Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern
GERALD L. BRUNS

Before hermeneutics became narrowly identified as a theory of textual or authorial interpretation (and thus falling into a primarily exegetical use), it lived in the common experience of making the past meaningful. Heidegger returned to hermeneutics this sense of lifeworld relevance, of having not merely a philosophical but an existential import. Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern seizes on and advances the existential core of Heidegger's project. Through a series of strikingly original analyses of the struggle for self-understanding, Bruns reclaims the concrete significance of hermeneutics. The philosophical value, however, is not strictly or merely comparative. Bruns attempts much more. Against the forces and institutions that police the free pursuit of meaningful forms of existence, Bruns means to reveal hermeneutics as a perennial mode of living philosophically.

Whether we are dealing with an individual person or a community, the issue facing our self-understanding is identical: to know oneself and the world one lives in (its values and traditions) is to translate that which is prima facie foreign into that which is familiar. In everyday life, the subject does not confront the world in a pseudo-objective fashion, but is a participant in the creation of a meaningful history, whether private or public. The old Socratic 'know thyself' takes on a special significance for Bruns. With its critical questioning of common opinion, practice and tradition, the Socratic figure reflects on the conditions of its own givenness. This way of approaching knowledge and understanding is very much in contrast to the Cartesian foundations of Modernity. For Bruns, Descartes launched a hermeneutical assumption — the disembodied, a-contextual subject, the Cogito — that formalized the horizons of knowledge and emptied them of any self-implication. Heidegger is crucial in this context because he gave back to the subject its historico-ontological depth.

Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern can be neatly divided into four parts: an Introduction, two parts (Ancient and Modern) each consisting of six chapters, and a Conclusion. The six chapters of "Part One: The Ancients" gives the historical origins of Bruns' theory of interpretation as appropriation. Ranging from studies of Socrates and Plato to Thucydides, from the Hebrew
Bible to midrashic interpretation, ending with the Islamic interpretation of the Qur'an by al-Ghazâlî, they present a formidable challenge of scope. It is difficult to bring such disparate figures and traditions as these under a common perspective, even one so inclusive as hermeneutics. Bruns manages this task by framing the discussion in each chapter around the usefully limited opposition of textual and oral traditions. One can see rather clearly the influences of Heidegger and, especially, Derrida in the attention to the forms of language and their representational implications. Also present is the characteristic treatment of the written and spoken word as being in conflict, locked in a struggle that has religious, political, and historical implications. The word in all its varieties becomes a site for self-reflection.

The common focus of "Part One" is the general problem of how to give expression to experience. All understanding proceeds through the communication of meaning, whether in the guise of the Oracle's response to Socrates or in the religious prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures. Certain difficulties arise when the form of this communication is written or oral. Dimensions of experience are not easily translated from one into another. Wittgenstein says they are grammatically different, the Thucydidean speeches raise this issue with respect to historical content (Chapter 2), and the canonizations of the Torah speak of this through issues of religious authority (Chapter 3). In each instance the competing claims of the written and spoken word make the articulation of Truth an event charged with public and private significance.

What we are to understand by the sense of Modernity in "Part Two: The Moderns" should be seen against the intervening period of medieval scholasticism. In scholastic hermeneutics Bruns finds an attempt to control and prohibit allegorical understanding and to limit the very possibility of interpretation itself. Meaning becomes not so much a communal affair but a canonical determination. The 'Modern Age' of hermeneutics began with Luther and his courses on the biblical Psalms at the University of Wittenberg. In Derridean style, Bruns takes note of Luther's use of the margins in the reprint of the biblical text. By requesting that there be wide spaces left for students' comments, Luther broke with the tradition of papal authority on matters of scriptural interpretation. As Bruns remarks,

At all events Luther produced for his students something like a modern, as opposed to medieval, text of the Bible — its modernity consisting precisely in the white space around the text. In a stroke Luther wiped the Sacred Page clean as if to begin the history of interpretation over again, this time to get it right (139-140).
Precisely what Luther ‘got right’ and what Bruns sees as fundamental to modern interpretation, is the turn toward an understanding of hermeneutics as “reflective and historical rather than formal and exegetical” (195). Descartes may have made the unfettered subject the prism of Modernity, but Bruns means to erect alongside it the hermeneutical category of self-implication.

