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Perhaps here we find the fundamental difference between descriptive and interpretive methods. When one analogizes differences, a reader is often left with the problem of interpreting the analogy. When differences are described, assuming sufficient clarity, the distinctions among them should stand out to be grasped as such.


*Review by: Martin Packer, Duquesne University*

Probably the first introduction to hermeneutics for the English reader was Richard Palmer’s *Hermeneutics* (1969). When Maurizio Ferraris’ *History of Hermeneutics* was first published in Italian in 1988 there was no other comprehensive historical treatment of hermeneutics, except that in Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960/1986). By the time the translation was published in 1996, two other histories had been published but are not yet translated (Gusdorf, 1988, and Grondin, 1993). But even if there were other treatments of the topic, Ferraris’ book would deserve careful attention. This is a very interesting book.

Ferraris notes, in an “Afterword” written especially for this translation, that the history of hermeneutics is customarily told as a progression from technique to philosophy, an evolution from particular to universal. But this is unsatisfactory: the regional always has canonical relevance; technique is never as empty in spirit, in philosophy, as such historical narratives would assert. And philosophy would be impossible without traces, residues, of technique; philosophy is not without technique. Wouldn’t a more adequate history of hermeneutics begin with a recognition of the relation of technique and spirit; a recognition that everything is the result of mediation; that idealization, the ideal, is the primary resource of technique?

Ferraris argues that hermeneutics had its motivation not in the study of texts per se, but in an awareness of distance and a desire to explore and rediscover traces of past experience. The protohistory of hermeneutics involved regional developments in three areas: literary texts, religious exegesis, and the rhetorics of juridical hermeneutics.
Hermeneutics only became philosophical as the claims that philosophers felt entitled to make about certainty and truth diminished and declined, and the truth claims of interpretation came to seem less paltry in comparison. The history of hermeneutics is the story of this transformation, and of the shifting relationship between interpretation and explanation, hermeneutics and epistemology.

Ferraris shows how hermeneutics began not as contemplation of essentials, not even as a methodology of interpretation, but as the practical matter of transmitting messages. Hermes was a practitioner; he delivered warnings and prophecies. For Plato (who accordingly belittled it) hermeneutics was the bearing of messages and tidings, the practice of transmission and mediation. The interpreter carries messages she may not understand, merely repeating what the oracle says. Much of what we now consider part of hermeneutics was in antiquity attributed to another *technē*, that of rhetoric, and the universality of ancient rhetoric was the first sign that the hermeneutic problem has repeatedly been universalized, albeit on different levels.

Medieval exegesis Scripture came to seek literal, allegorical, anagogic, and moral meanings, and hermeneutics became linked to ontology, “defining the modes of being and the substance of reality” (p. 13), the physical, spiritual, mystical, and psychical modes. With Augustine (A.D. 354–430) hermeneutics entwined with semiotics, not for the last time, and with a sense of history not as circular return but as linear development in which the past will fade away.

During medieval Scholasticism, exegetical methods remained largely stable, but self-identification as “modern”—starting in the 15th century—brought with it an increasing awareness of temporal distance from the “ancient” pagan world and its texts. The sense of a breaking of bonds with tradition motivated calls for an effort to preserve the past. Hermeneutics was considered a necessary part of this.

The 17th century saw the first projects for a universal hermeneutics. Classical texts began to lose their unquestioned status as models of reasoning and inquiry. Natural reason was now considered to be separable from tradition, an autonomous realm that could stand outside language. Language was, accordingly, now taken up as an object for empirical investigation, no longer regarded as a transcendental horizon that escaped objectification. And retrieving ancient texts was no longer the primary task of inquiry.

Accordingly, hermeneutics lost prestige in the face of investigation of the natural world, although investigation of the “book of nature” was nonetheless understood in terms very different from those
the positivists would employ in the late 19th and early 20th century: in essentially philological terms. In this respect, the universality of the hermeneutic problem was grasped for the first time, but at the same time that universality was preempted because thought and reason were seen as independent of language, history, and tradition.

The 18th-century secularization of the Bible further set the stage for a universal hermeneutics by dissolving the long-standing division between literary and sacred interpretation. Religious texts could now be grasped through more advanced means of exegesis, but at the same time they were devalued as merely the products of irrational tradition and myth. The sacred was recast as the mythical, and although the mythical began to be seen as the origins of humanity, as fundamental, it was also considered to have been overcome in the progression of human history.

