

between the scientific critical spirit and the residual will to believe.

2. Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* dissects the Gospel narratives with the tools of modern philosophical investigation and with a pure skepticism.
3. In his quest for the historical Jesus, Renan portrays a Jesus who is a product of the late romantic mind.
4. Wilhelm Dilthey situates hermeneutics within the context of the social sciences. The secularization of hermeneutics is complete.

Activities and Questions

1. Do you think that the radical distinction made by Matthew Arnold between the *literary* (or poetic) and the *scientific* elements in hermeneutics is justified? How would you define these two terms?
2. Compare the hermeneutics of David Friedrich Strauss with those of Thomas Aquinas, and assess, in your own words, the differences between them.
3. Reflect on how far *your* image of the historical Jesus has been formed by the romantic imagination of a writer like Renan and his "followers" in twentieth-century film and literature. (The "Jesus" of Franco Zeffirelli's hugely popular film *Jesus of Nazareth*, for instance, is directly descended from the "pale Galilean" of Renan's *Life of Jesus*.) How, as a reader today, would you set about recovering the "historical Jesus"? Is this even a legitimate quest? What would be your purpose?
4. Wilhelm Dilthey, it has been said, stands between two worlds, the ancient and the modern. Itemize the ways you think that this is true in terms of the hermeneutical task.
5. Do you think that contemporary Christian theology and its hermeneutics have effected the kind of paradigm shifts which have been experienced in science from Newton to Einstein? Is it necessary that they should?

Chapter Six

The Twentieth Century

1 Introduction

With the twentieth century, hermeneutics met the space age and new kinds of fundamentalism beyond the reason of the Enlightenment. It was an age of new mass media, the effect of which on the practice of reading is still hard to assess. It was also a century of unprecedented mass destruction and the fear of nuclear holocaust. Questions were being asked without any means available for providing answers or resolutions. It was an age not of romantic ruins but of jagged, broken fragments and the collapse of dreams, symbolized most poignantly, perhaps, in recent years by the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York—a primitive act effected by the tools of modern science with devastating efficiency.

All this has had its effect on the theory and practice of hermeneutics. Contemplating the work of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whom we shall consider briefly later in this chapter, the critic John Caputo now regards hermeneutics as merely an attempt to stick with the original difficulty and confusion of life without seeking resolution or meaning in the chaos. After the massive and systematic scholarly efforts of the nineteenth century, the new hermeneutics is fundamentally unacademic, representing a new approach to the task of understanding, which prefers to let questions hang in the air and resists all easy

solutions or answers. The age of reason was over, but this did not mean a return to the former glories of hermeneutics of faith of earlier Christian ages.

2 Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976)

But we must begin the twentieth century with two Protestant theologians who in their different ways are clearly within the traditions that we have been largely following so far—Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. These two near contemporaries dominate German-speaking theology and hermeneutics in the first half of the twentieth century. Karl Barth's work and influence on modern thinking, especially through his massive discussion of Christian doctrine in the *Church Dogmatics*, which he began to publish in 1932 and worked on for most of the rest of his life, is so vast in its extent that we can barely scratch the surface of it here. Born in Basel, Barth spent the years of the First World War as a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, having been educated largely in Germany. His reaction to the terrible mass slaughter of the war, and not least the endorsement of the German war effort by his former teachers of theology, led to his first great book, perhaps the most significant for our purposes, his commentary on the Letter to the Romans, the *Römerbrief*. There Barth writes appreciatively but critically of the historical-critical tools of biblical criticism that had been so laboriously developed in the previous century, and finally brushes them aside for a more immediate approach to the Pauline text:

The Historical-critical Method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: It is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification. The doctrine of Inspiration is concerned with the labour of apprehending, without which no technical equipment, how-

ever complete, is of any use whatever. (Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*)

It is easy to see here how Barth is a true son of Martin Luther. He sees the Bible as God's freely given revelation, and our part as readers of the Letter to the Romans is to "listen" to the word of God and to respond to it obediently. Barth, like Luther, was above all a preacher. Hermeneutics is central to his theology, because to read the Bible was to open oneself to God's revelation, and this leads to action—the living of the Christian life. In a sense, as we read the word of Scripture, God thereby reads and interprets us and uses us to do his will.

