art, poetry, and fiction of the modern West. Are we alone in what Pascal called "the eternal silence of these infinite spaces"? Have we been abandoned by God, as Christ was forsaken by him on the cross? Are we orphans in a world in which "survival is the *only* name of the game"?

The ad and its creator's self-justification also point, however unwittingly, to the complex history underlying contemporary debates about the theory and practice of interpretation. They do so both through their exploitation of the orphan imagery and through their implicit but sharp critique of repetition and imitation, which are irreducible elements of the Christian faith. "Once you're secure, you're doing something that's already been done. . . . The fact they censor us is a big honor," Toscani proudly proclaimed in announcing his ad campaign. "It says we're saying something new."¹

To understand this drive to "say something new," we can follow a

1. "Benetton's Unrepentant Adman Vows to Keep Pushing the Envelope," *The New York Times*, 21 July 1995, D4.

trail of concern for *originality* leading from the postmodern present back through the romantic poets and philosophers to its ultimate origin in the work of René Descartes. With his stress upon "first-person certainty," Descartes in good measure began the drive toward autonomy and originality that has proved to be a distinguishing characteristic of modernity.² His fabled *Cogito* is, after all, a parentless, autonomous thinking agent who is dependent upon nothing outside himself for the truth he has uncovered within himself. Perhaps more than any other figure at the dawn of modernity, Descartes launched the tradition of living without tradition; he became the father of all who would seek to live in a parentless world. After Descartes, in the words of Gerald Bruns, "we are always in the post position, primed and impatient to start history over again in an endless recuperation of the Cartesian moment of self-fathering."³ This was especially to be the case at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Poets and revolutionaries happily found in the parentless state an ideal of absolute first-person liberty. To be an orphan was to be free to "start history over again," and while the postmodern order may not share the revolutionaries' faith in human perfectibility and progress, the dream of radical originality lives on in its contemporary permutations.

Throughout this book, and especially in the second section, we will be making the argument that interpretation, like artistic creation, is a form of human action and is thus subject to the same vicissitudes and open to the same possibilities as all human actions. "Because the writing and reading of texts are actions that occur in the context of social and historical life," Clarence Walhout writes at the beginning of section two, "texts and the language that composes them are never autonomous and context-free." As such, the theory and practice of interpretation have much to learn from the central place assigned to the orphan in modernity. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre asserts that "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal." But the key question for us, he argues, is not that of "self-fathering" or "our authorship" of the stories we live. "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?'" — or "How am I to read?" it might be added —

2. Roger Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein: A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 284.

3. Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 199.

“if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁴

After all, MacIntyre explains, “only in fantasy do we live what story we please. In life, as both Aristotle and Engels noted, we are always under certain constraints.” Employing the metaphor of the theater, he notes that “we enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making.” To know how we are to act in this setting, we listen, observe, reflect, and begin to participate in the drama. We receive, in other words, imputed characters in our social world — “roles into which we have been drafted — and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.”⁵ Or as Paul Ricoeur puts it at the close of one of the landmark books of modern hermeneutical reflection: “The illusion is not in looking for a point of departure, but in looking for it without presuppositions. There is no philosophy without presuppositions.”⁶

If MacIntyre and Ricoeur are right about the nature of human understanding — and it will be the burden of this book’s argument that they are — then we have good reason to question all theories of creation and interpretation that take the orphan as their ideal. If they are right, it is neither desirable nor possible to read as though we were beginning history anew with each interpretive act. We are always already indebted to the past and implicated in the tangled web of action and reaction that make up the course of human history. We cannot remove ourselves from that history. Nor can we transform any of our actions — including those of interpreting — into timeless activities that neither bear the stamp of history nor share its responsibilities and promise. Christian theology, after all, holds that while history may bear the signs of human bondage, it is also the scene

4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

5. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 213, 216. MacIntyre’s point is similar to the one made by Clarence Walhout in section two: “If the historicity of actions implies that all understanding is based on a relation of resemblance between the new and the familiar, then all understanding is also dynamic or progressive. Every moment introduces new perceptions and contexts in which the new and the familiar are continuously interacting. . . . We are constantly absorbing, evaluating, and using new experiences. And we do so by relating them, consciously or not, to the patterns of experience that we have previously developed.”

6. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967), 348.

of God’s liberating activities. As Anthony Thiselton argues at the close of the third and final section, at the heart of the Christian faith is “the biblical understanding of God as one who chooses in sovereign freedom to constrain that freedom by graciously entering into the constraints imposed upon action by undertaking covenantal promise.” A contemporary hermeneutical theory informed by the Christian faith will be more concerned, that is, with questions of trustworthy fidelity than with those of absolute certainty.

In the end, this means that it would be neither necessary nor wise to accept Descartes’s desire for “self-fathering” as the necessary precondition for human understanding; instead, *The Promise of Hermeneutics* questions both the Cartesian move to the first person and the modern traditions which take that move as their starting point. To trace the line of influence running from Descartes to his nineteenth-century descendants is to see the delight of autonomy gradually turn into the terror of abandonment. It was in the Romantic era that the confidence in the Cartesian project was first shaken. In the literature of the nineteenth century, we first begin to hear of the orphaned state as a terrifying sign of our cosmic loneliness. Over the course of that century, faith in autonomy gave way to anxiety over the fate of the orphaned individual.

One of the many consequences of the crisis of confidence in the modern self proved a hermeneutical division that has marked interpretive theory since the romantic era. It has surfaced in different forms as an argument between those who believe with Friedrich Schleiermacher that interpretation must recover an author’s world or intention, and those who agree with G. W. F. Hegel that the creative spirit must appropriate the dead letter of text or tradition. This division runs through most contemporary hermeneutical debates and helps to explain the evident gap between contemporary evangelical Protestant hermeneutics and postmodern interpretation theory.

The poetry and fiction of the past two centuries have brilliantly taken the measure of orphaning’s hermeneutical implications. Long before the slaughter of the First World War and the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust, the orphans of modern fiction opened up the darkness at the heart of modernity. Through these characters, modern men and women began to sense the starker consequences of Cartesian isolation for the modern self. The world Descartes had envisioned is a parentless one in which autonomous subjects, freed from oppressive tradition and feckless opinion, bring a bold new order into being; but the world inhabited by modern fictional or-

phans is much darker than the kingdom illuminated by Cartesian rationalism. In an orphaned world, abandoned children ask the question posed by Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*, "Where is the foundling's father hidden?" The orphans scan the horizon for any sign of their absent parents and pose dramatic questions about the nature of interpretation. Who authored the text of this world, the orphans ask, and what does it mean? In their struggles to comprehend their own condition, modern fictional orphans bring us to the heart of the hermeneutical tensions of the present day.

Descartes: The Endless Recuperation

We begin with Descartes and with the Lutheran Reformation. Exactly one hundred years separate a founding moment of the Reformation — Luther's dispute with Johannes Eck at Leipzig in 1519 — and Descartes's fire-side discovery of certainty in the winter of 1619-20. Over the course of the century separating Luther and Descartes, both contemporary hermeneutics and the literary orphans of the modern world have their origins.

It was at Leipzig that the divisive potential of Luther's critique of the Catholic Church began to become most fully evident. A reluctant reformer at first, Luther had been drawn into the debate with Eck as a result of the latter's vituperative attacks upon him. In the aftermath of their exchange, Luther published an open letter to Pope Leo X, in which he assured the pope that he "never intended to attack the Roman Curia or to raise any controversy concerning it." He claimed to have turned to "the quiet and peaceful study of the Holy Scriptures," when "Satan . . . filled his servant Johann Eck . . . with an insatiable lust for glory and thus aroused him to drag me unawares to a debate. . . ." ⁷ However reluctant he may have been to enter this contest with Eck, once he was embroiled in it, Luther withheld nothing. He questioned the authority of the papacy, ridiculed the infallibility of church councils, and switched from the constraints of Latin to the freedom of the German tongue in debating Eck. ⁸ As he hammered

7. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1951), 47.

8. Heiko Oberman notes that "Luther's diatribes resemble public exorcisms and are futile as attempts to persuade persons of different opinions of the rightness of his position. Thus it is probably no coincidence, and only seemingly a consequence of rhetoric, that Luther rarely used the commonly employed scholarly qualification 'if I am not mistaken' — *ni fallor* — but made generous use of his favorite expression, 'certainly' —

away at Eck, Luther allowed only the Bible to be used as an authority in their dispute, "refusing even to consider arguments from other sources." ⁹ Through his arguments in this and later confrontations, Luther unleashed forces that neither he nor anyone else would be able to control. He challenged established authority with his own will, just as some who followed his lead would be quick to pit their authority against Luther's. As disputes and centers of authority proliferated, Luther had to face in his own lifetime the reality that his reforming impulse had taken on a life of its own and led to consequences he had not intended. "As competing authorities multiplied and began to diverge more and more sharply," writes Jeffrey Stout, "conventional means for resolving disputes arising from such competition became less and less effective. . . . This problem, which we may name 'the problem of many authorities,' is the central social and intellectual difficulty of the Reformation." ¹⁰

The century after Luther proved to be a divisive one. National and sectarian differences ran deep in the wake of reform, and dramatic upheavals in philosophy and cosmology went hand in hand with the tumultuous political changes. "Above all, it [the Reformation] dealt a fatal blow to the ideal of a united Christendom," writes a recent historian. "The scandal was so great, and the fragmentation so widespread, that people stopped talking about Christendom, and began to talk instead about 'Europe.'" ¹¹ By the time that Descartes was born in 1596, both *scientia* — the medieval view of certain and demonstrable knowledge — and *opinio* — those disputed beliefs that required the testimony of authority to support them — were under assault.

Scientia had been subjected to the sharp critique of nominalism, which questioned the fundamental principles of medieval theology and philosophy. In rejecting the category of universals, William of Ockham and those who followed him posited a world in which God was all-powerful and

immo. Luther's certainty left its mark on German academic linguistic usage. Where Anglo-American scholars qualify their statements with an 'I am inclined to believe,' the Germans say 'it is patently obvious.'" *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 299.

9. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 327.

10. Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 41.

11. Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996; reprint, New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 494, 496.

arbitrary, while the created order was filled with separate entities called into being by the will of God in a dramatically contingent manner. The nominalist turn in philosophy shaped the Reformers' view of God in myriad ways and was in turn itself shaped, to some degree, by the Reformation's doctrine of Christ. Because of the nuanced complexity of the doctrine of the Trinity, the precursors of the Reformation, as well as the central Reformation theologians themselves, were able to temper the arbitrariness of God the Father with the suffering and sacrifices of God the Son. But while they sought to humanize the nominalist God, they had no desire to salvage the Aristotelian model of science as the study of formal and final causes, which had also come under nominalist attack. "The whole of Aristotle is to theology as shadow is to light," Luther complained in 1517.¹²

By demystifying the world, nominalism opened the way for the modern scientific study of nature and human experience. In rejecting formal and final causes, it left only material and efficient causality as plausible modes of explaining movement and development. According to Michael Allen Gillespie, Ockham and his descendants established the "foundation for a science that is based on experience and hypothesis, which examines the contingent relationships among extended entities to determine the efficient causes that govern their motion, and which attempts to provide a quantitative rather than a qualitative explanation of phenomena."¹³ A world of predictable, efficient causes is one that can be readily manipulated for human purposes.

Yet even as it posited a means of studying nature as a predictable mechanism, nominalism also promoted, through its doctrine of God's absolute freedom, the terrifying possibility of divine deception and random intervention. How could men and women study nature with confidence and predict its movements, if they had to consider that God either could be deceiving them entirely about what they saw or could act without warning to alter the state of all they knew? If *scientia* was to proceed, it needed protection of some sort against what Emily Dickinson would call, several centuries later, Heaven's "marauding Hand."¹⁴

12. As cited in Oberman, *Luther*, 160.

13. Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 21.

14. See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 18-30, and Stephen Toulmin, "Descartes in His Time," in *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 121-46.

Descartes wrote of his consternation with this state of affairs, and of his desire to shelter human life from the "marauding Hand," in the *Discourse on Method* (1637). He blamed the state of confusion present in his day on the residual power of antiquated bodies of knowledge and outdated methods of learning. In justifying his own embrace of mathematics and deductive reasoning, Descartes attacked the humanistic training he had received as a young man. "I have been nourished on letters since my childhood," he wrote, "and since I was given to believe that by their means a clear and certain knowledge could be obtained of all that is useful in life, I had an extreme desire to acquire instruction." But instead of gaining useful knowledge, Descartes had found himself "embarrassed with so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that the effort to instruct myself had no effect other than the increasing discovery of my own ignorance."¹⁵ There was precious little *science* in the literature, philosophy, and theology Descartes had read, and all too many *opinions* swirling about his early seventeenth-century world.

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes claimed to have coursed his way through the whole of the liberal arts curriculum and to have found nothing of real worth on the journey. Even though they provide pleasing enough stimulation for the mind, ancient languages and literatures have the power to make the student a "stranger in one's own country" and to seduce their readers into forming "projects beyond their power of performance"; rhetoric teaches skills that have nothing intrinsic to do with the ability to render our thoughts "clear and intelligible"; the truths of theology are "quite above our intelligence" and would require for their proper elaboration "some extraordinary assistance from above," something that Descartes clearly did not expect to receive; and even philosophy offered no useful guidance, for although "it has been cultivated for many centuries by the best minds that have ever lived," there is still nothing "to be found in it which is not subject to dispute, and in consequence which is not dubious." Having surveyed the fruitless discord of contemporary opinion, Descartes could only conclude that "one could have built nothing solid on foundations so far from firm." For that reason, "as soon as age permitted me to emerge from the control of my tutors, I entirely quitted the study of letters" (*Method*, 6, 7, 8).

For Descartes, then, the problem was one of weak foundations.

15. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. David Weissman, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 5. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in parentheses within the body of the essay.

Wherever he looked, he could not find a firm footing of certainty upon which to build the scientific enterprise. He was confident that such a foundation could be unearthed somewhere, but it was buried beneath the rubble of received opinion. So, he formed the "resolution of also making myself an object of study and of employing all the strength of my mind in choosing the road I should follow" in searching for the spot where a solid foundation might be discovered (*Method*, 8).

Descartes's journey began with the realization that "there is very often less perfection in works composed of several portions" and executed by several hands, "than in those on which one individual alone has worked." Cities which were once villages, for example, seem poorly constructed "in comparison with those which are regularly laid out on a plain by a surveyor who is free to follow his own ideas." In the haphazard cities of Europe, he complained, large buildings jostled incongruously against smaller ones, and crooked streets meandered without plan or precision. These unkempt products of tradition made it appear that "chance rather than the will of men guided by reason . . . led to such an arrangement." In a similar fashion, the laws that had evolved haphazardly over the centuries, bridging the gulf between our "half-savage" past and our rational present, needed to be replaced. Such laws could not "succeed in establishing so good a system of government as those" which have been produced by a rational people, "who, from the time they first came together as communities, carried into effect the constitution laid down by some prudent legislator" (*Method*, 9).