The 19th century brought a growing recognition of the impossibility of presuppositionless knowledge. Hegel’s mockery of Kant set the stage for the Romantic sciences of the spirit: the Geisteswissenschaften. These undertook a kind of speculative physics, approaching nature as spirit, as the manifestation of Geist. The Romantic return to mythology involved an effort to reestablish relations with traditional modes of life, grasped now through and in terms of transcendental categories of spirit and reflection. As a natural creature man is nothing much, but he is distinguished from the animals by a capacity for reflection, and hence for language. Language became again seen as immanent, the study of myth revealing the origins and character of humanity. And any book—every book—can be as revealing as the Bible.

But these efforts became trapped within a positivist horizon. The Geisteswissenschaften sought to insist on their differences from Naturwissenschaften, and in doing so they became ironically dependent on the latter. It was the natural sciences that determined the terms of the debate and the opposition. Dilthey (1838–1911), for example, started with a notion of science that was essentially identical with that of positivism. As Dilthey viewed them, the human sciences have a different object and so different modes of knowledge and methods from those of the natural sciences, but their aims are identical: a knowledge freed from history. Dilthey argued, contra Hegel, that there are no historical institutions that are absolute objectifications of spirit, self-transparent but only historically located expressions; nonetheless Dilthey’s hermeneutics remained oddly antihistorical. The objects of inquiry were recognized to be historical
expressions, but the inquirer, the interpreter, was not herself seen as historically situated. For Dilthey, remaining unwittingly psychologicist, positivistic, and Cartesian, one can somehow translate oneself into a past life, breaking down the temporal distance between it and oneself. In such an account the knowing subject somehow remains outside history, contemplating it from without, free from any of the practical interests that stem from being the member of a culture.

This notion of “transposition” into the past was soundly rejected by Yorck (1835–1897), hence the attention Heidegger paid to him in Being and Time. The hermeneutic role of the subject in knowledge of the “objects” of the Geisteswissenschaften was now grasped. And “schools of suspicion” now arose that considered and examined subjectivity not as simply given but as requiring critique: Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. As critique of ideology, hermeneutics no longer sought simply to overcome temporal distance and connect with the past, nor did it seek a bridge between interpreter and author, and simply strive to overcome misunderstanding. Instead the aim became that of articulating the reasons for misunderstanding: the systematic distortions of meaning.

Such thinkers faced the interpretive relation of humans to our world. This relation was, of course, thematized by Heidegger. Ferraris’ discussion of Heidegger forms the center of his book. His treatment of hermeneutics is chronological for the first half, but then turns to the issue of how to understand the relation of hermeneutics to the social sciences after Heidegger. For Ferraris, Heidegger was neither phenomenologist nor existentialist, at least if by the former one understands the search for a transcendental vantage point, and by the latter an effort at providing or seeking a positive philosophy of existence. Transcendental constitution is, for Heidegger, merely a possibility of human being. All knowledge is based in our involved participation in a world, guided by the assumptions and prejudgments of a practical project. All knowledge is interpretation, but knowledge is derivative upon being. This is a radicalizing of phenomenology and any other transcendental philosophy; more importantly, in Ferraris’ view, it is also a radicalizing of hermeneutics, which is now seen no longer as a technique but as a mode of our being. To be human is to understand and interpret; to human being belongs the possibility of grasping the being of the entities with which we deal, the possibility of openness to a world in which we find, or lose, ourselves. Hermeneutics becomes ontological, and
primary; as such it operates at a level that cuts below and beyond any distinction between the natural and the human sciences. As Kuhn and others have shown, the natural sciences are hermeneutic also.

Ferraris is strongly inspired by Heidegger, by "the Heideggerian heritage," but he sees Heidegger's insight as skewed by an agenda: that of identifying the authentic with the originary. Heidegger fails to see that even my death is constituted; that even "mere presence" can never be just that, is always founded and grounded, prepared for. There's some truth left in the notion of truth as conformity, as correspondence; iterability can never be escaped completely. What is uncovered is something new, but always something old.

The ontological character of hermeneutics renders moot most of the efforts to define the human sciences in opposition to natural science. The distinctions between interpretation and epistemé, hermeneutics and science, verstehen and eklaren, the ideographic and the nomothetic, all dissolve. After Heidegger the relation of understanding to explanation must be rethought. And so it is that Ricoeur, Apel, and Habermas each undertake a hermeneutic rehabilitation of epistemology.