We have seen a certain clear anti-intellectualism in Barth's hermeneutics. Some contemporary scholars, like the English theologian Graham Ward (in his book *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 1995) and the American scholar Walter Lowe (in his book *Theology and Difference*, 1993), have seen Karl Barth as anticipating elements of a *postmodern* hermeneutics, and there is some truth in this, as we shall see later on, though his frame of mind is anything but postmodern. For in one way, paradoxically, there simply is no hermeneutic in Barth's program, which admits only the "impossible possibility" of faith (reminding us of the man in Mark 9:24 who cried out to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!"). After the elaborate philosophical interpretive programs and scientific definitions of scholars like Schleiermacher and Dilthey, Barth's message is a preacher's cry that radically disturbs all hermeneutics: Listen, against all reason, to the voice of God speaking to us through his Word. He is not all that far from the character in John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* (1952) who insists that the Bible is not there to be understood, but to be read and listened to. Too much struggling to understand can actually prevent us from hearing what God is saying to us through its words as a call to action. What Barth is always emphasizing is the chasm that exists between the Word of God and the word of humankind, and thus he restores to the Bible its ancient authority bestriding all concerns of culture, ancient or modern.

And so, as we turn to the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann, it is not very surprising to find that Bultmann seems to doubt if Barth *has* any hermeneutical program at all. If Barth sees our meeting with God as a meeting with the “wholly other,” beyond all possible human thought or reason, Bultmann insists on exploring this connecting point between the divine and the human as a meeting of God’s self-revelation with our human capacity for understanding.

Thus, in a late essay of 1950 entitled “The Problem of Hermeneutics” (see Klemm, vol. 1), Bultmann situates himself firmly in the intellectual and hermeneutical tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, though with one major difference. Bultmann was deeply influenced also by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose work we will consider briefly in a moment, and by the mode of philosophical thought known as *existentialist*. As a result, his hermeneutics is not so much a program of reconstructing the origins of the text (recall how Schleiermacher requires the reader to “enter into the mind of the author”) as it is a delving into the subject matter of the text as it relates to our lives here and now. Bultmann is not really interested in the mind of the apostle Paul! We can put this in another way: for Bultmann the focus of reading is not a reconstructed moment at the very first instant of the text’s life (to understand the text is to try and understand what was going on in the mind of Paul or Shakespeare), but rather the present moment of encounter between the text and the reader. The question is, what does the text mean *now* as I read?

There are two important things to be said about this.

1. The process of *demythologizing*. We have already encountered this term in our survey of David Friedrich Strauss (chapter 5). Bultmann does not underestimate the power of myth—indeed, quite the contrary. For him, myths are anything but old legends or mere stories and fables. Myths, rather, are expressions of human “being” in the world. We all live within their terms, and they are changing all the time as culture and society changes. But the ancient mythical world of the New Testament needs to be translated for our time, in a word, demythologized,

so that its nonmythological intention becomes apparent for *us*, “existentially.” Bultmann might say that most of us no longer live, for example, in a world in which illness is perceived as demon possession. In order to understand what is actually being said in the healing miracles of the Gospels, therefore, we need to translate them into terms that are more culturally accessible to us. This is not at all, it should be stressed, to dismiss the importance of what is being said about Jesus in these narratives. It is a process not actually that different from that of Strauss in *Das Leben Jesu*.

2. Through his focus on the subject matter of the text, Bultmann is concerned to unveil what it says to us regarding the manner of our self-understanding. Hermeneutics, in other words, is about discovering who we are and how we understand ourselves—in short, about exploring the meaning of human existence.

It has sometimes been said that Bultmann is ultimately not at all that interested in the biblical text, but only in what it says. His approach is the precise opposite of Barth in this respect. Barth keeps our attention on the text in front of us. Bultmann moves through the text to the subject matter that lies, in a sense, behind it.