Descartes's fruitless studies had disclosed to him the sorry state of what Paul Ricoeur has called "the conflict of interpretations."¹⁶ No matter how carefully he guarded himself against the follies of the "ancients," Descartes feared that he would remain in danger of becoming "infected with their errors" as long as he placed them at the heart of his education. With their improvised theories and irrational prejudices, the "ancients" had hopelessly compromised the foundations of knowledge. Even when they came upon "something certain and evident," the ancient writers could not resist the temptation "to surround it with ambiguities" because they feared the "simplicity of their explanation" would bring ridicule or "because they grudge us an open view of the truth."¹⁷

16. Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

17. Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, vol. 1 (n.p.: Dover, 1955), 6.

Hence, as Descartes saw it, confusion reigned in the texts of the ancient world and the practices of Reformation Europe, because of "the problem of many authorities." Yet there was hope: "Supposing now that all were wholly open and candid, and never thrust upon us doubtful opinions as true, . . . yet since scarce anything has been asserted by any one man the contrary of which has not been alleged by another, we should be eternally uncertain which of the two to believe." If we were to try to resolve a dispute between conflicting truth claims, it would not do to "total up the testimonies in favour of each" and call "true" the version with the greatest support; "for if it is a question of difficulty that is in dispute, it is more likely that the truth would have been discovered by few than by many."¹⁸

Having rejected the conflicting opinions of "the many authorities," Descartes turned to the only two "most certain routes to knowledge," *intuition* and *deduction*.¹⁹ He determined to "reject as absolutely false everything as to which I could imagine the least ground of doubt, in order to see if afterwards there remained anything in my belief that was entirely certain." Left with nothing but the thought "that everything that ever entered into my mind was no more true than the illusions of my dreams," Descartes immediately afterward "noticed that whilst I thus wished to think all things false, it was absolutely essential that the 'I' who thought this should be somewhat, and remarking that this truth '*I think, therefore I am*' was so certain and so assured that all the most extravagant suppositions brought forward by the sceptics were incapable of shaking it" (*Method*, 21).

By unearthing the foundational *ego cogito, ergo sum*, Descartes believed he had provided humanity with the secure foundation needed for the construction of a grand dwelling-place for knowledge. As an implacable foe of Aristotelianism and Scholastic obscurity, Descartes was looking for nothing less than a universal method for discovering truth. He sought to replace the messiness of tradition and authority with the cleanliness of method; in the search for indubitable truth, Descartes took the inner resources of the human mind to be adequate in ways that he believed institutions and traditions could not be.²⁰

18. Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," 6.

19. See Descartes, "Rules for the Direction of the Mind," 7-8.

20. "In place of a specific plurality of *human sciences*, . . . we have one single knowledge: science, Science with a capital 'S,' Science such as the modern world was to worship it; Science in the pure state, radiating from unique and unparalleled geometric clarity, and that Science is the human mind." Jacques Maritain, *The Dream of Descartes*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), 168.

Having established the foundational certainty of his own existence, Descartes went on to prove the existence of both God and the external world on the basis of his own self-consciousness. But the price paid for such certainty was high. Assurance about the self, God, and the world became entwined with self-awareness. Only because I think and am conscious of that fact can I be sure of my own existence and of innumerable other truths about the world and my experiences. "Descartes paves the way for making the relevance of the knowing self the center of thought," theologian Helmut Thielicke has observed. "Henceforth every object of thought, understanding, perception, and indeed will and belief, is related to the conditions contained for these acts in the subject that executes them. . . . Man, then, always stands over against when he observes; he is always himself a theme."²¹

In the modern West, Descartes was to become the authority for all who would live without authority, the founder of the tradition of spurning tradition, and the father of all who would live without the aid or imposition of their parents.²² Paul de Man calls this modern spirit one of "ruthless forgetting." For his understanding of modernity, de Man was in turn indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche, who had radicalized the Cartesian *Cogito* by emptying it of its epistemological certainty and metaphysical pretensions, leaving it a will in the shell of the self. "As he who acts is," according

21. Helmut Thielicke, *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, vol. 1 of *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 34-35.

22. As central as Descartes has proved to be in the formation of modernity, we should not overemphasize his role to the exclusion of other figures and forces. Walter Ong, for example, points out the "utter inadequacy of the view which regards interest in method as stemming from Bacon and Descartes. These late writers on method were great explosive forces indeed, but the reason was less the size of the bombs which they manufactured than the size of the ammunition dumps, stocked by whole centuries of scholasticism, on which the bombs were dropped." *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 230. Stephen Toulmin has also recently argued that though Descartes was enormously influential, his work was not an isolated intellectual phenomenon. "The shift within philosophy, away from practical issues to an exclusive concern with the theoretical — by which local, particular, timely, and oral issues surrendered their centrality to issues that were ubiquitous, universal, timeless, and written — was no quirk of Descartes. All the protagonists of modern philosophy promoted theory, devalued practice, and insisted equally on the need to find foundations for knowledge that were clear, distinct, and certain." *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 69-70.

to Nietzsche, "always without a conscience, so is he also always without knowledge; he forgets most things so as to do one thing, he is unjust towards what lies behind him, and he recognizes the rights only of that which is now to come into being and no other rights whatever."²³ Or, as de Man explains: "Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure."²⁴ In Descartes's practice and de Man's rhetoric, one can detect more than a hint of parricidal desire.

To borrow imagery from our earlier discussion of Luther, Descartes and others in the seventeenth century had witnessed the fragmentation of the Mother Church and the rejection of the papal Father's authority. Power flowed away from the aged parents and toward the warring children. With the "problem of too many authorities," even the Catholic Church became merely one more of the squabbling siblings of modernity. While some children longed to rebuild their parents' home, most were content to rummage in the rubble and start building anew. "The ancient monuments had begun to crumble," explains Jeffrey Stout. "Sacred spaces had become scenes of fragmentation and occasions for conflict. Better to begin again from scratch in circumstances of one's own choosing."²⁵

In the face of such fragmentation, Descartes and others began the slow transformation of Western culture from the model of authority (from the Latin *auctor*, meaning "author" or "originator") to that of originality. Before Descartes, originality had meant the creative appropriation of the thought of one's immediate predecessors; after him, it involved the adoption of an unprecedented point of view. Descartes's break with the past had established a compelling pattern for the future; it legitimated the desire at the heart of modernity: the urge to become one's own origin, author, and father.

W. H. Auden notes that with the advent of "the Protestant Era" the specific question of fatherhood assumes a centrality it had never possessed

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 64.

24. Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2d ed., rev. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 147, 148.

25. Stout, *The Flight from Authority*, 1.

in medieval Catholicism. Protestantism sought to replace the "collective external voice of tradition" with "the internal voice of the individual conscience." It thus shifted the emphasis in faith away from the rational capacities we share with other human beings and away from the human body, which enables us to partake with others in "the same liturgical acts." In place of reason and the body, Protestantism put the human will, which is "unique and private to every individual." Because the "interiorization of the paternal conscience is a process that each person can only do for himself," the "character and behavior of the actual father" became more significant in the development of the Protestant self than it had been in the Catholic era.

Auden suggests that Protestantism implies a rejection of the Mother, not because she is an antagonist, but because she has been rendered irrelevant. With the doctrines of predestination, Luther and Calvin stressed the sovereign arbitrariness of God to such an extent that they rendered the "notion of necessity meaningless" and thereby denied "any spiritual significance to the fact that we are born from the bodies of our mothers through the necessary processes of nature." For medieval Catholics, the self was saved by virtue of its having been born and baptized into the Mother church; for the Reformers, a free and conscious choice, a clear and certain appropriation of one's predestined salvation was required. In this crisis of election, the inwardness of the spirit alone mattered, while the flesh became a spectator of the drama enacted upon the stage of the will.²⁶

In the seventeenth century, the impulse behind what Gerald Brunns calls the "Cartesian moment of self-fathering" energized the cosmological and political struggles of that era, as well as the remarkable lyric poetry of the time. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the same impulse was to play a crucial role in the "quarrel between the ancients and the moderns." In that battle, the moderns successfully promoted "the cult of originality, the notion that original, personal genius was the only value, that, beside it, (mere) imitation was virtually worthless."²⁷ And, finally, at the end of the eighteenth century, the drive for originality would prove central both to the political revolutions in America and France and to the cultural

26. W. H. Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1973; reprint, Vintage, 1989), 83.

27. Joan DeJean, *Ancients and Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 50.

revolution we call romanticism.²⁸ These disparate movements share a common longing for sound foundations, new beginnings, and self-originating acts.

Just as the Enlightenment rationalists and romantic intuitionists were in the school of Descartes, so too are we postmodernists the descendants of our Enlightenment and romantic forebears. We have inherited from them the equivalent of a cultural tic, that is, the habit of defining ourselves over against the history from which we have emerged and against which we contend. Nowhere is this contemporary cast of mind made more evident than in our penchant for attaching the prefix "post" to each of our efforts to name our present state. We call ourselves "post-industrial," "post-modern," "post-structuralist," "post-Marxist," "post-Gutenberg," and the like. Historian Eric Hobsbawm observes that "the smell of impending death" rises from these labels. They take recognition of the death of something past, but they do not reveal anything in particular about the future to come.²⁹ We know what has died but not what is about

28. Alexis de Tocqueville perceptively argued that American culture was thoroughly Cartesian, even though few citizens of the American nation had ever read Descartes:

To escape from imposed systems, the yoke of habit, family maxims, class prejudices, and to a certain extent national prejudices as well; to treat tradition as valuable for information only and to accept existing facts as no more than a useful sketch to show how things could be done differently and better; to seek by themselves and in themselves for the only reason for things, looking to results without getting entangled in the means toward them and looking through forms to the basis of things — such are the principal characteristics of what I would call the American philosophical method.

To carry the argument further and to select the chief among these various features, and the one which includes almost all the others within itself, I should say that in most mental operations each American relies on individual effort and judgment.

So, of all countries in the world, America is the one in which the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed. . . .

The American[s] never read Descartes'[s] works because their state of society distracts them from speculative inquiries, and they follow his precepts because this same state of society naturally leads them to adopt them.

Democracy in America, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969), 429.

29. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 516.

to be born. In a "post" world, that is, we know a great deal about the judgment of history but very little about its promise.

"I must Create a System, or 'be enslav'd by another Mans," declared William Blake two centuries ago. "I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create."³⁰ From England, Blake watched as France was torn asunder, first by the Reign of Terror and then by the Napoleonic wars. A Cartesian to the core, the English poet was always searching for signs of the dramatic rupture with the past that would secure a glorious future. During a brief peace between England and Napoleon in 1801, he read the signs of the times and anticipated nothing less than the coming of the millennial kingdom: "The Kingdoms of this World are now become the Kingdoms Of God & his Christ, & we shall reign with him for ever & ever. The reign of Literature & the Arts Commences."³¹

The optimism of Blake is but an indicator of the dramatic shifts in views of poetry and selfhood that came into play in romanticism and would have a signal influence on modern theories of interpretation. With the romantics, the mimetic view of poetry — which had held sway in one form or another for more than two thousand years in the West — gave way to an expressive theory of the arts.³² The mimetic theory stressed imitation, which implies the priority and primacy of the thing imitated. In the many different forms it assumed from the time of Aristotle to the eighteenth century, the mimetic theory held that art was in some fundamental sense a *re-*presentation of a prior reality; its purpose was to hold "the mirror up to nature," in Hamlet's words. Romantic expressivism, on the other hand, promoted the expansive powers of the creative self and downplayed the need for models to be imitated or inherited; for expressivism, both the creation and the interpretation of art involve making the internal external.

In part, expressivism arose at the end of the eighteenth century as a response to the "disenchanted" of the world that had taken place over the previous two centuries. According to Max Weber, such "disenchanted" was fostered in good measure by the Protestant denigration of the sacraments and the modern scientific attack upon magic. By stressing what he

30. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 10, ll. 20-21, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 151.

31. Blake, as quoted in M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), 340.

32. The classic treatment of this subject remains M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

calls "the absolute transcendence of God" and "the inner isolation of the individual," Protestantism situated the modern self in an alien environment.³³ Between the transcendent God and inward individual stood a vast array of spiritless forms in nature and society. In many respects, modernity has been keenly marked by what philosopher Charles Taylor has called the loss of the "ontic logos" — the belief, that is, that all of reality is informed by a purposive and personal order. According to Taylor, we have come increasingly to view the world not as a creation of the divine mind, but as "a domain of objects to which we can respond in varying ways." In such a world, the human agent is "no longer to be understood as an element in a larger, meaningful order. His paradigm purposes are to be discovered within." And according to the logic of romantic modernity, once those purposes have been discovered within, they must be expressed.³⁴

A self that possesses and expresses a truth which it has intuited on its own has little need of resources that come to it from outside itself. This is the case whether those resources are derived from putatively authoritative sources in the present or from the traditions of the past. Both the Enlightenment and romanticism followed Descartes and "set at naught books and traditions" — Ralph Waldo Emerson's phrase — as a matter of principle.³⁵ They viewed those books and traditions as sources of disabling prejudice. As Hans-Georg Gadamer notes, "The fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment is the prejudice against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power."³⁶

In the Enlightenment, the assault upon prejudice was often couched in the language of parent-child relations. In "On Enlightenment," an important document in the German debate over the Enlightenment, Andreas Riem defended the movement and attacked the forces of "prejudice" aligned against it. "The child on its mother's breast feels the impulse toward" enlightenment, he explained. That child follows its instincts, and its "restless spirit tirelessly pursues its efforts toward instruction and truth, until death gives its noble strivings an end." For parents to blunt their chil-

33. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958), 221-22, 104-6.

34. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 187, 193.

35. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 259.

36. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 270.

dren's drives toward enlightenment would be for them to condemn those children to be raised "like animals." Riem is clear about the need to be rid of prejudice so that children may grow into truth: "Yes, you say, but one must allow this impulse to develop only to a certain degree, mix in prejudice instead of truth, and block it where wisdom would be harmful. But who of you has ever demonstrated that prejudice, this shameful synonym of falsehood, is more useful than enlightenment, which is the result of truth?"³⁷

The attack upon prejudice begun in the Enlightenment was radicalized in romanticism and the French Revolution, and at its height it nourished a spirit of enormous optimism and parricidal power. Indeed, at times the romantics and revolutionaries seemed eager to make themselves orphans through their own acts of murder, whether real or symbolic. In the French Revolution, the parricidal impulse took the specific form of an attack upon the ultimate father figure and representative of prejudicial authority, the king. Saint-Just articulated the logic of regicide in a speech in late 1792. Arguing against a trial for the imprisoned Louis XVI, he explained that there was no question but that the king deserved death as a tyrant, because "one cannot reign innocently." As Simon Schama explains, Saint-Just argued that because the very existence of the Republic was predicated on the destruction of tyranny, Louis had to be eliminated. "All that was needed was a summary proscription, the surgical removal of this excrescence from the body of the Nation," writes Schama. "A king had to die so a republic could live. It was as simple as that."³⁸

In a less overt manner, the impulse to usurp or kill the father runs throughout the literature of high romanticism. It is particularly strong in American Romanticism, due in part to the Puritan heritage of the culture. Situated squarely within the Reformation tradition, the New England Calvinists developed the Reformers' insight that faith required strenuous appropriation rather than casual assent; one could not simply inherit one's parents' faith. Jay Fliegelman notes that the Puritans' language of conversion focused upon the fact that in Christ, "the old man was dead." The new Adam, Christ, replaced the old Adam, and "conversion effected a rhetori-

37. Andreas Riem, "On Enlightenment," in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 170.

38. Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 651.

cal patricide."³⁹ To be fair, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritanism, the imagery of the Adamic struggle applied to a battle within the human heart much more than it did to a revolt against the past in its entirety. But in romanticism, that Protestant imagery came to symbolize a primal conflict between warring generations, with Christ clearly on the side of the emerging generation in the struggle. In the opening chapter of *Walden*, for instance, Henry David Thoreau kills off the parents with gusto. "It is never too late to give up our prejudices," he notes in true Cartesian fashion. "No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. . . . Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new." The past has nothing of worth to say to the present, which may listen for a while and then walk silently away. "You may say the wisest thing you can old man, — you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind, — I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels."⁴⁰

Being parentless, then, was not a bane but a blessing for many who lived in the era of revolution and romance. To be orphaned was to have the freedom to name, define, or generate oneself. "The man prophesied by the Romantics is a central man who is always in the process of becoming his own begetter," explains Harold Bloom. The "full Romantic quest . . . must make all things new, and then marry what it has made."⁴¹ As long as those who worked in the Enlightenment and romantic traditions were able to sustain their faith in the powers of the self and its innocence, then that self's rationality, autonomy, and intuition seemed adequate for its spiritual and ethical needs. "I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own," declared Walt Whitman in *Song of Myself*, "And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, / And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers."⁴² For Whitman,

39. Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 186.

40. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, in *Thoreau: A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 329, 331.

41. Harold Bloom, "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), 24.

42. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, sec. 5, in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 192.

Jesus as brother renders God the Father and Son superfluous. In *Song of Myself* Whitman makes explicit his rejection of God as Father:

Magnifying and applying come I,
 Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
 Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
 Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son,
 . . . Brahma, Buddha, . . .
 Taking them all for what they are worth and not a cent more,
 Admitting they were alive and did the work of their days,
 (They bore mites as for unfledg'd birds who have now to rise and fly
 and sing for themselves.)⁴³

Here Whitman longs to become an orphan. Like an heir desperate to get his hands on the benefaction he believes to be his due, Whitman's romantic self gladly pulls the plug on the systems maintaining the feeble pulse of the "old cautious huckster."

What was arguably the most important of the romantic efforts to be rid of God the Father can be found in the poetry of William Wordsworth. In some poems, Wordsworth developed the theme with an audacity to match that of Blake and Whitman. Consider, for instance, the "Prospectus" he wrote as a young man for a long poem that he was never to finish:

All strength — all terror, single or in bands,
 That ever was put forth in personal form;
 Jehovah — with his thunder, and the choir
 Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones,
 I pass them, unalarmed. Not Chaos, not
 The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
 Nor aught of blinder vacancy — scooped out
 By help of dreams, can breed such fear and awe
 As fall upon us often when we look
 Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man,
 My haunt, and the main region of my Song.⁴⁴

In the main, Wordsworth pursued a less insistent line of argument in several of his most memorable lyrics, as he sought to complete the transfer

43. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, sec. 41, in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, 233.

44. William Wordsworth, "Prospectus," cited in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 467.

of authority, begun by Descartes, from parent to child. Where Descartes had shifted authority away from institutions and received opinion to the rational, adult self, the English romantic poet snatched this same authority from the adult and bestowed it upon the child:

My heart leaps up when I behold
 A Rainbow in the sky:
 So was it when my life began;
 So is it now I am a Man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
 The Child is Father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.⁴⁵

Where Augustinian orthodoxy had seen in the child a welter of confusion and rebellion, Wordsworth discovered in it a divine surplus of "natural piety" that adulthood had the chance to recover and preserve.

If the "Child is Father of the Man," who is father of the child? Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" would seem to indicate that the child's earthly father is of little importance, in contrast to his heavenly one. The poem treats conception and birth not as the start of life but as the beginning of loss. "There hath passed away a glory from the earth," Wordsworth laments. "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" The answer follows immediately:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

The "Intimations Ode" pictures the body as a "prison-house" and the earth as a "homely Nurse" who tries to "make her Foster-child, her In-

45. Wordsworth, "My Heart Leaps Up," in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 246.

mate Man, / Forget the glories he hath known, / And that imperial palace whence he came." That "Inmate" is a "little Actor" who "cons another part" at each stage of growth, arriving at last at the indignity of "palsied Age."

Wordsworth sees these struggles of the soul as conflicts of knowledge and interpretation. The self that "cons" its parts becomes the slave of *mimesis*, "As if his whole vocation / Were endless imitation." Imitating and interpreting from the surface of things, such a self will neglect the "Soul's immensity" that resides beneath the surface of "exterior semblance." The only hope of adulthood is to trace the trail marked by our "obstinate questionings" and "shadowy recollections." If we follow it, we will come upon "what remains" of "the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be."⁴⁶ The best that a "self-fathered" self can do in adulthood, in other words, is to *re-collect* the primal unity of childhood.

In short, in romanticism, the dream of Cartesian self-creation realized its fullest potential. Descartes had believed that through strenuous effort, free rational agents could deduce the foundational truths essential for building the secure structures of modern science. For more than a century after Descartes, his descendants worked methodically to build upon the foundations laid by the rational analysis of the human mind or the empirical study of the natural world. With romanticism, however, the primary mechanism of the Cartesian quest changed, and its scope grew dramatically, as intuition and recollection replaced ratiocination and empirical study as the means to the truth. Romanticism was to continue the work of the Enlightenment, but only on different terms.

Romantic hermeneutics in particular drew upon its resources in rationalism and intuitionism and became, as a result, an odd amalgam of methodical study and creative illumination, as the romantic theorists employed procedural means to suggestive, intuitive ends.⁴⁷ According to Gadamer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, the most influential theoretician of romantic hermeneutics, did not seek "the unity of hermeneutics in the *unity of the content of tradition* to which understanding is applied, but . . . in the unity of a procedure." We need procedures and a universal hermeneutic to understand texts, whether they are oral or written, because "the experience of the alien and the possibility of misunderstanding is [*sic*] universal." With Schleiermacher, "in a new and universal sense, alienation is

46. Wordsworth, ed. Gill, 297-302.

47. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 173-218.

inextricably given with the individuality of the Thou."⁴⁸ Hermeneutics is the "art of avoiding misunderstanding," but it must be practiced with both the rigor of a science and the subtlety of an art. This is so because of the isolation inherent to the condition of the post-Cartesian self. That self is isolated within its own consciousness so dramatically that all communication appears to be a case of translation fraught with peril and difficulty. As a result, in Schleiermacher's words, "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point."⁴⁹

For Schleiermacher, the primacy of misunderstanding in the interpretive process meant that the interpreter had to work strenuously to overcome the obstacles to proper comprehension. To understand a text, he argued, "the interpreter must put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author." The interpreter does so objectively through an exhaustive study of the historical and linguistic background of the work. Only when any particular utterance has been set fully within its original context, and considered "in [its] relation to the language as a whole," can a serious misunderstanding of it be avoided. But with the proper blend of "historical and divinatory" techniques, we can not only avoid misconstruing the meaning of another person's utterance; we can potentially understand that person's words better than he or she may comprehend them. The more we learn about an author, the better equipped we are for interpretation, the ultimate goal of which is "to understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author."⁵⁰

This means that to understand a text we must proceed methodically, employing all the tools of historical research, as we reconstruct the life-world behind the work. The goal of the process was for Schleiermacher, as it had been for Descartes, the obliteration of the mediating traditions separating the interpreter from the immediacy of the text's world. Schleiermacher believed that we come to perfect clarity about the object of our study only when we have bridged the gap of opinions, traditions, and prejudices that separate us from it. He was confident that the final span of that bridge could be built by a creative act of illumination, by what he called the "divinatory" act of knowing and intuiting the

48. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 178-79.

49. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, in *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology*, ed. Keith Clements (London: Collins, 1987), 166.

50. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, 167.

“inner and outer aspects of the author’s life.” In Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, Gadamer explains, “what corresponds to the production of genius is divination, the immediate solution, which ultimately presupposes a kind of con-geniality.” This act of divination “depends on a pre-existing bond between all individuals.”⁵¹

For the Enlightenment and romanticism, that “bond” was made possible through the presence in the self of a God-given capacity for knowledge and understanding; the clockmaker God of the Newtonian universe may have distanced himself dramatically from his creation, but before removing himself, he had planted within the human mind a means to the truth. In the century and a half after Descartes, we can witness what Helmut Thielicke has called “an increasing depersonalizing of God, whether as substance or idea.”⁵² But the more God became impersonal and distant, the more modern views stressed the compensating properties of the expansive, universal self. In Gadamer’s words, according to romanticism, each individual manifests a portion of the “universal life and hence ‘everyone carries a tiny bit of everyone else within him, so that divination is stimulated by comparison with oneself.’” As a result, the individuality of an author can “be directly grasped ‘by, as it were, transforming oneself into the other.’”⁵³

Fueled by confidence in the autonomous self and its innate powers, for two centuries the Cartesian tradition happily embraced the image of the orphan. Free of its prejudicial parents at last, the human spirit could develop its innate potential and emerge into its long-postponed adult maturity. “*Enlightenment is mankind’s exit from its self-incurred immaturity,*” wrote Immanuel Kant in 1784. “*Immaturity is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.*”⁵⁴ To be enlightened, a person or an age must be under no obligation to appropriate the dead symbols or claims of the past. It “is completely impossible,” Kant argued, for the members of a society to bind “one another by oath to a certain unalterable symbol.” And in a similar manner, “one age cannot . . . place the succeeding age in a situation in which it becomes impossible for it to broaden its knowledge, particularly such pressing knowledge, to

51. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 189.

52. Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 73.

53. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 189.

54. Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?” in *What Is Enlightenment?*, ed. Schmidt, 58.

cleanse itself of errors, and generally to progress in enlightenment.”⁵⁵ Whether it be the “opinions of others,” the crippling forces of imitation and tradition, or the historical distance that separates us from the object of our understanding, we must slip free of the parental grip that holds us back in our journey to the truth. Only then, when free at last of parents and the past, will we begin to see the truth and understand others as we ought.

“Beautiful Fruit Already Picked from the Tree”: Texts in an Orphaned Age

There is more than a little irony in the fact that in the very years that the Cartesian tradition of “self-fathering” reached its self-congratulatory peak in romanticism and the French Revolution, the ideal of autonomy — that ideal which stood behind the dream of living in a parentless world — began to be questioned sharply. At the start of the nineteenth century, the questioning surfaced in isolated incidents or stories but did not resonate in the larger culture. As the century wore on, however, the questioning of autonomy developed quietly but steadily, until, by the second half of the century, it became a central concern of the age.

One of the earliest provocative treatments of the theme of orphaning emerged at the height of romanticism. It was Jean Paul Friedrich Richter’s “Speech of Christ, after death, from the universe, that there is no God.” In this fable, “a lofty, noble form, having the expression of a never-ending sorrow, now sank down from above upon the altar” in a church adjoining a graveyard. From that graveyard the dead arise each night at midnight to “mimic the religious services of the living in the churches.” As they emerge from their graves, they cry out, “‘Christ! is there no God?’” The response of Jesus is plaintively chilling: “There is none! . . . I traversed the worlds. I ascended into the suns, and flew with the milky ways through the wildernesses of the heavens; but there is no God! I descended . . . into the abyss, and cried aloud — ‘Father, where art thou?’ but I heard nothing but the eternal storm which no one rules; . . . and when I looked up to the imma-

55. Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” 61. “In modernity, traditional wisdom becomes irrational ‘prejudice,’ and the ‘grounds’ for knowledge are decentered from the shared conventions of a substantive ‘we’ to the sort of abstract ‘I’ . . . characteristic of the marketplace.” Paul Redding, *Hegel’s Hermeneutics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 198.

surable world for the Divine Eye, it glared upon me from an empty, bottomless socket. . . .” And when the dead children arise and stream into the temple, they throw themselves before Jesus. Desperate for reassurance, they ask him, “Jesus! have we no Father?” And with his eyes filled with tears, he can only answer, “We are all orphans, I and you; we are without a Father.”

With the shrieks of the children still sounding, the walls of the temple split apart, and then children, temple, earth, sun, and “the whole immeasurable universe” sink down “as into a mine dug out of the Eternal Night.” From “the summit of infinite Nature,” Christ looks down and beholds the “grinding concourse of worlds, the torch-dances of the heavenly *ignes fatui*, and the coral-banks of beating hearts.” He lifts his eyes “to the Nothing, and the empty Immensity,” and cries out, “How lonely is every one in the wide charnel house of the universe!” And then he asks what was in the early nineteenth century a prescient and prophetic question: “If every being is its own father and creator, why cannot it also be its own destroying angel?”⁵⁶

Though he shared many of the concerns of the romantic poets and philosophers, Jean Paul was deeply skeptical of their individualistic tendencies. He wrote scornfully of “the lawless, capricious spirit of the present age, which would egotistically annihilate the world and the universe in order to clear a space merely for free *play*.” Disregarding history and scornful of authority, the modern age is committed to nothing more than “the arbitrariness of egotism.” That egotism is hopelessly disappointed by the “hard, sharp commandments of reality” and retreats to a “desert of fantasy.” There, the dreams of delight eventually give way to nightmares of nihilism: “In an age when God has set like the sun, soon afterwards the world too passes into darkness. He who scorns the universe respects nothing more than himself and at night fears only his own creations.”⁵⁷

Jean Paul’s anxieties proved uncannily prophetic for the nineteenth century. They surfaced in various romantic and Victorian poems, pulsed at the heart of Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity and Western culture, and dominated the characterization of protagonists in the nineteenth-century novel. The torment of Jean Paul’s Christ had focused atten-

56. Jean Paul Friedrich Richter, *Flower, Fruit and Thorn Pieces; or, The Married Life, Death, and Wedding of the Advocate of the Poor, Firmian Stanislaus Siebenkäs*, trans. Edward Henry Noel (Boston: James Munroe, 1845), 332-40.