But other, more radical possibilities exist. Following Habermas (1971) and like Caputo (1987), Ferraris sees Gadamer as "urbanizing" Heidegger's hermeneutics and Derrida as "radicalizing" it. Dialogue—"cold hermeneutics"—and deconstruction—"hot hermeneutics"—are two paths that can be taken from Heidegger. For Derrida, the conditions of understanding are provided not by Dasein but by writing. This pathway calls for abandoning all transcendental interrogation and efforts at the reappropriation of tradition (including the residues of metaphysics that Derrida detects in Being and Time) for play and festival. Our relation with the past is one of indecidable precariousness; when we interpret a text we cannot presume a continuity of tradition or commonality with the author. Bridges with the past may all have been burnt. After all, interpretation only becomes possible when it becomes necessary, when rapport is interrupted and misunderstanding occurs.

It is at this point that the book is, to my mind, at its most interesting. Ferraris makes a detour into analytic philosophy; into John Austin's (1975) work on speech acts. Communication seeks not understanding but having an effect, producing an event, giving a performance. Making a difference. Language is first of all a means for producing effects; linguistic marks have impetus, the power to produce and transform a situation. Speech-act theory makes contact here with value is if must real. Does su or can it properly; answer is: he charac claiming t plain how. Then 1 pretation. but it is no and the cri how herme. He deals fi 1979): the have taught even consta ject or state what they do of subjectivi same time F of any tradit ing work by not mutually tion and em capes its au and its origi describing th of the real. emancipative. When hern gests, not sim tions of lang is transforme not cancel th from archeol what we move be deconstr distance artic
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mind, at its most inter- ic philosophy; into John communication seeks not using an event, giving a ge is first of all a means e impetus, the power to act theory makes contact here with Nietzschean energetics, as Derrida has remarked. And truth value is irrelevant to performatives, as Austin noted; epistemology must really play second fiddle.

Does such an energetics of language move beyond hermeneutics, or can it be said rather that it is at the very center of hermeneutics properly practiced? Ferraris raises this important question but his answer is a while coming. On the way he turns first to Rorty, whom he characterizes neatly as rejecting analytical philosophy and de-claiming the end of philosophy without taking the trouble to explain how we must think of history in order to see how this can be so. Then he makes an “excursus” on the issue of validity in inter- pretation. Both these sections are informative and well-constructed, but it is not until the book’s concluding chapter on hermeneutics and the critique of ideology that Ferraris returns to the question of how hermeneutics can deal with the power of language to perform. He deals first with the Gadamer-Habermas debate (cf. Mendelson, 1979): the hermeneutics of suspicion of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche have taught us that knowledge and interest are inevitably linked; even constatives—speech acts that seem simply to describe an object or state of affairs—must be recognized as actively transforming what they describe. Hermeneutics appropriately foregrounds the role of subjectivity and “prejudice” in knowledge and explanation; at the same time Habermas is right to insist on the importance of critique of any tradition and its prejudices. But, as Ferraris shows in reviewing work by Ricoeur and Derrida, interpretation and critique are not mutually exclusive alternatives. A text is both vehicle for tradition and emancipated from it. Open to new readings, any text escapes its author’s intentions, the circumstances of its production, and its original reader. The goal of hermeneutics becomes that of describing the world that a text opens up in front of it, as a critique of the real. We can even mount a hermeneutic metacritique of emancipative knowledge.

When hermeneutics becomes deconstruction it deals, Ferraris sug-gests, not simply in epistemology but in the practical-rhetorical func- tions of language. When reading a text, an interpreter’s subjectivity is transformed. Ferraris seeks to sketch a hermeneutics that “does not cancel the relation of truth and interpretation but transposes it from archeology to teleology.” Truth is not what is returned to, but what we move forward toward, what we create. Truth is what cannot be deconstructed. Hermeneutics is always criticism, radicalization; distance articulates with expectation.
A theory of this action of the text, and of action in general, should make possible the unifying of epistemological explanation and hermeneutic understanding, of tradition and criticism, of language games and the lifeworld. Ferraris returns to Ricoeur’s “Model of the Text” article (first published in 1971). Ricoeur described how action, objectified, is text-like. Understanding occurs when the text-object is appropriated by an interpreter, who is transformed: action is both object and outcome of interpretation.

Is there not here, Ferraris wonders, a lingering Romantic vitalism? Interpretation gives life back to the dead letter of the text. Can we resolve this antithesis of vitalism and scientism? In 1986, Ferraris ended his book with the suggestion that Derrida succeeds in doing just this, finding in texts a significant autonomy.