Learning from Heidegger, Bultmann defines two modes of human existence, the authentic and the inauthentic. Authentically we *gain* ourselves within our understanding of “being” (*Das Sein*). This is a German term from Heidegger, which we will look at in a moment. Inauthentically, we *lose* ourselves. What has all this got to do with reading the Bible? Bultmann would direct us back immediately to Mark 8:35–36:

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

This is a perfect statement of authentic existence, translated (or demythologized) by Bultmann into the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

3 Martin Heidegger (1889–1976)

Heidegger is one of the most difficult, controversial, and important thinkers of the twentieth century, but a survey of hermeneutics cannot avoid an acknowledgment of his central place in hermeneutical theory and understanding. With him we move on, now, from the world of theologians and biblical critics like Barth and Bultmann into the wider world of philosophical and literary reflection. Heidegger is *difficult*, because his German language is highly idiosyncratic, an instrument used to delve *behind* thinking and concepts of thought into their very origins. He tends to avoid the technical language of philosophy, but uses words in an idiosyncratic way that makes translation extremely difficult. Heidegger is *controversial* because he was, as rector of Freiburg University, a member of the Nazi party, and the debate about this has continued to rage through the years. The point is, how seriously can we take the thought of a man who is ethically so problematic? Yet he is *important*, because no thinker in the West in the twentieth century can finally avoid the implications of what he said and wrote. We have noted how important he was for Rudolf Bultmann. Here I will confine myself to two further points—but don't imagine for one moment that this sums up "Heidegger." That would require at least another book, and Heidegger's philosophy lies far beyond our present scope!

1. So far we have been assuming that the fundamental question in hermeneutics is something like "How do we come to understand texts?" Largely speaking, the varieties of hermeneutics we looked at have all tried to offer some kind of answer to this question. Heidegger goes back one step farther to the question of "being" itself. The crucial word in his early masterwork *Being and Time* (1927) is the German *Dasein*, usually left untranslated because it is, essentially, untranslatable. *Dasein* refers not to my being or any specific "being." *Dasein* is simply "being there" in the universe. It is, indeed, a word on the very edge of linguistic possibility itself. This is Heidegger's intention, since his concern is with "the

ontological foundation of modern hermeneutical theory" (Klemm), that is, its very origins. And so he goes behind the question, to "being" itself. With Heidegger, hermeneutics moves far beyond the business of textual interpretation. It returns in a curious way (another hermeneutic circle?), via philosophy and, by implication, to the most profound questions of theology—hermeneutics and theology are met again. Heidegger, however, would never have described himself as a theologian. As a good hermeneut he was more interested in breaking down the limitations of disciplines, beyond theology or philosophy. Behind him lies another thinker, Edmund Husserl, who sought to free philosophical thinking from all systems and speculations in a return to "things in themselves." The shift is in a sense away from *epistemology* (a term we have encountered frequently since our look at Kant) and toward *ontology*.

2. In his later writings Heidegger adopts a poetic, even mystical, tone. More than in texts he is profoundly interested in *language* itself, so that one commentator, Joseph Kockelmans, has rather cryptically commented that "[l]anguage is no longer just a tool, but it itself speaks" (Kockelmans, *On the Truth of Being*). Heidegger almost seems to suggest that language has a divine rather than a human origin, but he is not here speaking of Scripture. Rather, language expresses "being" itself, far beyond the limits of human intentions, so that hermeneutics or "interpretation is the meditative, even poetic, process of listening and giving voice to the linguistic (and hence finite) appearance of being" (Klemm, *Hermeneutical Inquiry*, vol. 1).

Heidegger is, curiously, at once both very difficult and very simple to understand. With him we find ourselves on the very edge of language and thought—hence his rather mystical tone. He transforms the nature of philosophical inquiry in the twentieth century, but then moves beyond philosophy to an interplay with text (he was a great reader of poetry, especially the German romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin) and language that remains

rooted in history and yet allows "conversations" with matters of infinite concern, with Being itself.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

In a world that is perpetually being threatened with disintegration and fragmentation, one of the obsessions of the modern mind since romanticism has been with wholeness and the recovery of a vision of life that embraces all things, rather as Christianity had done in the Christendom of the Middle Ages. In a way, Heidegger's whole life was devoted to exploring the coherence of "Being" and the connectedness of all things. With Hans-Georg Gadamer we have a hermeneut par excellence, whose long working life (he was still lecturing at one hundred years old!) was devoted to emphasizing the universality of hermeneutics, a theme we have been pursuing since we looked at Schleiermacher's work.