57. Jean Paul, “School for Aesthetics,” trans. Margaret R. Hale, in *German Romantic Criticism*, ed. A. Leslie Willson (New York: Continuum, 1982), 32.

tion upon the terrible price to be paid for the “self-fathering” drive of modernity and had raised the hitherto unspeakable subject of the “death of God.”⁵⁸ Particularly in the second half of the century, there were orphans everywhere in the fiction of the day, and a number of crucial philosophical texts examined the theme of the eclipse of God.

It was to be Hegel who would offer the first extended philosophical meditation on the subject of the “death of God.” He did so in a passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, written at the same time as Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode.” It is hard to imagine two less similar works than the English poet’s hymn to the innate knowledge of God and the German philosopher’s steely assessment of our disenchanting belatedness. Where Wordsworth sees the self “trailing clouds of glory,” Hegel finds it afflicted by the travails of the “Unhappy Consciousness” that gains “certainty of itself” by losing everything else, including “all essential being.” The “Unhappy Consciousness” is that self-awareness which stands in the void as the only vibrant agent in an otherwise senseless world of matter in motion. Surrounded by death, “it is the grief which expresses itself in the hard saying that ‘God is dead.’” For that Unhappy Consciousness,

Trust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles, which pronounced on particular questions, are dumb. The statues are now only stones from which the living soul has flown, just as the hymns are words from which belief has gone. The tables of the gods provide no spiritual food and drink, and in his games and festivals man no longer recovers the joyful consciousness of his unity with the divine. The works of the Muse now lack the power of the Spirit, for the Spirit has gained its certainty of itself from the crushing of gods and men. They have become what they are for us now — beautiful fruit already picked from the tree,

58. Perhaps the subject was not entirely unspeakable. Eberhard Jüngel notes that a 1641 Lutheran hymn by Johannes Rist contained the lines “O great distress! / God himself lies dead. / On the cross he died, / and by doing so he has won for us the realm of heaven.”

“The sentence ‘God himself lies dead’ was known and debated as a pronounced expression of Lutheran theology; it was so controversial that, for example, the Dortmund hymnbook replaced it with the less objectionable ‘The Lord is dead.’ At the theological faculties, learned disputations were conducted about the dogmatic correctness of the chorale.” *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 64.

Jüngel observes that Hegel quoted this passage from the hymn a number of times in the lectures he gave in the final decade of his life.

which a friendly Fate has offered us, as a girl might set the fruit before us. It cannot give us the actual life in which they existed, . . . nor the cycle of the changing seasons that governed the process of their growth. So Fate does not restore their world to us along with the works of antique Art, it gives not the spring and summer of the ethical life in which they blossomed and ripened, but only the veiled recollection of that actual world. Our active enjoyment of them is therefore not an act of divine worship through which our consciousness might come to its perfect truth and fulfillment; it is an external activity — the wiping-off of some drops of rain or specks of dust from these fruits, so to speak — one which erects an intricate scaffolding of the dead elements of their outward existence — the language, the historical circumstances, etc. in place of the inner elements of the ethical life which environed, created, and inspired them. And all this we do, not in order to enter into their very life but only to possess an idea of them in our imagination. But, just as the girl who offers us the plucked fruits is more than the Nature which directly provides them — the Nature diversified into their conditions and elements, the tree, air, light, and so on — because she sums all this up . . . in the gesture with which she offers them, so, too, the Spirit of the Fate that presents us with those works of art is more than the ethical life and the actual world of that nation, for it is the *inwardizing* in us of the Spirit which in them was still [only] *outwardly* manifested; it is the Spirit of the tragic Fate which gathers all those individual gods and attributes of the [divine] substance into one pantheon, into the Spirit that is itself conscious of itself as Spirit.⁵⁹

If the history of philosophy has been a footnote to Plato, then contemporary hermeneutics might be seen as an extended reflection upon this passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology*. At its heart, Hegel's metaphorical treatment of the "Spirit of Fate" speaks of that sense of alienation from the past — from its vital life, its beliefs, and its texts — that is one of the central phenomena of modernity. As potent as they had been in their day, both the antiquities of the classical world and the scriptures of Christian and Jewish eras are now no more than "stones from which the living soul has flown." If they are to speak to us and to have any authority over our lives, how are they to be brought back to life? How are we to bridge the chasm of time that yawns between us and them?

59. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 455-56.

Hegel's answers to such questions differed dramatically from previous ones. In the period from Descartes to Schleiermacher, the ruling question for human understanding had been, "How might I rid myself of those prejudices and encumbrances that separate me from the truth or from the meaning of what another has written?" The assumption here was that everything which mediates our knowledge of truth or interpretation of texts serves little or no good purpose. This includes, especially, the history between us and the object of our concern. Through critical reflection and historical research, we build a trail all the way back to the ancient past, and we travel on it until we reach the point at which our object of interest originated. Having cleared the obstacles in our way and having traversed the ground, we are at last free to confront that object directly. In Emerson's classic formulation of the argument, we ought "to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil."⁶⁰

Although Hegel rejected the Cartesian ideal of an unmediated understanding, he also recognized that Descartes's shift represented an irreversible development in the history of philosophy: it was, he understood, one of the means by which Spirit has become fully conscious of itself. He harbored no illusions about returning to a pre-Cartesian understanding of knowledge, but he also realized that Descartes's move threatened to turn the history of philosophy into a "simple accumulation of local opinions and perspectives."⁶¹ After Descartes, Hegel noted, the *history* of philosophy

60. Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 88-89. This disdain for mediating agents has great theological and linguistic significance, of course. Both Keith Thomas and Charles Taylor trace it, in part, to the Reformation's anti-sacramental impulses, which fed into the desacralizing of nature that seventeenth-century science and commerce eagerly promoted. The process accelerated through the eighteenth century and issued in the romantic reaction at the end of that century. Thomas writes of the Reformation's "onslaught on the central Catholic doctrine of the Mass. . . . The Papists, wrote Calvin, 'pretend there is a magical force in the sacraments, independent of efficacious faith'. . . . In place of the miraculous transubstantiation of the consecrated elements was substituted a simple commemorative rite, and the reservation of the sacrament was discontinued. It went without saying that none of the Protestant reformers would countenance any of the old notions concerning the temporal benefits which might spring from communicating or from contemplating the consecrated elements." Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 53.

61. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 149. For this discussion of Hegel, I am greatly indebted to Bruns.

yielded nothing but a "bare knowledge of opinions, i.e. other people's peculiarities. . . . But the peculiarities of other people are external and foreign to me, purely historical and dead material. In that case the history of philosophy is superfluous, wearisome, devoid of interest except perhaps to scholars. . . . It does not belong to me and I am not in it." In modernity, our relationship to all that we inherit becomes painfully strained. Myths, metaphors, and stories are handed on to us like so many corpses pulled from the morgue of the past; we detect no life in them and do not know how to dispose of them.

To illustrate his point, Hegel offered the example of a teacher of the history of philosophy called upon to remain neutral about the ideas he studies and teaches. "Such a teacher is to act in expounding the philosophies as if he were dead, that he is to treat them as something cut off from his spirit, as something external to him," Hegel explained. Implored to remain neutral, the teacher faces a clearly untenable situation. If he treats ideas from the past as dead opinions without weight or power, "in that event the history of philosophy is a miserable occupation," because the teacher "knows in advance that he must deal solely with unsuccessful enterprises." If "we are to study the history of philosophy in a worthwhile way," wrote Hegel, ". . . we must be partisans of philosophy and must not restrict ourselves to, or content ourselves with, merely knowing the thinking of other people. Truth is only known when we are present in it with our own spirit; mere knowledge of it is not proof that we are really at home in it."⁶² Having passed through the alienating stance of Cartesian skepticism, the self had to internalize it and yet move it to a higher unity.

For interpretation, Hegel's solution means that when we have become alienated from history or texts, we can make ourselves at home in them only by appropriating them — that is, by taking them up into our own lives and experiences. In doing so, we raise the past to life through the power of our creative spirit. Hegel terms this process *Aufhebung*; it is what he calls in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the "inwardizing" of the Spirit that had once breathed in the ancient myths and now discredited beliefs. Through *Aufhebung*, alienation proves to be a blessing and a gain, rather than a curse and a loss, because the "Spirit of Fate" that delivers the works of the past to us is greater than "the ethical life and the actual world" of that past, "just as the girl who offers us the plucked fruits is more than the

62. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. T. M. Knox and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 100.

Nature which directly provides them." That which had been present in an outward form in the ancient beliefs and rituals has now been "inwardized," or gathered "into one pantheon, into the Spirit that is itself conscious of itself as Spirit."⁶³ And so the lifeless, mechanistic world of Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian science comes to life through the internalizing power of Spirit.

In one form or another, this view of a triumphant consciousness as Spirit had surfaced earlier in the German idealist philosophers and English romantic poets; after Hegel, it became one of the central tenets of the romantic and post-romantic creeds. For Hegel, according to M. H. Abrams, "the spirit recognizes that all the mysteries of religion are intrinsic to itself, as moments in its own educational development: human consciousness becomes aware that it has been its own betrayer, and can be its own redeemer."⁶⁴ In the final sentence of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel calls this process "the inwardizing and the Calvary of absolute Spirit."⁶⁵

Hegel's "inwardizing" of texts and the historical represents the radical realization of the anti-sacramental potential of the Reformation. With their attacks upon magic and the Mass, the Protestant Reformers served as a powerful force in the desacralizing of the world. In their view of the Lord's Supper in particular, and the seven sacraments in general, Protestants shifted their focus from the liturgical act to the spiritual state of the recipient. Luther was unambiguous on this matter. In his 1519 treatise entitled "The Blessed Sacrament," he explained that the sacrament of "the holy and true body of Christ" has three parts: "The first is the sacrament, or sign. The second is the significance of this sacrament. The third is the faith required with each of the first two. These three parts must be found in every sacrament." While the

63. For Hegel, the appropriation of dead traditions and formulations by consciousness offers a way of recovering, albeit in a different form, something of an earlier immediacy of belief. "The sublation of mediation into immediacy is similar to an entity's sublation of its own conditions. Both processes occur, on Hegel's view, in our knowledge of God. God (Jacobi has argued) is unmediated and unconditioned, while our knowledge of him is mediated and conditioned; thus either our cognition falls short of God or it degrades him to a mediated entity. The solution, Hegel replies, is that while both God and our cognition of him are mediated, they sublimate their mediation into immediacy." Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 185.

A modified Hegelianism informs most hermeneutical enterprises in the modern world. For a succinct and compelling representation of the power of the Hegelian vision for contemporary hermeneutics, see Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 347-57.

64. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 233.

65. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 493.

sacrament takes an external, visible form, its significance "must be internal and spiritual, within the spirit of the person. Faith must make both of them together operative and useful."⁶⁶ With this definition, Luther was rejecting the Catholic view that the sacraments have the power to confer grace *ex opere operato*; he refused to grant that they could be effective regardless of the disposition of the persons administering or receiving them. Instead, while Luther and most of his fellow Reformers saw an objective property in the sacraments, they also held that the animating presence of the believer's faith was required to make the sacrament efficacious.

Luther remained poised between his trust in the objective power of the sacraments and his understanding of the necessity of faith. But romanticism, of which Hegel's philosophy stood as one of the most complex and powerful representations, was to tilt completely in the direction of inwardness. In the Hegelian understanding of Spirit, the quickening power of self-consciousness raises dead realities to life and enables us to appropriate the lifeless legacy of the past. Emerson again provides the memorable illustration of this romantic doctrine of appropriation: "The scholar . . . received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went out from him, poetry. It was dead fact; now it is quick thought."⁶⁷ Or, as he put it in another essay, in an unblushing declaration of the primacy of self-consciousness: "History is an impertinence and an injury, if it be any thing more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming."⁶⁸ In

66. Martin Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 242.

67. Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 56.

68. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 270. According to Hans Frei, "Religious theory after Kant focused more and more on faith as a distinctive and self-conscious human stance which is reducible to no other. And faith in this sense qualifies whatever 'reality' it is properly in touch with, analogous to the way in which for Kant the structure of reason qualifies the transcendental ego's contact with the objects of the sensible world, turning them from things-in-themselves into phenomena for human consciousness. It became a commonplace in nineteenth-century Protestant theology that we know God only under the qualification of a religious relation to him (be it revelation or some other), and not as he is in himself." Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 283-84.

interpreting a text or an event from the past, we cannot transport ourselves back to its world, Hegel held, but must rather bring it forward into ours. "Neither does an individual transcend his time; he is a son of it," he argued, employing an image that makes the present age, rather than an ongoing tradition, its own parent and authority. "No one can escape from the substance of his time any more than he can jump out of his skin."⁶⁹

Hegel's view of interpretation and history accepted the irreversibility of the Cartesian discovery of consciousness, and on this point, at least, he was in agreement with Schleiermacher. For Hegel, Descartes's isolation of the skeptical subject was a necessary stage in the developing self-consciousness of Spirit, and for Schleiermacher it led eventually to a higher consciousness of God. There are, the German theologian wrote, "three grades of self-consciousness," the first of which is "the confused animal grade" seen in "the consciousness of children"; the second, or "middle stage," is that of "sensible self-consciousness" and "antithesis"; and the third and final stage is that in which the self experiences a "feeling of absolute dependence" and "unites and identifies itself with everything which, in the middle grade, was set over against it, as the highest."⁷⁰ Schleiermacher's view of consciousness resembles Hegel's judgment about the salutary metaphysical loss that has made Spirit at last "conscious of itself as Spirit." For Schleiermacher, "the highest self-consciousness is in no wise dependent on outwardly given objects which may affect us at one moment and not another." Instead, "it is quite simple, and remains self-identical while all other states are changing."⁷¹

Whatever similarities they had in their view of Cartesian isolation, however, Hegel and Schleiermacher differed dramatically on the aims and mechanics of interpretation. To the end, Schleiermacher remained confident in the power of methodical interpretation to obliterate the historical distance between readers and their texts. If anything, the distancing of history spurs us to such rigorous efforts of understanding that eventually we may "understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author." In his confidence about recovering the original intentions of the author, Schleiermacher was one with Descartes in his efforts to recapture perfect epistemological certainty, one with the Revolutionaries in France

69. Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 112.

70. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.), sec. 5, 18-20.

71. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, sec. 5, 21.

in their drive to retrieve a state of natural perfection, and one with Wordsworth in his passion to recuperate the immortal glory of childhood. Cut off from the past but able to reconstruct it through diligent effort, Schleiermacher's interpreter is an orphan who fabricates a family through methodical interpretive labors and feats of divinatory understanding.

Schleiermacher's goal of "understanding the text at first as well as and then even better than its author" may explain his appeal to conservative American biblical scholars who might otherwise question his orthodoxy. At first glance, Schleiermacher and the heirs of fundamentalism would seem to be unlikely allies. He, after all, is the father of the theological modernism against which the fundamentalists reacted so strongly in the early decades of the twentieth century. There is little in his theology of feeling or his accommodating apologetics that can be squared with the unblinking supernaturalism of fundamentalism or with its animus toward culture.