The chapters that follow the pivotal discussion of Luther advance a theory of hermeneutics as openness and otherness. “Wordsworth at the Limits of Romantic Hermeneutics” presents the poetry of Wordsworth and the Romantics as an encounter with the otherness and alienness of another person’s experience. The burning question that engaged them was: what does it mean to annihilate and reincarnate oneself as another with their categories of experience and understanding? For Bruns, Wordsworth composed his poems at the pitch of empathy (a state not entirely safe from the disruption of memory and identity that such a dispossession of the self can have). The dark and profound discovery of Romanticism is that the attempt to understand the other does not always gratifyingly enlarge our sense of what it means to be ‘human’ but, rather, can in fact problematize the very notion itself. In this sense, hermeneutics as openness is deeply concerned with realism but is suspicious of external limits placed on one’s sense of identity.

The next chapter, “On the Tragedy of Hermeneutical Experience,” develops this conception of a hermeneutics of unredeemed otherness, drawing out, through selections from Stanley Cavell and Hans-Georg Gadamer, the affirmative potential of interpretive self-exposure. The analogy between tragedy and hermeneutics is that both leave one in the position of risk. Like the hermeneutical, the tragic experience makes palpably clear that the world of events and actions cannot be appropriated, controlled, or even approached through a settled self-understanding. The singularity of existence requires one to loosen one’s interpretive grip; responsivity not conceptual representation is key to understanding differently and tragically.

In “What is Tradition,” Bruns considers Petrarch’s engagement and encounter with classical traditions and historical figures. Tradition comes to be nothing at all like an inert inheritance of a dead letter. Instead, it represents the possibility of a cultural alternative, where, combined with the use of satire, the present milieu is stripped of its pretension of immanence. On this, Bruns makes the critically cogent remark: “I mean that from a hermeneutical standpoint the encounter with tradition is more likely to resemble satire than allegory, an unmasking of the present rather than translation of the past” (204).

The remainder of the book — “On the Radical Turn in Hermeneutics,” “Against Poetry,” and the “Conclusion” — shifts to the age-old debate between philosophy and poetry. Allegory, with its conceptualizing and appropriative powers, becomes the form of philosophy, while satire, with its
often playful disregard for order and structure and its courting of ambiguity, is transposed into poetry. Bruns succinctly moves through the texts of Heidegger, Derrida, and John Caputo (*Radical Hermeneutics*) to develop some questions about the work of art. Specifically, Bruns wants to know how to interpret the world that art discloses and what principle of rationality is disclosed therein. The radicality of hermeneutics in this regard is its appeal to the being-in-the-world of an event, text, or tradition, and to throw into reflection the forestructures of understanding. What Heidegger, in his theory of the poetic work, Derrida, in his deconstructive readings of philosophic and literary texts, and Caputo, in his immanent working through of the crisis of Enlightenment rationality, all reveal is the sense of hermeneutical excess and loss that plagues the conceptual resources of the Western philosophical project.

Bruns applauds these efforts toward a 'hermeneutics of freedom' (what he calls an 'approach' rather than a 'method' in an effort to avoid committing an overformalization) because they entail the study the modern subject and its self-understanding in both its allegorical and satirical possibilities. The necessity for both modes of understanding comes from Bruns' wish to avoid embracing a theory of rationality whose conceptual scheme is too inflexible or indulgent to profitably address the ethical diversity of modern culture. Since the entire enterprise of *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* is founded on the subtle and empathetic engagement with the being-in-the-world of others, this conclusive move to the rudiments of a social theory, although unexpected, is not entirely unjustified. Luther would not be such a pivotal figure for Bruns if there were no civil dimension to his hermeneutical project.

JONATHAN KIM-REUTER, *New School for Social Research*

**Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition**

KATHY EDEN


*Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition* is a compact but meticulous study of a somewhat neglected subject. In a series of short chapters that might serve better as appetizers than as main courses, Kathy Eden sets the table for an enjoyable sampling of ancient theories of rhetoric. But if the fare is on the light side, there can be no complaint about the presentation. The clarity with which Eden establishes an unbroken line of influence from Republican Rome to Reformation Europe is impressive and flawless. Beginning with Cicero, Quintillian, and Plutarch, Eden moves competently to Basil and Augustine, before linking up with Erasmus, Melanchthon, and Flacius, all the while