In 1966, Gadamer wrote an essay entitled "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (reprinted in Klemm, vol. 1), but his chief claim to fame rests on his massive book *Wahrheit und Methode* (*Truth and Method*), published in 1960 and deeply influenced by Heidegger. An essentially conservative thinker, Gadamer offers us here perhaps the most systematic survey of hermeneutics in the twentieth century, its title indicating his dialogue between the claims of "truth" on the one hand and the processes of "method" on the other—a return to what should by now be to you a familiar pattern in hermeneutical thinking as it exists between an absolute demand (whether of God or *Dasein*) and the relentless, systematic application of methods and processes. In short, Gadamer returns us to the question of the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion, and he suggests that, ultimately, in our reading we have to decide between one and the other. Indeed, it has often been remarked that his book ought more properly to have been entitled "*Truth 'or' Method*." For him, the final word is always with "truth."

Like Dilthey before him, Gadamer cannot be contained within any one academic discipline. His hermeneutics voyage across the

seas of philosophy, theology, classics, literary criticism, and even legal theory. A student of Heidegger (who supervised his *Habilitationsschrift* on the philosophy of Plato), and influenced also by Bultmann, Gadamer exhibits many of the traits of his teacher. Above all, his suspicion is primarily of the modern age itself, with its division of learning and understanding into separate and often discrete categories or disciplines (we sometimes say, "I am a theologian, not a philosopher," or, "I am a literary critic, not a New Testament critic," for example), at the danger of losing our sense of the whole of life. Gadamer tries to see things from all perspectives. It is a classic hermeneutic move, another "circle," to remind us to see the particular from the perspective of the whole, and to articulate the whole by the careful examination of particulars.

The mythologies of specific disciplines, and we should include biblical criticism among them, become distorted and myopic in their relation to the world unless they are seen within wider, more universal claims. Thus, the true hermeneut is faced with the impossible task of mastering all "disciplines" (and not all of us are blessed with Gadamer's extraordinary, and intellectually productive, longevity!). Yet at the same time Gadamer is no pedant making impossible demands on his students. Early on in *Truth and Method* he introduces the concept of "play" as central to the experience of truth. His discussion is rather complex, but it may be boiled down to three points that can quite easily be understood. (Think of any game you might be involved in, either as a child or as a member of a college team.)

1. The purpose of play is fulfilled only when the player "loses" himself or herself utterly in the game. The game has to become a "world."
2. To be effective, play has to be taken absolutely seriously. We all know what it is like to play a game, whether of football or cards, in which another player does not "play seriously." It takes all the real fun out of it!
3. When we are playing a game properly, and are wholly absorbed in it, it may become a "sphere of disclosure" in

which we realize and learn something new, or see it in a new way. That is why games are so important—and they work only when we play by the rules.

These three points maybe transferred quite easily to the experience of reading a book. When we are reading “seriously” we “lose ourselves” in the book, we take its world absolutely seriously (even though we “know” it is fictitious), and serious disclosures do often take place. This might be true of a novel, or it might be true of the Gospels, which one eminent New Testament scholar has recently described as “true fiction” (Douglas A. Templeton, *The New Testament as True Fiction*, 1999). If one needed further assurance of the seriousness of the business we are engaged in as “play,” we might also recall Hamlet’s strategy to “catch the conscience” of Claudius by means of a play within the play—“The Mouse-trap.”

Finally, Gadamer warns us, when reading hermeneutics like Schleiermacher or Dilthey, of the danger of assuming that we read back “historically” in texts like the Bible from a position of objectivity. That is, we tend to assume that our position is a stable and clear one, and that any instability lies either in the text or in the processes of understanding. But Gadamer reminds us that we ourselves live and read from within the flux of history, and our vantage point of today is no more absolute or objective in its assumptions than any other. We are, in a way, no better (or worse) than earlier readers, and like them we have our strengths and weaknesses, our strong points and our naïvetés. Gadamer, then, is highly suspicious of any claim to know the mind of the author better than the author does himself or herself. What a presumption! Rather, any act of historical understanding is itself historical, and all our interpretations are themselves part of the stream of history itself. We can have no privileged perspectives.