Nonetheless, Schleiermacher and the evangelicals come together on key questions of interpretation through their common disregard of the constructive hermeneutical significance of history. In Schleiermacher, the bias against history followed from his conviction that in interpretation "misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course." If we interpret in order to understand a text better than its own author understood it, then history can only be a hindrance and not a help. It is the void through which we must travel to reach the text in its original purity, the debris we must clear before we can dig beneath the surface of the text into the very mind of its author. As a repository of prejudices, misconceptions, and illusions, the history of interpretation is almost always more likely to conceal rather than reveal the meaning of a text. With his emphasis upon method and divination, Schleiermacher sought nothing less than to overcome history and its opposition to right understanding.⁷²

72. Unlike many fundamentalists and evangelicals, however, Schleiermacher did not allow his hermeneutical disdain for tradition to assume the form of a universal denial of the irreversibility of history. For example, he did not dream, as many modern conservative Christians do, of overturning history and re-establishing the church as it was in the time of the New Testament. He wrote, "As a universal rule, what has previously existed never recurs at a later time in quite the same form; and . . . no one particular point of time could be given, all over, to which the Church should have been brought back, . . . partly because we cannot sacrifice the dogmatic precision of our ideas, partly because we can as little re-establish the then relations to Judaism and Hea-thenism as we can the political passivity." *The Christian Faith*, sec. 24, 104.

American evangelicalism has its own history of looking askance at history. George Marsden observes that at the end of the nineteenth century, "Americans had relatively little history of their own, and their national experience often seemed like a new dispensation, totally discontinuous with the past." (And here we have yet another instance of modernity's desire to be orphaned from the past.) Because dispensationalism had a nondevelopmental view of history, Marsden conjectures, it was ideally suited to thrive in American soil after it was transplanted from England in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.⁷³ In its fundamentalist flowering, dispensationalism did away with the need to take the history of doctrine and interpretation seriously. The institutional church and its traditions, after all, were more often the scene of error and apostasy than right understanding. Those who could interpret the scriptures correctly belonged to that saving remnant of "Bible-believing" Christians present in every era of history. Members of that remnant could, with the help of the Holy Spirit, leap over almost two thousand years of history and land safely back in the presence of the prophets and apostles themselves.

Although most evangelical biblical scholars have left behind the dispensationalism of their fundamentalist past, they have at the same time still clung to their predecessors' view of history. And in doing so, they have unwittingly appropriated the Enlightenment "prejudice against prejudice." Like politics, hermeneutics makes for strange bedfellows. In a history of early American religion, Nathan Hatch notes that "no less than Tom Paine or Thomas Jefferson, populist Christians of the early republic, sought to start the world over again."⁷⁴ In like manner, no less than Schleiermacher, conservative biblical scholars have sought to read the Bible as though it had never been read before. They have, that is, labored to suppress the history of interpretation in their quest for the pristine historical origins of the text.

To be certain, the evangelical desire to go behind history makes a certain kind of sense, in light of the recent history of theories of interpretation and human understanding. Understandably concerned about some of the subjectivist excesses of the Hegelian tradition of inwardizing

73. George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 226.

74. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 213.

appropriation, evangelical scholars have generally adopted as their alternative Schleiermacher's two-stage approach to interpretation. In the first stage, careful historical and textual analysis is meant to yield the fixed meaning of the text. With that *meaning* secured, the interpreter is then free to articulate the *significance* of the text for the present day. "Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent," writes E. D. Hirsch, whose *Validity in Interpretation* has been enormously influential in evangelical biblical studies. "Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable."⁷⁵ Evangelical scholar Gordon Fee clearly states the case for the two-stage approach: "The first step toward valid interpretation of Scripture is a historical investigation known as *exegesis*, which means the determination of the originally intended meaning of a text." Fee speaks of "taking history seriously" but makes it clear that he means by that not the history that stands between us and the text but the "original setting(s) of the biblical texts themselves." The task of the interpreter is "nothing less

75. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 8. For a recent evangelical elaboration of the Hirschian viewpoint, see Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), esp. chap. 2, "The Meaning of Meaning," 27-45.

Daniel Fuller, in a widely circulated syllabus for a course at Fuller Theological Seminary, lauds Hirsch for his assertion that "it is wholly possible to have full knowledge of the verbal meanings of others. To know an author's language conventions . . . is to be able to know fully what he is trying to say." Hirsch is praised for espousing a "hermeneutical theory . . . not in vogue today." It is not in vogue because it has been supplanted by the theory of hermeneutics most closely associated with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Fuller dismisses what he calls Gadamer's "radical historicism." While praising Hirsch, he says that "Gadamer's point of view is not true because it counters experience and is inherently contradictory." Daniel Fuller, *Hermeneutics*, 5th rev. ed. (n.p., 1978), sec. I, 7-8, 13.

Walter Kaiser views the situation along similar lines. He writes of "the crisis in hermeneutics" and places the primary blame for "this sad state of affairs" on Gadamer, who is faulted for not giving us a "yardstick for determining which interpreter is more nearly correct if both happen to hit upon conflicting interpretations at the same moment in time." On the other hand, Kaiser praises Hirsch as one who "stand[s] almost alone in attempting to return hermeneutics and exegesis to a more objective version of interpretation." Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 23-34.

than to bridge the historical — and therefore cultural — gap between them and us."⁷⁶

With its crisp distinction between meaning and significance, Hirsch's intentionalism appears to allow for a measure of interpretive liberty even as it tethers interpretation to the pole of certainty. That makes it especially attractive to conservative Christians seeking to ground their faith without either deference to tradition or recourse to a developed doctrine of the church. With the unchanging meaning of the text secured by exegetical work of the biblical scholars themselves, there is no apparent need for an understanding of the activity of God in the history of the church and its manifold interpretive practices and traditions. Hirsch argues that while our "relationship" to the meaning of a text may change over time, "one constant, unchanging pole of that relationship is what the text means." The failure to make this "simple and essential distinction" has led to endless confusion in modern hermeneutical theory and practice.⁷⁷ Following Hirsch's lead, a generation of evangelical biblical scholars has claimed that the subjective art of appropriation can be practiced but only after the objective science of interpretation has secured the unchanged meaning of the text. "There is one meaning to a text, that meaning consciously willed by the author, but the particular way that meaning affects the readers, its significance, will be quite different," asserts evangelical New Testament scholar Robert Stein, with a confidence typical of contemporary evangelical approaches to interpretation.⁷⁸

Yet for all of their self-assurance, the evangelical promoters of Hirschian intentionalism are fighting a lonely battle. Almost two decades ago, Frank Lentricchia observed that "E. D. Hirsch stands pretty much by himself in the landscape of contemporary critical theory."⁷⁹ For two centu-

76. Gordon Fee, "History as Context for Interpretation," in *The Act of Bible Reading*, ed. Elmer Dyck (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 11.

77. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8.

78. Robert H. Stein, *Playing by the Rules: A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 36.

79. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 257. In analyzing the intellectual sources of Hirsch's intentionalism — and his abiding disdain for the Heideggerian tradition — Lentricchia also illuminates the irony of the evangelical embrace of Hirsch: "There is, in so many words, no unmediated historical knowledge. That is reserved for God, or for theorists like Hirsch who believe that objective knowledge can be acquired in a massive act of dispossessing ourselves of the only route to knowledge that we have: the historicized self. What Hirsch's readings of Heidegger and Gadamer may ultimately indicate is the traditional Anglo-

ries, the forces that Hirsch represents — and that evangelical biblical scholars have tried to muster in their battle against relativism — have been fighting a rear-guard action against the Emersonian and Hegelian hordes. Outside of the world of evangelical biblical hermeneutics, few students of interpretation or the history of ideas find Schleiermacher's strict intentionalism tenable. On seemingly every front, the advocates of *Aufhebung*, or internalization, have pressed forward and won the day. From Nietzsche and Emerson to Rorty, an air of triumphalism has informed the pronouncements of Hegel's intellectual descendants. Emerson declared with blithe confidence that "God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world"; for Nietzsche, the true interpreter is an artist, one who refuses to "[lie] in the dust before petty facts," but seeks out of a spirit of "intoxication" to transform "things until they mirror his power"; and in Rorty's words, poetic creation and strong interpretation are merely sophisticated forms of "an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own."⁸⁰

Rorty's glibly bleak candor helps one to understand the anxieties of those alarmed by the drift of contemporary interpretive theory. The radical allegorizing practiced by the descendants of Hegel and Nietzsche constitutes a dramatic reconfiguring of Christian practice. Allegorical interpretation first arose as a matter of apologetic concern within the Jewish, classical Greek, and early Christian traditions. From the start, allegory involved the effort to bring relevance to texts or beliefs that had been rendered obscure by historical change. Plato and the Greek tragedians employed allegory to reinvigorate the Homeric myths; in the early centuries of the Christian era, both the Jewish Philo and the Christian Origen used allegory to reconcile their respective faith traditions with Greek philoso-

American fear and manhandling of any sort of thought which does not work from Cartesian premises." *After the New Criticism*, 263.

Lentricchia's linking of Hirsch with Descartes is but one of many ironies of the relationship of evangelicalism to modernity. In trying to counter the rationalism and subjectivism that threaten their faith and its sacred texts, Christian scholars turn for aid to the very source of the ideas and practices they so strenuously oppose.

80. Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 80; Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 82, 83; and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 43.

phy; and in the Middle Ages, Catholic interpreters and artists practiced allegorical interpretation in works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in books of speculative and prophetic history, and in innumerable homiletical treatises.

But even though allegory was intended to sustain beliefs and practices by reinterpreting them, by the late Middle Ages it had begun to fall into disfavor, and the Reformation only hastened its demise. Allegorical interpretation had become too associated with the extravagances and abuses of medieval faith and was linked in the minds of its critics with magic and superstition. Luther and Calvin distrusted allegory, while both rationalism and empiricism discredited it.⁸¹ The Reformers argued for the literal or plain sense of scripture over the figurative and often ridiculed the idea that there could be manifold senses of any single biblical passage. As they pressed their point about the clear and unambiguous meaning of the biblical text, the Reformers made claims about language that dovetailed neatly with the sharp distinctions being drawn by early modern philosophy and science. In the seventeenth century, for example, the British scientist Thomas Sprat called for the banishment of "Specious Tropes and Figures" from "all *civil Societies*, as a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners." Instead, he argued, the Royal Society ought to pursue "a close, naked, natural way of speaking . . . as near the Mathematical plainness as they can."⁸² With language stripped to its "naked" state, there was no need for allegorical garb to conceal it.

81. "It is self-evident that Calvin would make only the most cautious use of what is called allegorizing even where NT parallels would seem to call for it directly by their *hina plerothe* ('that it might be fulfilled'). It was naturally no accident that of all the NT books he did not write a commentary only on Revelation. He hated what he called on one occasion the pleasurable playing about with every possible interpretation of the text that we can hardly avoid when it comes to Revelation." Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 390.

Luther also excoriated the allegorists: "Origen received his due reward a long time ago when his books were prohibited, for he relied too much on this same spiritual meaning, which was unnecessary, and he let the necessary literal meaning go. When that happens Scripture perishes and really good theologians are no longer produced. Only the true principal meaning which is provided by the letters can produce good theologians." Martin Luther, "Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig — Including Some Thoughts Regarding His Companion, the Fool Murner," in *Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Lull, 78.

82. Thomas Sprat, as cited in Abrams, *Mirror and Lamp*, 285.

Yet later generations were to find such a "naked prose" too bracing for comfort, and they would seek once again to clothe their verbal figures in allegory. Distraught over the barrenness of a demystified world, for example, the romantic poets and philosophers redeployed allegory, this time in an effort to "re-enchant" the world. It may be true, as Hegel alleges, that "trust in the eternal laws of the gods has vanished, and the Oracles are dumb," that the statues have become lifeless stones, the hymns hollow vessels for dead beliefs, and the communion table a starving site providing "no spiritual food and drink." Yet all the same, the Spirit of Fate blesses us by showing that this loss is really a gain, for "it is the *inwardizing* in us of the Spirit which in them was still [only] *outwardly* manifested." Fully conscious of our powers, we bring life to that which seems dead outside of ourselves, whether it be the facts of history or the pages of texts.⁸³

It is easy to sense the disruptive and disorienting potential of such a view of allegory. How does one hear God speak authoritatively, if the only way to understand his word is to appropriate it entirely on one's own terms? How is the church to discern and live by the unchanging standard of God's word, if the meaning of that word is never fixed but always fluctuates? And by what standard will the many competing interpretations of the Bible and Christian doctrine be judged or reconciled, if interpretation can never establish the indubitable truths that God has revealed in his word? Those who have pressed the case for authorial intention have made a valid point when they have worried about the relativizing power of interpretive appropriation. But in seeking to counter what they consider to be rank subjectivism, the intentionalists have pressed an untenable view of the interpretive process.

For almost two centuries, in short, representatives of these two interpretive traditions — the intentionalists descended from Schleiermacher and the allegorists who issued from Hegel — have pitched themselves in

83. Abrams writes, "Much of what distinguishes writers I call 'Romantic' derives from the fact that they undertook, whatever their religious creed or lack of creed, to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature." Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, 13. After Feuerbach and Nietzsche, of course, the transactions of "consciousness with nature" would seem forever altered, with nature perpetually on the verge of being devoured or obliterated by consciousness.

opposition to each other and have viewed one another as inhabitants of alien realms. Yet in reality, the allegorists and the intentionalists are hardly foreign to each other, for they are intimately related and resemble siblings squabbling about their inheritance more than anything else. For all their apparent differences, the intentionalists and the allegorists are the heirs of Descartes, who are in their markedly different ways forever re-enacting "the Cartesian moment of self-fathering."

On the basic premises of interpretation, that is, contemporary conservatives and radicals are in remarkable agreement. Both the intentionalists and the allegorists are Cartesian in that they conceive of texts as objects waiting to be operated upon by solitary subjects. They accept as a given the claim that misunderstanding and alienation constitute the normal state of affairs in hermeneutics. For the intentionalists, the text is a lifeless body awaiting the galvanizing touch of the method that will bring it to life, or it is the changeless meaning trapped inside the body of decaying human language. Only the expert, or the expert's methods, can revivify it or free it. "Exegesis is a must" for proper understanding, writes Gordon Fee, ". . . because the nature of Scripture, God's eternal Word given in human words in history, demands it."⁸⁴

For the allegorists, texts demand nothing but yield everything under the proper caresses. Or, to use an image made popular at the height of deconstructive theorizing, the creative reader is the parasite living off the decaying body of the once vital text.⁸⁵ In many of its contemporary manifestations, allegorizing represents an effort to feed off tradition without replenishing its stores, to consume the spiritual and ethical harvests of past ages without planting new crops for future generations. Where the intentionalists are confident that the subject studying the text can extract from it the truth hidden within its language, the allegorists seek instead to bring the dead text to life by internalizing it. Intentionalists and allegorists alike are orphans contesting their legacy in a soulless Cartesian world.