Now, in the new “Afterword,” Ferraris returns to the question, this time centering his analysis on the experience of the trace, on writing as trace. The birth of hermeneutics can be sought, he suggests, in three necessary but insufficient conditions: “the existence of a written tradition; the valorization of temporal distance; the acknowledgment of the universal value of language.” But in each of these three lies the universal experience of the trace, and it is here that the origin of hermeneutics is to be found. While it is true that “[w]ithout the living assistance of their author, written texts wander through the world like orphans and are neither capable of defending themselves nor of attacking,” this in itself is not the starting point of hermeneutics, nor is a hermeneutics adequate that considers only the historical phenomenon of writing. Speech, and even thought, are impossible without traces, images, and it is here that hermeneutics arises.

Historicity—temporal distance—rests equally upon the logic of the trace: “[W]ithout a history there could be no trace; without a trace there could be no history.” Hermeneutics deals not so much with temporal distance as with distance in general. The contrast between the human and the natural sciences tends to be polemicated between the historical and the spatial, but this too is misleading: being-thrown is always spatial. Temporality is rooted in space, as that stability in relation to which truth can occur. Hermeneutics starts not with temporal distance but with distance per se, even the distance of the soul from itself; hermeneutics deals first of all with existence, with the difference and distance that existence contains.

And the appreciation of language too must be understood as acknowledging the universality of the trace, of repetition, of the im-
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possibility of simple intuition, of experience that is not also, at the same time, "a construction within the framework of an ideality that is itself the elaboration of a previous trace." Both the possibility and the need for interpretation arise when we encounter a text without its author, but the notion of "writing" must be broadened to cover "trace" in general. As Derrida pointed out, there is always a way in which the "author" of any expression is not present at its reception.

And when hermeneutics becomes philosophical (and vice versa) this isn't so much the sign of a growing historical consciousness, but rather of an openness to death, to chance—to the being-thrown character of our existence, just as much spatial—one might add, cultural—as temporal. Hermeneutics "is the act of constitution itself."

There's a creative tension at work in hermeneutics, as in life: an interpretation is grounded on both a trace of the past and an antici-pation of the future. An event is what conforms to idealizations; e.g., repeating and ritual. It is both new and old. So, concludes Ferraris, the universalization of hermeneutics is a response to more than a recognition of the ubiquity of the need to interpret texts and text-analogues; the core of hermeneutics, and the hermeneuti-

problem, is that of the trace as memory, image, ideal—these are the transcendental conditions of experience, but themselves are the embodiments of earlier empirical events. Experience is always structured and organized by the trace of past, earlier experience, lingering as idea, the ideal.

Ferraris is struggling to articulate and develop a view of language, of speech, as ontological: as producing an effect; as constitutive. In my view he is not completely successful. It would seem that a post-Heideggerian hermeneutics would be exactly what's needed to grasp and articulate this ontological work: how our talk and texts construct worlds and transform subjects. It was one of Heidegger's contributions to show that social world and human being are mutually constitutive. Language has effects, and these effects shape the way we experience ourselves and our situations: this is the hermeneutic phenomenon: thrown-projection. But is all we can say to clarify this that speech leaves its mark? True enough, but not enough. How does this connect to the "practical-rhetorical functions" of language and philosophy? It's true that the action of writing makes a mark, leaves its trace, and the mark has a certain autonomy. And the same can be said of speaking; my words have their effect, leave their mark, and their consequences ripple out. But making a mark seems the least ontological effect of what's involved.
Language—speech—constructs, reproduces, and transforms our many social worlds; it moves people, changing their positions, and shapes and transforms their subjectivity and identity; it changes them in their being. Language does ontological work: reality is socially constituted, and language is a crucial medium of this construction. Why then does Ferraris make no reference to any writing on social constructivism? To ethnmethodology, for instance? It is unfortunate that he abandons phenomenology as though it is irrelevant to hermeneutics, for phenomenology can be considered the study of this constitution, rescued from efforts to locate it in an intending, fully present consciousness. And that he fails to mention work like Rosen’s (1987) *Hermeneutics as Politics*.

Perhaps this is an unfair criticism of a history of hermeneutics—that the historian doesn’t follow the traces of his subject into what is, arguably, a distinct area. At the very least, Ferraris has identified the relevance of hermeneutics today, as well as the direction its most important developments must take in the future. This is a book to mull over as well as employ as a work of reference. It is ambitious, both encyclopaedic and thoughtful. Its wide scope means that it is necessarily sketchy at times, but Ferraris pulls disparate material together with ease and expertise.

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