5 Paul Ricoeur (1913–)

The prodigious output of the French philosopher and critic Paul Ricoeur remains still unfinished, as he continues to write and pub-

lish. If Gadamer and Ricoeur are anything to go by, hermeneutics are very good for health and a productive long life! Ricoeur, whose academic career has been split between France and the U.S.A., has described himself as “a philosopher who identifies himself with the so-called hermeneutic school of thought” (LaCocque and Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically*). Self-consciously working in the great tradition of nineteenth-century hermeneutics, Ricoeur, like Gadamer, is a scholar who ranges across many intellectual disciplines in his hermeneutical inquiries.

In an early book entitled *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960), Ricoeur establishes that evil is not directly accessible, but is perceived only in its expressions and their effects. In other words the very notion of “evil” itself requires a process of interpretation, a hermeneutics, for us to identify it. Yet, if Ricoeur is a hermeneut through and through, and interpretation is a universal necessity in the absence of “direct access” to, say, the absolute fact of evil, there is another side to him, which is summed up in a famous sentence that appears toward the end of *The Symbolism of Evil*: “Beyond the desert of criticism we wish to be called again.”

Yet the desert of intellectual travail must be journeyed through and crossed if we are to hear the voice calling us back: again suspicion and faith. Throughout his work Ricoeur respects both the philosophical text, in all its rigor, and the poetic text, with its melody and intuition. They stand apart, and only in their differences do they speak to one another. Having crossed the desert, with the hard labor that that requires, we may expect to enter into what Ricoeur names as a “second naïveté”—a simplicity of understanding born of wisdom and hard work.

Many of Ricoeur’s books deal directly with the business of biblical interpretation, addressing directly such fundamental issues as revelation, authority, and the nature of the “sacred text.” For example, he distinguishes between the Qur’an as the sacred text for Muslims, and the Bible, wherein “it is not the text that is sacred but the one about which is spoken” (*Figuring the Sacred*). Then, after his initial investment in the sacred subject matter of the biblical text, Ricoeur is free to apply rigorous procedures of interpretation in the reading of it. In a sense, he is like the hermeneuts

of old, who began their reading of the Bible with prayer and devotion. He is careful to see its language not as *literal* (which reduces to a single meaning in the manner of science), but rather as *figurative* (which recognizes many voices and levels of meaning working together to create new meanings and insights).

Ricoeur, we see, in a sense stretches back beyond the Reformation, to earlier modes of Christian hermeneutics characteristic of Augustine, the church fathers, and the medieval theologians, who saw many levels of meaning in the biblical texts all working together.

If Heidegger and Gadamer seem to take hermeneutics away from what had always been its primary concern, the interpretation of texts, to questions of philosophy, language, and ontology, Ricoeur returns us directly to the primary issues of textual interpretation. Furthermore, his is at heart a traditional hermeneutics of faith, yet one that is also situated in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment story that we have been following. This balance is most delicately expressed in one of Ricoeur's more difficult but crucially important philosophical texts, *Soi-même comme un autre* (*Oneself as Another*) (1992). The passage requires, and repays, careful reading, so take some time to absorb it:

The ten studies that make up this work assume the bracketing, conscious and resolute, of the convictions that bind me to biblical faith. I do not claim that at the deep level of motivations these convictions remain without any effect on the interest that I take in this or that problem, even in the overall problematic of the self. [This is the subject of *Oneself as Another*.] But I think that I have presented to my readers arguments alone, which do not assume any commitment from the reader to reject, accept, or suspend anything with regard to biblical faith. It will be observed that this asceticism of the argument, which marks, I believe, all my philosophical work, leads to a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, itself remains in a suspicion that could be called agnostic. (Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*)

This is a delicate and nuanced summation of the task of the contemporary Christian hermeneut. Ricoeur admits his "biblical faith" and the rooted convictions that lie at its heart. At the same time, "textual interpretation" demands a rigorous discipline, which involves, as far as possible, the suspension of the prejudices and preconceptions inherent in any uncritical "faith." *Oneself as Another*, as a rigorous investigation into philosophical questions, must "bracket out" the requirements of his convictions about the Bible and indeed his discussion of God, while at the same time these convictions actually lie at the secret heart of his whole endeavor. (Indeed, Ricoeur's argument is rather similar to that of Coleridge in his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, and it may be helpful to go back again and remind ourselves of that work, which we discussed in chapter 4, before going any farther.)