84. Gordon Fee, "History as Context for Interpretation," in *The Act of Bible Reading*, 32.

85. "The caution amounts to saying that abnormal and 'existential' discourse is always parasitic upon normal discourse, that the possibility of hermeneutics is always parasitic upon the possibility (and perhaps upon the actuality) of epistemology, and that edification always employs materials provided by the culture of the day." Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 365-66.

**"The Shadow of Absence":
Orphans and the Interpretive Quest**

Given the cultural dynamics prevailing in the early modern West, it is not surprising that orphans came to figure so prominently in the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a genre, the novel offered unprecedented freedom and flexibility to explore the full range of human development and social reality. The novel also fed upon and helped to foster a remarkable appetite for the intimate delineation of inner experience, and orphans provided grist for the fictional mills. With the rise of the novel in the late eighteenth century, observes Eileen Simpson, "orphans became heroes and heroines whose feelings readers could identify with, whose orphanhood was not merely stated (as it is in Shakespeare's plays and in picaresque tales), but described as if from the inside."⁸⁶

To put the theoretical discussion of orphaning and the Cartesian turn in perspective, we may consider the fate of orphans in three novels from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What happens to orphans in these novels neatly illustrates the plight of the Cartesian subject in the modern world, and in their treatment of the orphan these and other novels suggest fruitful lines of inquiry for contemporary hermeneutical discussions. In some cases, they even put forth suggestions about how to resolve key hermeneutical disputes.

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, for instance, uses orphaning as a metaphor for the human condition in a world enduring the absence and silence of God. The novel is narrated by a character who tells us virtually nothing about himself, save that he is named Ishmael. The biblical Ishmael, of course, was the son of Abraham by Hagar, and he was effectively abandoned by his father. Disinherited in favor of Isaac, his younger half-brother, and cast out of the covenant, Ishmael became a wanderer and an exile.

In Hebrew, the name *Ishmael* means "God hears." In *Moby-Dick*, however, the problem is that although God may hear, he does not speak. Throughout the novel, Ishmael and Captain Ahab wrestle with the inscrutable silence of the universe. Gazing at the head of a dead whale one night, Ahab implores it to speak: "Speak, thou vast and venerable head. . . . O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of

86. Eileen Simpson, *Orphans: Real and Imaginary* (New York: New American Library, 1987), 181-82.

Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!"⁸⁷ As they close in on the whale near the novel's end, Ahab's first mate says of an occurrence, "'Tis a solemn sight; an omen, and an ill one." To this Ahab responds in angry disappointment: "Omen? omen? — the dictionary! If the gods think to speak outright to man, they will honorably speak outright; not shake their head, and give an old wives' darkling hint. — Begone!" (452).⁸⁸

Yet in spite of God's silence — or perhaps because of it — we are driven to the desperate interpretation of nature and our own experience. Our insatiable hunger for meaning compels us to interpret, for without that meaning, we could not endure the burdens of living. "Some certain significance lurks in all things," Ishmael asserts at one point in the novel, "else all things are of little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload, as they do hills about Boston, to fill up some morass in the Milky Way" (358).

Though they cannot help but try to decipher the text of nature, Melville's characters have no confidence in their ability to get the reading right. They doubt themselves because their creator doubted himself, doubted God, and doubted the highly touted romantic imagination. Melville repeatedly posed the question put by Jean Paul's Christ: "If every being is its own father and creator, why cannot it also be its own destroying angel?" If the self was to become divine, that is, would it not possess the destructive powers of the Evil One as well as the creative powers of God? Even Emerson had to concede that there was a price to be paid for self-deification. In "Experience," written only a few years before Melville published *Moby-Dick*, Emerson reluctantly concluded, "We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now, the rapa-

87. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, ed. Harrison Hayford and Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1967), 264. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in parentheses within the body of the essay.

88. "In his relation to belief, Melville was like the last guest who cannot leave the party; he was always returning to see if he had left his hat and gloves. And yet he did not want to be at the party, either. It is just that he had nowhere else to be and would rather be with people than be alone. He was tormented by God's 'inscrutable' silence — this is clear from the work. *Moby Dick*, who is both God and Devil, flaunts his unhelpful silence as God does to Job: 'Canst thou draw out leviathan with a hook?' James Wood, "The All of the If," *The New Republic*, 17 March 1997, 32.

ciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. . . . Every evil and every good thing is a shadow which we cast."⁸⁹

What Emerson calls "this new power" was the human imagination as it had been defined in late eighteenth-century philosophy and early nineteenth-century poetry. In Kantian epistemology and romantic poetic theory, the perceiving and creating subject assumed an unprecedented importance. That subject was able to stand alone without the need of support from the institutional church, the scriptural record, or tradition. The autonomous human subject in Enlightenment philosophy and romantic poetry was not an abandoned orphan but a mature adult who had internalized the divine powers.

At first, that subject found within the self the same moral truths hidden within the natural world; in one of his earliest works, Emerson confidently declared that "nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal, and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. . . . And, in fine, the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."⁹⁰ Yet as the passage from "Experience" demonstrates, "this new power" proved to be "rapacious," and the balance quickly shifted in its favor at the expense of nature.

As a consequence of the nineteenth century's burgeoning sense of the self — as well as of its dramatic scientific discoveries — the practice of reading the "Book of Nature" was called dramatically into question. That practice had originated in the sixteenth century and had been central to early modern efforts to replace the discredited authority of received opinion and religious dogma with a more trustworthy, universal authority. As religious sects and theological schemes proliferated alarmingly, nature spoke with one voice and in a language all could understand. What book could be clearer than this one "True Book"? From the early 1500s throughout the mid-nineteenth century, theists and deists of every kind read that book for its natural signs and, in many cases, anchored their beliefs in the meanings that it conveyed.⁹¹

89. Emerson, "Experience," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 487.

90. Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 56.

91. Ian Hacking describes this development clearly and convincingly. See *The Emergence of Probability*, 39-48. To trace the uncertainty of nineteenth-century readings of nature to problems of epistemology and the self is not to deny the enormous importance of the changes that the natural sciences were undergoing in these decades. The Darwinian critique of the argument from design fed into a skepticism already established by the romantic dilemma of consciousness.

The "Book of Nature" was meant to resolve the "problem of many authorities" by providing incontrovertible evidence of the designs of God. By the early nineteenth century, however, it had become very hard to decipher the text. With its stress upon the projecting powers of the self, romantic epistemology eventually transformed nature into a screen upon which the self was projected or a mirror which reflected that self. (Recall Nietzsche's definition of art as man's attempt to "transform things until they mirror his power.") In changing the view of nature, romanticism was abetted, to be certain, by the powerful scientific developments of the nineteenth century, particularly the rise of Darwinian naturalism. With nature drained of moral significance and the locus of meaning shifted so dramatically to the self, the "problem of many authorities" became in the romantic tradition the "problem of endless authorities." In a radically Protestant world, "every being" became not only its own "father, creator, and destroying angel," but also its own pope and authoritative interpreter.⁹²

An incident in *Moby-Dick* illustrates perfectly the interpretive dilemma of the late romantic world. One day, each of the main characters stands before a gold doubloon that Captain Ahab has nailed to the mast as a bounty for the first sailor who spots Moby-Dick. Each sailor scans the symbols on the coin and reads into them whatever meaning he desires to find there. The doubloon depicted three mountain peaks in the Andes; on one there was a flame, on another a tower, and on the third, a crowing cock. Each character interprets these visual signs in light of his own most pressing concerns; there is no pattern to those concerns, so it appears to an observer that the men have not been influenced at all by what they have seen but have read into it simply what they have willed. It is left to Pip, the half-crazy cabin-boy, to sum up what the others have done as interpreters: "I look, you look, he looks; we look, ye look, they look." As another sailor puts it, having overheard the soliloquies before the doubloon: "There's another rendering now; but still one text. All sorts of men in one kind of world, you see" (362). It may be only "one world," but it is populated with "endless authorities."⁹³

92. W. H. Auden notes that the modern devaluation of nature as a moral source has deep roots in Protestant soil: "Protestantism implies a rejection — rejection is not the same thing as rebellion — of the Mother. The doctrine of Predestination which makes the actions of God's will arbitrary from a human point of view makes the notion of necessity meaningless and thereby denies any spiritual significance to the fact that we are born from the bodies of our mothers through the necessary processes of nature." *Forewords and Afterwords*, 83.

93. James Wood comments, "His love of metaphor leads Melville marvelously

According to Ishmael, our interpretive confusion stems from our status as orphans who have no certain knowledge of either our origins or our destiny. "There is no steady unretracing progress in this life," Ishmael laments. We move through each of life's stages — through "infancy's unconscious spell, boyhood's thoughtless faith, adolescence' doubt (the common doom), then scepticism, then disbelief, resting at last in manhood's pondering repose of If" — only to have to "trace the round again . . . eternally." Where is "the final harbor" in which we might rest? What presence sustains and upholds the world? "Where is the foundling's father hidden?" Ishmael asks rhetorically. He can only conclude that "our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them: the secret of our paternity lies in their grave, and we must there to learn it" (406).

Moby-Dick lays bare the consequences of the romantic radicalizing of Protestantism's "priesthood of all believers." When each reader of nature or scripture speaks *ex cathedra*, then there are as many denominations — and interpretations — as there are self-conscious subjects in the world. How are we to reconcile our drive for freedom of thought, expression, and interpretation with our equal hunger for the common good and our need to believe in a truth greater than ourselves?⁹⁴

Moby-Dick also raises crucial questions about the limits of a "sign theory" of language, which holds that words are arbitrary markers that are "in principle replaceable and interchangeable."⁹⁵ In a sign theory of language, words reveal nothing more than the history of linguistic convention

astray, theologically. His 'wandering' love of language breaks up his God, and he encourages this; his love of language bribes him against that rival, the Original Author. . . .

"*Moby-Dick* represents the triumph of this atheism of metaphor. Or, perhaps, this polytheism of metaphor. For it is a book in which allegory explodes into a thousand metaphors; a book in which the Puritan habit of reading signs and seeing stable meanings behind them is mocked by an almost grotesque abundance of metaphor. In his book, meaning is mashed up like a pudding." "The All of the If," *New Republic*, 17 March 1997, p. 34.

94. Alfred Kazin writes, "In the struggle between man's effort to find meaning in nature, against the indifference of nature itself, which always eludes him — and this in a world suddenly emptied of God, one where an 'intangible malignity' has reigned from the beginning — Melville's ultimate strangeness is to portray the struggle from the side of nature itself." *God and the American Writer* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 96.

95. Joel Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 90. Making effective use of Gadamer's critique of semiotics in *Truth and Method*, Weinsheimer offers in this work a useful corrective to the dominant theory of words as signs.

and social practice. For both structuralism and poststructuralism, it is this arbitrariness that marks the essence of language and its relationship to whatever we would call the reality beyond or beneath it. Tzvetan Todorov correctly observes that "arbitrariness is not, for [Ferdinand de] Saussure, merely one of the sign's various features, but its fundamental characteristic: the arbitrary sign is the sign par excellence."⁹⁶ The sharp nominalism of this position resembles that of certain branches of Protestant thought; the main difference is that in the case of structuralism and its sign theory, linguistic determinism has replaced the will of God as the controlling agency. In the modern world, the assumptions of the sign theory have deeply informed the hermeneutics of suspicion and its skeptical reading of the ostensible meanings of words and actions, and they are at the center of structuralism and poststructuralism.

In their own uncertainty about the relationship of words to things, Ishmael and Ahab show themselves to be true sign theorists who take words and natural phenomena to be masks for a hidden will that works out its purposes in mystifying secrecy. But while Ahab and Ishmael may agree that signs are arbitrary, they differ markedly on how we should react to that arbitrariness. The genial and accommodating Ishmael is a pragmatist and postmodernist before his time. He would have us respond to the silence of God by seeking, at all costs, to get along with all the other orphans housed with us on our forlorn planet. With a feat of syllogistic and ecumenical legerdemain, Ishmael justifies his participation in a pagan ritual with Queequeg, his shipmate: "So I kindled the shavings; helped prop up the innocent little idol; . . . kissed his nose; and that done, we undressed and went to bed, at peace with our own consciences and all the world" (54). After all, if the earth is a prison and we never even catch a glimpse of our jailer, then Ishmael concludes that we might as well get along with one another: "It is but well to be on friendly terms with all the inmates of the place one lodges in" (16).

Like the contemporary pragmatists, Ishmael would have us abandon our ultimate concerns and get on with our practical chores. Indeed, he sounds like a prototype of Richard Rorty, the leading voice of contemporary American postmodern pragmatism. "To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered," argues Rorty, "is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter." Like possible points of disagreement between Ishmael's Presbyterianism and

96. Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 268.

Queequeg's paganism, arguments about "the nature of truth" and "the nature of God" are stale and unprofitable. But in Rorty's words, "this claim about relative unprofitability, in turn, is just the recommendation that we in fact *say* little about these topics, and see how we get on."⁹⁷

Captain Ahab rejects such pragmatic compromises. He must know the power that has created him, assailed him, and abandoned him. If "all visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," then he will break through them to face the force that overmasters him (144). Ahab is one with his Enlightenment and romantic forebears in understanding God as a power lurking behind the masks he wears to encounter us. But while the Enlightenment rationalists and romantic optimists found comfort in their faith in the self that faced and read those masks, Ahab knows no such consolation. The self as he understands it is guilty and tormented, not innocent and tranquil. It must go behind the sign to learn the mind of the one who signifies: "If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall. . . . That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him" (144). The pain of abandonment and divine indifference is too great for Ahab: "He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down," Melville writes of Ahab, "and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it" (160).⁹⁸

97. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 8.

98. Rorty acknowledges his deep debt to William James, the first and greatest of American pragmatists. In describing the difference between the pluralist and the monist, James maps out neatly the divide that separates Ishmael from Ahab. "But what at bottom is meant by calling the universe many or by calling it one?" James asks. "Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related*. Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely 'external' environment of some sort or amount. Things are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. . . . The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.

"Monism, on the other hand, insists that when you come down to reality as such, to the reality of realities, everything is present to *everything* else in one vast instantaneous co-implicated completeness — nothing can in *any* sense, functional or substantial, be really absent from anything else, all things interpenetrate and telescope together in the great total conflux." *A Pluralistic Universe*, in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 776.

Ahab's complaint against God is directly related to the autonomy that he cherishes. Ahab is possessed by a Cartesian and Enlightenment desire to seal off the natural world and the human psyche from intrusions of the transcendent. To him, the malevolent arbitrariness of God was perfectly symbolized by Moby-Dick's attack upon him. With terrible fury, the divine could break into the human world without warning and with cruel intent. Yet when his consciousness afflicts him, then Ahab finds unbearable the very isolating security he has craved. It is then that he cries out for God to "come in thy lowest form of love," only to find that what had once seemed undesirable now appears utterly impossible. Fearing himself orphaned and abandoned, Ahab strikes out at "the personified impersonal" that faces him in Moby-Dick (417).