Hermeneutics does not preach; nor do Ricoeur's texts. The reader must be free to make a judgment one way or another. The "asceticism" of his argument lies precisely in *not* allowing religious beliefs to skew the text of the reading. But the unspoken implication of the final sentence must be that God, or indeed the Bible, is never very far away in Ricoeur's work, and proper hermeneutical inquiry will lead us back to the unspoken word that lies at its heart.

6 Toward the Postmodern: Jacques Derrida (1930–)

What follows will be little more than a note or an addendum to this chapter, as it looks forward to the discussion of contemporary hermeneutics in the next chapter. However, the contemporary interpreter needs at least some sense of what the term "postmodern" implies (I will not say "means") and how it affects, or possibly even invalidates, the project of hermeneutics as we have followed it up to the still-on-going work of Paul Ricoeur. At the

Indeed, Ricoeur's argument is rather similar to that of Coleridge in his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, and it may be helpful to go back again and remind ourselves of that work, which we discussed in chapter 4, before going any farther.

same time, the term “postmodern” is itself now becoming rather outdated since its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, and the fear and disapproval that its youthful proponents then instilled in more conservative critics has been replaced by an almost strident seniority that is rather unwilling to admit that it is no longer young, and hermeneutics, as always, has begun to move on in different directions.

Though employed in various, often rather vague, ways and in many fields (it was first used as a term in architecture), the word “postmodern” is basically employed to describe the cultural emergence, or perhaps decline, from the “modern” age of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought. Like hermeneutics itself, it is entirely interdisciplinary, being used in rather different ways in architecture, music, literature, and even theology. It acknowledges the breakdown of *essentialist categories*—that is, that we can ever reach or speak of the essence of anything, whether that is God or merely language itself. Nothing can be spoken of in itself. Postmodernity is characterized by notions of *relativity* and a suspicion of paradox. Jacques Derrida, the French thinker who more than anyone else seems to epitomize the term (it can hardly be described as a movement), delights in coining words that are not real dictionary words but rather exist *between* words, *deconstructing* what we assume to be the structures of language and reference. The best-known example of this is his “word” *différance*, which is not a word you will find in any French dictionary. It is a word suspended between two actual words, to “differ” and to “defer.” All meaning is in difference; all meaning is deferred.

A hugely important figure in the gallery of postmodernism is the rather enigmatic Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). A brief look at his work is important for our work in hermeneutics, as he is perhaps the single most important modern figure in the field of understanding the nature of language and how we use it.

In a course of lectures delivered in 1911, which he himself never published, Saussure revolutionized how we understand the workings of language, and therefore, by extension, how we understand texts. The story has been told often, and I do not intend to repeat

it at length here. (You might follow it up in Jonathan Culler’s excellent brief study simply entitled *Saussure*, 1976.) At its heart is the understanding of language simply as a play of differences. The word “dog” is understood as referring to my furry little friend with four legs only because it is *not* a “cat.” (Remember that in postmodernity there are no essences, and that includes language.) Words do not actually refer to anything except by mutual agreement and because they are different from other words. There is no intrinsic link between the letters and sound “dog” and Rover over there in the garden, and you could just as well say “chien” (if you were French), or whatever you say if you are Chinese or Hungarian. In the end, as long as we understand each other any word will do.

I have labored this point a bit because it is important to appreciate how Saussure’s rather academic researches in linguistics feed into the traumatic events of so-called *deconstruction*, that is, the critical overturning of all the structures and hierarchies on which we have built beliefs and belief systems in culture. The Frankfurt philosopher Jürgen Habermas has expressed it in this way; read the following passage carefully:

The rebellious labour of deconstruction aims indeed at dismantling smuggled-in basic conceptual hierarchies, at overthrowing foundational relationships and conceptual relations of domination, such as those between speech and writing, the intelligible and the sensible, nature and culture, inner and outer, mind and matter, male and female. Logic and rhetoric constitute one of these conceptual pairs. Derrida is particularly interested in standing the primacy of logic over rhetoric, canonized since Aristotle, on its head. (Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*)

Postmodernism, it seems, is the final abandonment of logic and reason and their long reign in the ordered world of hermeneutics. Like Gadamer, Derrida refers to the concept of play, but it is far

Remember that in postmodernity there are no essences, and that includes language.

from the sedate, well-ruled game of Gadamer. Derrida's postmodern play is full of *jouissance*, tricks and blind alleys. Two things need to be borne in mind at this point.