While *Moby-Dick* seems to range across the entire vast landscape of modern anxiety about the orphaning of humanity and the world, Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* focuses more specifically and profoundly upon the question of "the death of God." The brothers in this novel become orphans, but only through an act of parricide. Through that act Dostoyevsky attempts to fathom the modern experience of metaphysical orphaning. Nietzsche's madman cries out in the marketplace, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. . . . Who will wipe this blood off us?"⁹⁹ *The Brothers Karamazov* asks that question and attempts to answer it.

Of the myriad hermeneutical issues that Dostoyevsky's novel raises in its exploration of these questions, we can focus very briefly on just one fruitful line of inquiry. I have in mind the conversation that the Devil has with Ivan Karamazov near the novel's close. What Ivan comes to acknowledge in this "conversation with the devil" is that his illegitimate half-brother, Smerdyakov, murdered their father *and did so with Ivan's tacit approval*. What the Devil does is parrot back to Ivan all of the young Karamazov's radical metaphysical, moral, and political judgments. The Devil arrives at a dramatically different conclusion, however, than the one that Ivan has reached:

"The question now," my young thinker reflected, "is whether or not it is possible for such a period [of utopian perfection] ever to come. If it does come, then everything will be resolved and mankind will finally be settled. But since, in view of man's inveterate stupidity, it may not be settled

99. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), 95.

for another thousand years, anyone who already knows the truth is permitted to settle things for himself, absolutely as he wishes, on the new principles. . . . The new man is allowed to become a man-god . . . [and] to jump lightheartedly over any former moral obstacle of the former slave-man, if need be. There is no law for God! Where God stands — there is the place of God! . . . ‘Everything is permitted,’ and that’s that!’ It’s all very nice; only if one wants to swindle, why, I wonder, should one also need the sanction of truth?¹⁰⁰

The “Devil’s” rhetorical question has intriguing implications for the future of the hermeneutics of suspicion. For the past several decades, while many conservative scholars have been splitting hairs about questions of authorial intention — and have been doing so, to a large extent, on the terms established by a single book (*Validity in Interpretation*) almost thirty years ago — the mainstream theoretical world has been all but overwhelmed by the hermeneutics of suspicion and its proponents.¹⁰¹ In tracing textual assertions and truth claims to their sources in economic, social, or psychological compulsions, the hermeneutics of suspicion has proved to be a powerful tool for a certain kind of critique. In ways that have often proved to be useful, it has provided a healthy critique of Christian faith and practice. And in the hands of its most ardent advocates, the hermeneutics of suspicion has been used to dismiss or discredit the idea of truthful assertion, of bearing witness, that is at the very core of the Christian faith.

Like the Ivan being queried by the Devil — “. . . if one wants to swindle, why . . . should one also need the sanction of truth?” — the practitioners of suspicion have themselves been subjected to suspicious critique in a series of recent works.¹⁰² As Christian critics work to come to terms with the hermeneutics of suspicion, however belatedly, these works will provide substantial support for the critique of critique, the suspicious reading of suspicion.

100. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1991), 649.

101. See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32ff.

102. See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990); Frederick Crews et al., *The Memory Wars: Freud’s Legacy in Dispute* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1995); and George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays, 1978-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

Of all the modern novels that treat the theme of orphaning, none explores its hermeneutical dimensions more tellingly than William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* Interpretive concerns are central to the novel’s subject matter and its formal organization. Its tragic protagonist is Thomas Sutpen, a ruthless plantation builder and owner in the antebellum South. Yet though almost all of the events described in the novel occur in the nineteenth century, Faulkner has the entire story told by narrators in 1909 and 1910. In this manner, he makes the narrators’ struggles to interpret the past a subject of equal importance to the tragic story they are trying to comprehend.

There are many orphans in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the most interesting of whom is Charles Bon, the firstborn son of Thomas Sutpen. Bon may not be an orphan in fact, but he is in spirit. When Bon’s father, Thomas Sutpen, had discovered that his first wife had some black blood in her, he had abandoned her and their infant son Charles Bon. Sutpen refused to accept a wife and child of mixed blood, for he was desperate to establish himself as a plantation owner in the antebellum South. As he explained to one of his few friends several decades later, he had rid himself of his wife and son because “I found that she was not and could never be, through no fault of her own, adjunctive or incremental to the design which I had in mind, so I provided for her and put her aside.”¹⁰³

In his late twenties, Charles Bon finally meets Sutpen, but he does not receive even the slightest gesture of recognition from his father. At one point in the novel, Bon looks into the face of his half-brother Henry, Thomas Sutpen’s son by his second wife, and meditates upon the mystery of his father’s identity as well as his father’s absence. “There — ” one of the novel’s narrators imagines Charles Bon thinking as he stares at his brother, “there — at any moment, second, I shall penetrate by something of will and intensity and dreadful need, and strip that alien leavening from it and look not on my brother’s face whom I did not know I possessed and hence never missed, but my father’s, out of the shadow of whose absence my spirit’s posthumeity has never escaped” (254).¹⁰⁴

103. William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 194. All further references are to this edition and will be cited in parentheses within the body of the essay.

104. Of the many treatments of *Absalom, Absalom!* that focus on it as a hermeneutical study, the most satisfying remains Cleanth Brooks’s chapter on the novel. “Most important of all, however, *Absalom, Absalom!* is a persuasive commentary upon the thesis that much of ‘history’ is really a kind of imaginative construction. The

The absence of the father casts a shadow upon the spirit, and from that shadow, the "spirit's posthumeity has never escaped." Faulkner's images describe acutely the poignancy of the "post position" and allude to the theological implications of the orphan's predicament. In life as Charles Bon envisions it, we stand alone before the vast immensity of the Other, which is the source of our life but which stubbornly refuses to acknowledge us as its own. No one can mediate the experience of that Other for us, nor can anyone gain access for us to the mind and heart of the Other. Instead, each of us must struggle by "something of will and intensity and dreadful need" to strip off the mask behind which the Other, the Source, the Father, lurks in majestic silence and terrifying obscurity.

In the world of *Absalom, Absalom!*, God the Father confronts men and women without the interceding offices of God the Son. Theologically, we would call this a "Sabellian" world. In a Sabellian or modalist understanding of the Trinity, Jesus is not the god-man who mediates our experience of God or God's experience of us. He is instead only one of the masks that God dons for his encounter with us. We can know Jesus as a man but not as God, just as Charles Bon can know Thomas Sutpen as a man but never as the father he longs to meet. In Sabellianism, all we know is that God is on one side of the masks of transcendence, secure in his splendor and isolation. We stand on the other side, staring at them and searching for a sign. Alone on our side of the masks, we at first warmly celebrate our autonomy and then begin to feel the terrible, bracing chill of our solitude.

Helmut Thielicke traces the contemporary revival of Modalism back to Schleiermacher, among other sources. For Schleiermacher, Jesus represented the flowering of full human potential rather than God's taking on of flesh to dwell among us. "*The Redeemer*," writes Schleiermacher in *The Christian Faith*, "is like all men in virtue of the identity of human nature, but distinguished from them all by the constant potency of His God-consciousness, which was a veritable existence of God in Him."¹⁰⁵ As the Redeemer, Christ saves us by taking us up into his perfected God-consciousness. He does not impart to us grace from an outside source; instead, he provokes within us a response that draws out our own innate powers. "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts,"

past always remains at some level a mystery, but if we are to hope to understand it in any wise, we must enter into it and project ourselves imaginatively into the attitudes and emotions of the historical figures." *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 311-12.

105. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, sec. 94, 385.

observed Schleiermacher's American contemporary, Emerson. "They come back to us with a certain alienated majesty."¹⁰⁶ All that one needs to do is to change the word "genius" to "divinity," and one has a perfect formula for the German theologian's understanding of the nature of Christ and his work.

But a Christ who discloses to us our own divinity is not God incarnate breaking into our state of finitude and sin. He is merely the supreme embodiment of our own capacities. In the words of Thielicke, "This . . . is shut up with us in finitude" and God reigns alone in "his transcendence . . . above it."¹⁰⁷ For Schleiermacher, the doctrine of the Trinity is like all other doctrines of the faith; it discloses not the particular nature of God but the specific qualities of our experience of God. "*All attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God*," he claims, "*but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to Him*."¹⁰⁸

Between God and humanity, then, stand the masks that God always wears to meet us. On one side, God rules in isolated majesty, screened behind his manifold manifestations. As we gaze at the masks, we see not God himself but only the manipulative manner in which he has chosen to encounter us. And the more we strain to look, the more we realize that in those masks we glimpse nothing but puzzling reflections as in a mirror. Like Melville's Ahab and Faulkner's Charles Bon, we are orphaned and trapped in our finitude. Lost in our solitude without a guide, we can only guess at the nature of God behind the masks or wonder, in our more desperate moments, whether there is anything at all behind them.

It was over the course of the nineteenth century that the implications of the modern revival of Modalism became apparent. In his discussion of the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, Thielicke suggests that after Schleiermacher, the "normative role" of human consciousness increased dramatically "within the relation of God and man." It did so because in the modalist scheme of things, the history of salvation was not the record of God's entry into history but "the history of human consciousness as it reflects on God." Initially in Schleiermacher, consciousness was "a mere criterion of the possibility of appropriating revelation," but gradually it became

106. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 259.

107. Helmut Thielicke, *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, vol. 2 of *The Evangelical Faith*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 143.

108. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, sec. 50, 194.

the “normative principle” for determining what may count as true statements about God and the scriptures. “The final result is the fully emancipated and completely autonomous consciousness of a radical secularism.”

In Schleiermacher’s Modalism, Thielicke notes, God reflects himself in human consciousness through the masks he puts on to encounter humanity. But before long in the nineteenth century, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche would expose those masks to be simple projections of human desire. “Now,” writes Thielicke, “the consciousness reflects itself in the ideas of God that it produces.” The masks become not manipulative manifestations of the hidden God but mirrors in which we see only our own countenances beamed back to us. Thielicke argues that there is an element of inevitability to the process that leads so quickly from Schleiermacher’s theism of consciousness to Nietzsche’s atheism of hermeneutical perspectivism. Nietzsche is merely carrying the anthropological revolution of Schleiermacher and others “to its extreme limit. As he puts it, meaning, even . . . the concept of God, is necessarily perspective, perspectivism, in virtue of which every center of power constructs all the rest of the world in terms of itself.”¹⁰⁹

Such is the hermeneutical journey the orphan has traveled from Descartes to Nietzsche. In his essay on skepticism, “Experience,” Emerson wrote that “a political orator wittily compared our party promises to western roads, which opened stately enough, with planted trees on either side, to tempt the traveller, but soon became narrow and narrower, and ended in a squirrel-track, and ran up a tree. So does culture with us; it ends in head-ache.”¹¹⁰ And so, the orphans of these novels would seem to say, does the Cartesian *Cogito* in the modern world.

Beyond the Orphaned First Person

In a study of modern philosophy since Descartes, Roger Scruton concludes that “one thing is certain. . . . The assumption that there is a first-person certainty . . . has been finally removed from the centre of philosophy.”¹¹¹

109. Thielicke, *Doctrine of God and of Christ*, 149-51. For a reading of how these theological developments played themselves out in nineteenth-century literature in general and in the case of Emily Dickinson in particular, see my *Emily Dickinson and the Art of Belief* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 43-47, 144-50, 166-74.

110. Emerson, “Experience,” in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, 478.

111. Scruton, *From Descartes to Wittgenstein*, 284.

And its removal, one might add, has opened the way to modes of hermeneutical reflection far more fruitful than those determined by the orphaned consciousness of the Cartesian *Cogito*.

In *Truth and Method*, for instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer has a criticism of “first-person certainty” in mind when he traces contemporary alienation back to a more pervasive form of alienation, that of historical consciousness since the Enlightenment. The “global demand” of the Enlightenment was the “overcoming of all prejudices.” Driven by its desire to secure autonomy of the Cartesian *Cogito* over against tradition and external authority, the Enlightenment established its “fundamental prejudice . . . against prejudice itself, which denies tradition its power.”¹¹²

Gadamer’s observation is rich in its implications for our thinking about modern hermeneutical theory and practice. Both the allegorists and the intentionalists question the authority of historical tradition. For the allegorists, that tradition appears to be a history of arbitrary assumptions, none of which are grounded in a truth beyond the conventional uses or assumptions of their time. In this view, prejudices are preferences for which there is no justification beyond that of the provisional consensus of the moment. For the intentionalists, on the other hand, the tradition that stretches between us and the text we are trying to understand is like a desert through which we must travel if we are to drink from the clear springs of the author’s mind. In this view, prejudices are like so many mirages dotting the arid landscape; we must see them for the illusions that they are and not let them deter us from our goal.

But for Gadamer, those prejudices are the very things that the interpreters of texts and human actions cannot do without as they begin the work of interpretation. “Long before we comprehend ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live,” he argues. “*That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.*”¹¹³ Developing a line of thought first artic-

112. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 270. Joel Weinsheimer writes of prejudice: “We already know. We are always already prejudiced by tradition, which asserts its validity prior to consciousness. The fact that we never completely rid ourselves of prejudice certainly marks the finitude of historical being — but some prejudices are true. The fact that the knower’s own being comes into play in his knowledge certainly betrays the limitation of objectivity and method, but it does not prevent truth.” *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of “Truth and Method”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 258-59.

113. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 276-77.

ulated in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Gadamer stresses the manner in which all reading and human understanding begin with the interpreter already interested in, and prejudiced about, that which he or she is trying to interpret. For Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur explains, "hermeneutics is not a reflection on the human sciences, but an explication of the ontological ground upon which these sciences can be constructed."¹¹⁴ According to Heidegger, the ground upon which those sciences can be built already has its foundation set. The task of the thinker is not, as Descartes held, to construct the intellectual edifice absolutely from scratch, but rather to build creatively with what is already there. The idea of a completely disinterested and prejudice-free interpretation becomes an impossibility for Heideggerian hermeneutics. "The illusion is not in looking for a point of departure," writes Ricoeur about the problem of human understanding, "but in looking for it without presuppositions. There is no philosophy without presuppositions."¹¹⁵ Nor is there ever any point at which we can "start history over again in . . . [a] moment of self-fathering."

His convictions about the inescapable nature of prejudices and presuppositions led Gadamer to develop the idea of the "fusion of horizons" to describe the interpretive process. The reader sets out by anticipating the discovery of certain things in a text; in the process of reading, he or she finds some assumptions confirmed, some altered, and perhaps still others definitively refuted. The horizons of the text and the reader meet and "fuse," as they both focus upon their object of concern, which is the thing said or pointed to in the text. "The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning."¹¹⁶ To understand another person, or a book, then, one does not put on another's glasses to see the object through entirely different lenses; instead, one looks alongside another upon an object of mutual concern and enters into dialogue in search of understanding.