1. If Derrida is more concerned with rhetoric than the demands of logic (and reason), we need to remind ourselves that Plato, for one, deeply distrusted rhetoric and explains why at some length in his dialogue called the *Phaedrus*. For the rhetorician is not ultimately concerned with the truth of anything, but only with persuading you that something is true. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. If I can persuade you to believe that the moon is made of cheese, then I am a successful rhetorician, and the actual constitution of the moon is irrelevant! Think for a moment what the prioritizing of rhetoric means for the status of texts and their truth claims. In short, are we just being conned by texts all the time?

2. Deconstruction is not something that you consciously *do*. People sometimes talk about a deconstructive reading of a text (say a Gospel) as an alternative to a historical reading, or a formalist reading. But Derrida's point is that texts themselves are inherently deconstructive of the very meanings that they might seem to promote and embody. Words and texts will play with any meanings that you might seek to impose on them. Deconstruction is the ultimate acknowledgment of the age-old adage that we encountered in chapter 1 in our discussion of Humpty Dumpty. We never quite say what we mean and we never quite mean what we say.

For some people all this means a wonderful new freedom. Powerful texts like the Bible have a history of readings that may be marvelous for some folk, but for others they may have meant repression and subordination. Feminist hermeneutics, for example, flourished in its release from the patriarchal structures—men dominating women—inherent in biblical culture and the long history of male-dominated biblical interpretation. If you think about it, there has not been *one* woman hermeneut mentioned in this book until now. Well, don't blame me personally. It has not been

for the want of looking! There just aren't any, or at least any who have been allowed to be heard through publication or public position, until the postmodern and deconstructive turn began to allow them to speak. The result has been such works as the Dutch critic Mieke Bal's searing rereadings of the book of Judges, which *deconstruct* their narratives of patriarchal male power through a *counterdiscourse* perceived in hitherto neglected female voices in the text.

But for others, postmodernism means just chaos, values lost in a sea of relativities (what would Einstein have thought?), readings in which anything goes, and, above all, confirmation of what the German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed in the nineteenth century as the "death of God" (*The Gay Science*, 1882). If all readings are relative, how are we to prefer one above another, and who now arbitrates between what is right and what is wrong, between good and bad? In a famous essay entitled "Is There a Text in This Class?" (1980) the American critic Stanley Fish addressed the question as to whether in the postmodern sea of indeterminacy we could even speak of actual texts at all anymore, as they were drowned in the endless babble of claims and counterclaims. The question, Fish recounts, was asked by a student of literature, who went on, "I mean, in this class do we believe in poems and things, or is it just us?" His reply was that there certainly are texts, but they exist within interpretive communities, and their "meanings" emerge only within situations and are never absolute. Fish's argument for textual indeterminacy (or we might call it interpretive or hermeneutical freedom)—which is not at all the same as unintelligibility—is made in opposition to the position of a more conservative American hermeneut, E. D. Hirsch Jr., who defines a text in his book *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) as "an entity which always remains the same from one moment to the next." (The irony is, of course, that Fish's essay has remained pretty stable and authoritative in the classrooms of literature departments for over twenty years!)

But Nietzsche was, after all, quite mad, at least at the end of his life. Does this mean, then, that now we are *all* mad, or at least drowning in the bottomless seas of postmodernism? How can we

trust anything anymore—least of all that ancient text of power, the Bible? Derrida puts the matter before us rather ponderously in his early work *Of Grammatology* (1967; transl. into English, 1976):

Language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*)

For “infinite signified” we might here read “God.” In the hermeneutics of postmodernity there is no god to guarantee meaning (or at least no god as understood by the term *theism*), and there is no reason either. There are no essences and nothing essential. There is nothing but instability and play, a playtime without responsibility. There is, it seems, no point of reference *outside* the text by which to interpret it. There is, perhaps, nothing outside the text *at all*. The text is, at best, self-authenticating. Or perhaps language is *menaced in its very life* and seems doomed to implode into meaninglessness.

Postmodernism, it is sometimes said, aspires in an almost mystical way toward a state of pure consciousness, free from physical, linguistic constraints. But we need to be very careful to distinguish a proper or genuine mysticism from the terrifying condition that we seem to welcome on all sides and that we might call the realm of *cyberspace*. For in the cyberspace of “information technology,” a kingdom that is rapidly threatening to overwhelm the world of texts and books, we do not have to be responsible for our bodies, or even for who we are. There is no limit, no fixed identity (as long as you know your password), no god, and the cowboys run riot. No one rules in a game without rules.

But . . . but, even in the world of postmodernity, texts themselves have “bodies” and forms, which make their demands on us. Christianity, which has been our primary concern in this book, is an *incarnational* religion—a body lies at its very heart. And we ourselves do have bodies, and mutual responsibilities thereby. In the

next chapter, then, we will return to the body of the text and the claims it makes on us and we on it.

If postmodernism poses the question to the interpreter of how to legitimate one text in preference to another, then, equally, it poses the problem, how to remain a responsible reader.

Summary

We might summarize the main points of this chapter as follows:

1. Karl Barth cuts through hermeneutical problems with his “dialectical theology” and restores authority to the biblical text.
2. Rudolf Bultmann joins his hermeneutics with an existentialist philosophy, which underlies his program of demythologizing.
3. Martin Heidegger addresses the question of *Dasein*, “being there,” and digs under the hermeneutical questions to the roots beneath, thereby reintroducing theology, as it were, by the back door.
4. The universality of hermeneutics is affirmed by Gadamer in this book *Truth and Method*.
5. Paul Ricoeur’s contemporary hermeneutics return us to some of the basic issues in Christian interpretation of the Bible with which we began.
6. Postmodernity—the end or a new beginning?

Activities and Questions

1. Who is more relevant for us today, Barth or Bultmann?
2. In what sense do you think that Martin Heidegger was moving *back* to an earlier form of hermeneutics that celebrated the Bible as the immediate word of God? In what sense was he radically new?
3. Compare the hermeneutics of Gadamer regarding the reader and history with those of Eichhorn and Semler (chapter 4). Do you think that we now have special privileges as readers

over the more “primitive” peoples of the earlier culture of the eighteenth century? If so, what are they? (The point is, do hermeneutics *develop*, or do they merely *change*?)

4. Do you see “postmodernism,” as we have briefly looked at it in this chapter, as an end or as a new beginning for hermeneutics? How might a “postmodern reader” approach the Bible? (You might find *The Postmodern Bible Reader*, edited by David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and Ronald Schliefer, a very useful guide as you think about this question.)
5. In what ways do you think that computers, the Internet, and information technology are affecting the hermeneutical questions we have been wrestling with in this book? What are the *positive* and the *negative* aspects of this question? You might also consider how our *writing* as well as our *reading* habits have been affected by these technological developments.

Chapter Seven

Varieties of Postmodern Hermeneutics

This final chapter will address a number of hermeneutical issues that face us today. As was suggested in the last chapter, the time has probably now come to recognize that postmodernity itself has already become something of a historical term, and although its long shadow will be with us for some time to come, hermeneutics has already moved on in its restless search. We have seen how at the beginning of the twentieth century Karl Barth could seem to be anticipating certain characteristics of the postmodern, and in some respects this is the case, for both Barth and the postmodern constitute radical turns from the whole Enlightenment movement and a disregard for the elaborate structures and claims of historical criticism. On the other hand, nothing could be farther than Barth from the relativities of postmodern hermeneutics, and their similarities rest in their responding to the social and cultural upheavals of a century that was unprecedented in mechanized violence and bloodshed. As always, hermeneutics is sensitive to all forms of change and technological developments.

This book has been very focused on the interpretation of the Bible, although it has not attempted to offer a history of biblical hermeneutics as such. That can be found elsewhere, in the work of scholars like Robert Grant or Robert Morgan. (Their books are mentioned in the list of Recommended Reading on pp. 4–6). Nor has it offered a history of the development of literary criticism and