C. S. Lewis says virtually the same thing as Gadamer in *The Four Loves*. In distinguishing between Friendship and Eros, Lewis offers separate images of the way that partners in these two relationships perceive one another. Under the spell of Eros, lovers stand and gaze into each other's eyes, searching for an ineffable something, while friends stand together

114. Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. and ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 55.

115. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 348.

116. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 292.

and look upon a shared truth or delight. "Hence we picture lovers face to face but Friends side by side; their eyes look ahead."¹¹⁷ According to the hermeneutical theory of Gadamer and Ricoeur, a "friendship" model of this kind is far more appropriate for interpretation than is the intentionalists' romantic image of isolated minds straining to reach each other across the voids of time and space.¹¹⁸

Although Gadamer's theory of the "fusion of horizons" is often referred to as the "hermeneutical circle," it might more correctly be called the "hermeneutical spiral." The circle imprecisely implies a self-enclosed finality, while the image of the spiral captures more of what Gadamer intends by *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, which his translators render as "the consciousness of being affected by history." What Gadamer means in using this phrase is that there is no such thing as a completely isolated reader who is uninformed by the historical tradition in which he or she is situated. There is no Cartesian moment of "self-fathering" in human understanding, for every reading of a text or human action is grounded in the history of reflection and action that language unfolds. Interpretation begins as a reader anticipates certain things on the basis of his or her tradition and proceeds as text and reader question each other, finding points of fusion in their understanding; it culminates with the production of a revised interpretation that may then shape subsequent preunderstandings of that very text. If the production and interpretation of texts are human actions, then it follows that like all other human actions, these will have both origins in the mysteries of motivation and consequences in the history we inhabit.

While ontological questions about language and tradition dominate Gadamer's phenomenological study of interpretation, the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein concentrates more upon the functions and uses of language in specific contexts of inquiry. In *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, Wittgenstein asks us to "think of the tools in a tool-box," of the hammer, pliers, saws, and nails. "The functions of words are as diverse as the func-

117. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1960), 98.

118. The work of the Russian theorist and literary historian Mikhail Bakhtin is also important here. For a succinct discussion of his view of truth as dialogical — a view that overlaps at many points with the insights of Gadamer and Ricoeur — see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 59-62. "Bakhtin's ultimate image of such dialogic faith is, characteristically, a conversation with Christ. 'The word as something personal. Christ as Truth. I put the question to him' [Bakhtin]." *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 62.

tions of these objects," he notes. We use those words in many varied ways in the countless "language games" (*Sprachspiel*) we play in ordinary life. According to Wittgenstein, we gain an understanding of the meaning of a word, phrase, or text by examining its place in the surrounding context of human action. "The *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life," and "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." Even that most disciplined of human actions, the regular obeying of rules, makes sense only when we see it as part of a larger scheme of human action and communal life, for "to obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, interpretations)." ¹¹⁹

Wittgenstein's observations about language raise serious questions about the possibility of discovering an abstract, value-neutral, and prejudice-free foundation for interpretive activity. To understand the words in a text, we must have a related understanding of the human actions involved in the use of those words, "for what makes language teachable is *its connection with observable regularities in human behavior*."¹²⁰ In spite of the grip that the ideal of the unbiased reader has on the contemporary Protestant mind, it is clear, according to Anthony Thiselton, "that concepts like 'being redeemed,' 'being spoken to by God' . . . are made intelligible and 'teachable' *not on the basis of private existential experience but on the basis of a public tradition of certain patterns of behavior*." To understand pain, we must observe and reflect upon "pain-behavior," and in like manner, to know what redemption means, we must study the "observable regularities in redemption-behavior."¹²¹

"Such is the circle," Ricoeur writes in one of his early hermeneutical studies: "hermeneutics proceeds from a prior understanding of the very thing that it tries to understand by interpreting it." This view of hermeneutics is similar to the understanding of interpretation that is implicit in St. Anselm's "*Credo ut intelligam*" ("I believe in order to understand"). Both views are counter to the prevailing Cartesianism of modernity. They assert that before we can understand anything — whether it be the movement of atoms, a collection of poems, a painting in a museum, or a book of the Bible — we must assume things about what we are trying to understand. As Ricoeur puts it, hermeneutics gives us "reason to think that the *Cogito* is

119. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §11, 23, 19.

120. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 81.

121. Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 382.

within being, and not vice versa." If we grant that point, then "the task of the philosopher guided by symbols would be to break out of the enchanted enclosure of consciousness of oneself, to end the prerogative of self-reflection."¹²²

Even if we were to argue that the Cartesian model of self-understanding — as it has been employed so relentlessly in the romantic literary tradition and the modern interpretation of the Bible — is still useful because it yields interesting readings, we still face the question of its validity. Considering the nature of language, is it ever possible for a prejudice-free reading of a text to take place? "We are always already biased in our thinking and knowing by our linguistic interpretation of the world," Gadamer observes. "To grow into this linguistic interpretation means to grow up in the world. To this extent, language is the real mark of our finitude."¹²³ In the larger drama of language, "the consciousness of the individual" plays a very small role.

If Gadamer is correct in his understanding of language, then none of us is ever truly an orphan as an interpreter, just as none of us is ever the sole author of his or her life or the meaning of that life. ("We are never more [and sometimes less] than the co-authors of our own narratives," explains Alasdair MacIntyre. "Only in fantasy do we live what story we please."¹²⁴) When we read, we do so both as individuals with particular needs and expectations and as members of communities whose beliefs inform our understanding. When we read, that is, we do so as people who belong, seek, and act. We belong, to a great extent through language, to the theological, ethnic, and cultural traditions that have molded us as subjects and without whose mediation we could understand nothing; we seek the beauty and truth of the world we inhabit, even as we also seek, through stories and images, to conceive of the world we should like to create and the kinds of persons we should like to become; and we act as readers whose interpretations have both histories and consequences. As it is with the life of the spirit, so it is with reading: there is no finding without seeking. Of course we may discover things that challenge our expectations, but we would discover nothing at all were we not to search.¹²⁵

122. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 352, 356.

123. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 64.

124. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 213.

125. Ricoeur has written extensively on the tension between reading as a rule-governed activity and reading as an active, creative engagement with the fixity of a

This is not to argue for a form of interpretive determinism. We are not fated to discover only what we have anticipated, for any particular act of reading may overturn the assumptions that we brought to the interpretation of the text. But our very possibility of being changed by the texts we read depends upon our being active seekers rather than disinterested recipients. When we read, we are not isolated subjects who either endanger texts or worship them. Instead, we are members of multiple communities whose traditions make possible our very understanding of what we read, even as those traditions open themselves to the risk of being changed by what we discover when we read.

Neither is this to argue that the questions raised by the ideal of objectivity have no place within our theory of reading. If we dispense with notions of falsification and verification, we are left in the seductively lonely worlds of Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities," in which competing traditions arbitrarily constitute the meanings of texts for their private purposes.¹²⁶ We may adjudicate interpretive disputes and test the validity of individual interpretations without having to claim that a single interpretive method exists to resolve all disputes. To interpret with confidence in our ability to acquire an adequate understanding of meaning, as well as an adequate grasp of the truth, we do not need to fall prey either to the impossible drive for certainty undertaken by the intentionalists or to the beguiling liberty promised by the allegorists. If a "text had but one right interpretation and many wrong ones, or many right interpretations and no wrong one, there would not be a problem," explains Joel Weinsheimer.¹²⁷ As he points out, in interpreting, we always live with the tension of correctness and creativity.

Martin Luther understood this tension well. In a study of Luther's theology, Paul Althaus notes that Luther was not preoccupied with the

text. In "The Bible and the Imagination," he writes, "I would like to consider the act of reading as a dynamic activity that is not confined to repeating significations fixed forever, but which takes place as a prolonging of the itineraries of meaning opened up by the work of interpretation. Through this first trait, the act of reading accords with the idea of a norm-governed productivity to the extent that it may be said to be guided by a productive imagination at work in the text itself." *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 145.

126. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

127. Weinsheimer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, 87.

pursuit of certainty, a pursuit that overtook the European mind less than a century after his death. Scripture was not for Luther the pure and sole foundation for the Christian life, but it served instead as the "standard of what can and cannot claim to be good tradition of the church." The Bible set the standard by which the traditions of the church were to be judged, according to Luther. Yet the "'no' to tradition is not a basic and universal 'no,' but is always spoken in a specific situation and based on Scripture."¹²⁸

In hermeneutical terms, this would mean that tradition grounds our reading of texts and opens up the very possibility of understanding them; the principle or standard of criticism — in Luther's case, the scriptures — provides a check upon that tradition. That means that our distancing from tradition is subsequent to our belonging to it. It is in that process of distancing ourselves from our assumptions that our prejudices are tried and modified. A great deal of this inevitable process of testing and confirmation takes place in the silent transaction between reader and text; it also occurs in our dialogue with others, from the past and the present, who have interpreted this same text. "The text presents a limited field of possible constructions," Ricoeur explains. "The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism," between the poles of correctness and creativity, and between the methodical rigidity of the intentionalists and the formless fluidity of the allegorists. In Ricoeur's words, "It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach."¹²⁹

That is one truth that all who seek to understand hermeneutics would do well to realize. Perfect agreement may be beyond our immediate reach, but that is not cause for despair. Like texts themselves and those who seek to understand them, interpretations are a part of our history. As such, they have pasts that have shaped them and futures that open before them and beckon them. And as one form of human action, interpretation requires of us the same diligence, trust, and perseverance that all our responsible actions do.

128. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 335.

129. Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 79.

Confessing Our Part

I wish to conclude this section with an edifying note. But first a question: To what degree might the condition of the orphan explored by the writers treated in this essay be the product of what one might call complex cultural decisions made in the Western world over the past several hundred years? Is the orphan's experience bound to be the experience of present and future generations? Are Nietzsche's questions perhaps *the* questions for our age?: "Who will wipe the blood off us? . . . Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?"

The answer of the Christian faith to Nietzsche's question is Yes, this deed is too great a burden for humanity to bear. But, that faith asserts, that burden has already been borne for us. The "greatness of this deed" may be too much for us to bear through heroic self-striving, but it is not too great a burden for confession to carry.

As the Benetton ad for hiking boots so tellingly illustrates, however, we postmoderns have become positively casual about claiming solidarity with Christ's sufferings. Long before those ads appeared, W. H. Auden provided a sharp critique of our glib attempts at identifying with Christ. He did so in a long poem, *Horae Canonicae*, that sets the activities of a typical day within the structure of the canonical hours of worship in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. That typical modern day, in turn, is related anachronistically throughout the poem to the events of Good Friday. Nones, for example, is traditionally observed at three o'clock in the afternoon. And on this day, something tragic has happened suddenly at midday. As the narrator of "Nones" remarks, "We are surprised / At the ease and speed of our deed . . . / It is barely three, Mid-afternoon, yet the blood / Of our sacrifice is already / Dry on the grass."

In a later poem in the cycle, the speaker describes the moment of dropping off to sleep, that "instant of recollection / When the whole thing makes sense." But, he admits, instead of sense,

All
I recall are doors banging,
Two housewives scolding, an old man gobbling,
A child's wild look of envy,
Actions, words, that could fit any tale,
And I fail to see either plot
Or meaning; I cannot remember
A thing between noon and three.

As the speaker gropes for the meaning of this single day, of his own life, and of the whole of the history into which he has been thrust, he finds at first that

Nothing is with me now but a sound,
A heart's rhythm, a sense of stars
Leisurely walking around, and both
Talk a language of motion
I can measure but not read: maybe
My heart is confessing her part
In what happened to us from noon till three . . .

Here, in the mystery of the cross, Auden argues that we cannot know the satisfactions of allegorical coherence without the discipline of confession. The story of the death of Christ, and all the stories of human suffering that flow into and out of that death, will not make sense and will not correspond to our realities until "my heart" confesses "her part / In what happened to us from noon till three."¹³⁰

In *Horae Canonicae* Auden is effectively asserting that if we have been orphaned and abandoned, then, as Paul says in his letter to the Romans, it is to our own desires that God has abandoned us, even if those desires involve killing God himself: "They boast of their wisdom, but they have made fools of themselves. . . . For this reason God has given them up to their own vile desires." In a work written two decades ago, the Nobel prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz writes of the modern age, "I did not expect to live in such an unusual moment. / When the God of thunders . . . / would humble people to the quick, / allowing them to act whatever way they wished." Given over to their own desires, Milosz writes,

People, afflicted with an incomprehensible distress,
were throwing off their clothes on the piazzas so that nakedness
might call for judgment.
But in vain they were longing after horror, pity, and anger.¹³¹

As a word of judgment, the Christian faith claims first that the distortions of the human will drove Christ to the cross. If God has been killed

130. Auden, *Horae Canonicae*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), 484-85.

131. Milosz, "Oeconomia Divina," in *The Collected Poems, 1931-1987* (New York: Ecco, 1988), 235-36.

and humanity abandoned, then it is we who have wielded the weapon. As Anthony Thiselton writes at the close of this book, the law is meant to expose human responsibility for the "failure, evil, suffering, and fallenness" of the world. Confession is a part of Christian hermeneutical endeavor, because our self-understanding and interpretive skills share in the brokenness of our condition. As readers, we need to be redeemed.

Yet as Thiselton goes on to point out, the gospel of the Christian faith is the news of our liberation from bondage to sin and the law. "The covenant of *promise* is a dispensation of *grace: of change by divine agency, giving and given*," Thiselton explains. As a word of promise, Christian faith affirms that God is not trapped in his tomb and sealed off from his world. The good news is that when the heart confesses "her part in what happened to us from noon till three," we, the orphans of our age, may begin to learn how to read — both our experiences and our books — as the heirs of eternity.

• II •

Narrative Hermeneutics

CLARENCE WALHOUT

Texts as Objects of Action

Because the writing and reading of texts are actions that occur in the context of social and historical life, texts and the language that composes them are never autonomous and context-free. Thus, a theory of hermeneutics needs to show how language and texts function in relation to human actions. This is the main topic for the second section of our book. In this essay I will be chiefly concerned with written texts and, more specifically, with fictional narratives.

I will also be using Nicholas Wolterstorff's distinction between texts as objects of action and texts as instruments of action.¹ We perform many actions, Wolterstorff notes, with the goal of producing objects, and among these objects are written texts. Since texts are objects produced by actions, we must see them in relation to the actions that produced them. Texts acquire meaning by virtue of their place within complex chains of actions.

But texts can be instruments of action as well as objects of action. By means of texts, authors and readers perform certain additional actions, such as communicating with others, describing nature, expressing emotions and beliefs, and interpreting the implications of a story. Hermeneutics, thus, should not be limited to viewing texts simply as objects that have

1. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), x, 15-16; and *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 14.

The Promise of Hermeneutics

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