

Editors' Introduction

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I know not what to say to it; but experience makes it manifest, that so many interpretations dissipate the truth, and break it . . . Who will not say that glosses augment doubts and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, either human or divine, which the world busies itself about, whereof the difficulties are cleared by interpretation. The hundredth commentator passes it on to the next, still more knotty and perplexed than he found it. When were we ever agreed among ourselves: "this book has enough; there is now no more to be said about it?" . . . do we find any end to the need of interpreting? is there, for all that, any progress or advancement toward peace, or do we stand in need of any fewer advocates and judges? . . . There is more ado to interpret interpretations than to interpret things; and more books upon books than upon any other subject; we do nothing but comment upon one another. Every place swarms with commentaries . . . Is it not the common and final end of all studies? Our opinions are grafted upon one another; the first serves as a stock to the second, the second to the third, and so forth . . .

—Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*¹

The "Experience" of Interpretation: "there are only interpretations . . ."

Montaigne's comments on interpretation, cited here, appear in an essay entitled "Of Experience." In this essay, Montaigne begins with an allusion to Aristotle's famous dictum: "All men by nature desire to know."² Montaigne writes: "There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge. We try all ways that can lead us to it; where reason is wanting, we therein employ experience."³ What follows this paraphrase is a *gloss*; it is an interpretation of the thought that opens Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, introducing the single, very complex theme which, momentarily, orders Montaigne's musings. In short, the gloss "interprets" Aristotle while it simultaneously

“interprets” *itself*, inserting itself into the Aristotelian text and tradition. Beyond offering an exegesis of the thought that organizes Montaigne’s commentary, in a provisional fashion, there is a rewriting, indeed a reformulation, of a thought which eclipses the epistemological and metaphysical tradition that binds Montaigne.

By way of a *commentary* that turns away from itself, toward a different text, *and* that turns in on itself, Montaigne articulates a line of inquiry inextricably inscribed in a certain epistemological and metaphysical tradition of Western thought. Montaigne’s text, then, announces a sentiment that has come to regulate and provide a refuge for a particular current in contemporary philosophical analysis: “there are only interpretations of interpretations.” The name given to this inquiry, and the line(s) of thought it has produced, is “*hermeneutics*.” It is the purpose of the selections collected in this volume, under the title *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, to trace certain *paths* traversed within selected discourse(s) and tradition(s) of hermeneutics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To be sure, like Montaigne’s *Essays*, each of the selections presented in this volume can be seen as an interpretation of interpretations, announcing once again—rethinking and rewriting—hermeneutics and its fundamental motifs.

It must be noted explicitly, then, that the selections included here do not emerge outside the context of the hermeneutic tradition; they are grafted to that tradition; they presuppose that tradition. In fact, the issues and themes presented in this text, and incorporated in *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*,⁴ and the debates and polemics that mark the tradition(s) of hermeneutics account for the production of a very intricate history or series of graftings. To trace the paths traversed and ordered within selected discourses of the hermeneutic tradition is to give an account of the continuities that bind apparently incommensurable interpretations of the hermeneutic tradition itself. Moreover, it is to give an account of the differences generated in any attempt to rupture with that tradition and the simultaneous transformation (dissemination) of the tradition. With both *The Hermeneutic Tradition* and *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context*, then, we hope to present certain thematic linkages between the so-called “tradition” of hermeneutics, as represented in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*, and the alleged nontraditional practices of interpretation reflected in this volume. Toward this end, it seems fitting at this juncture to provide a sketch of *The Hermeneutic Tradition*.

Divided into two parts—“The Hermeneutic Legend” (part I) and “Hermeneutics and Critical Theory: Dialogues on Methodology” (part II)—, *The Hermeneutic Tradition* presents readings representative of what is referred to as “traditional” hermeneutic theory and “post-Heideggerian”

hermeneutics. In effect, the selections from Friedrich Ast, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Martin Heidegger help to identify the tradition of hermeneutics according to certain lines of thought and styles of discourse and, as such, create the "historical" background against which the issues and themes pursued in this text will be configured.

In terms of certain post-Heideggerian lines of debate—the polemics inaugurated in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*—that surround the hermeneutic project, the selections by Gadamer, Emilio Betti, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur address two intertwining points of contention: (1) the "universality" and methodology of the hermeneutic project, as it is stated in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, and the "objective status" of interpretation argued for by Betti, as it pertains to the Diltheyan notion of *Geisteswissenschaften*; and (2) how the hermeneutic claim of "universality" contends with or accommodates the critique of ideology, as articulated by Habermas. With respect to their historical and philosophical import, the debates presented in this context are germinal. They incorporate and cast anew certain fundamental concerns expressed in the writings of Ast, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Heidegger. The textual exchanges between Gadamer and Betti, Gadamer and Habermas, and Ricoeur and Gadamer and Habermas can be cast not only against the historical context of the other selections that appear in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*. These texts demonstrate once more, in a different context, and in their respective ways, the force of Montaigne's remark regarding the experience of interpretation: "[W]e do nothing but comment upon one another." "Our opinions are grafted upon one another; the first serves as a stock to the second, the second to the third, and so forth . . ." Interpretations—interpretations of interpretations—can do no more nor less than "dissipate the truth [the tradition], and break it . . ." ⁵ while at the same time refer to it as a complete, fixed, and organized whole.

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Where reason, in its different forms and capacities, takes into account the resemblance and similitude among ideas and objects, Montaigne claims that the conclusions which can be drawn from these comparisons are always "unsure" and incomplete. "There is no quality so universal in this image of things, as diversity and variety."⁶ Resemblance and similitude simultaneously betray and employ difference(s). As such, dissimilitude, difference, and dissimulation intrude upon all of our works, judgments, and pronouncements. "Resemblance does not so much make one, as difference makes another. Nature has obliged herself to make nothing other, that was not unlike."⁷

What promise does this condition hold for those analyses interested in explicating the "nature" of knowledge? If knowledge claims are "grounded" in the otherness of that point where resemblance and difference converge, the "nature" of knowledge can be neither certain nor uncertain. As a consequence, the authority as well as the legitimacy of epistemological claims, and those metaphysical and ontological claims made regarding the "nature" of understanding, and our understanding of nature, must be suspended. The only recourse we have, the only "law" to which we can turn to adjudicate the differences and legitimate our assertions, is *interpretation*—to comment upon, to analyze the announcements, the discourses, the texts offered in behalf and in support of various theoretical and practical positions.

Resemblance, difference, and similitude converge in acts of interpretation; through individual *acts* of interpreting, our sensibilities are challenged, our expectations are confirmed or subverted. Thus, whatever claims to truth are advanced, even about the concept "truth" itself, the authority and the significance—the "truth"—of these claims is dispersed, placed in circulation through a proliferation of interpretations. "We exchange one word for another, and often for one less understood."⁸ And so, Montaigne asks, is this not our common experience, in the end, in all fields of study?

In the idiom of contemporary, Western philosophical discourse, the exchange of "one word for another" is an analogue for the substitution of one interpretation for another. To invoke two technical terms taken from the grammarology of Jacques Derrida, we might say it is the "supplementation" or "reinscription" of interpretation by interpretation:⁹ that is to say, it is the grafting of one text to others, the "sharing" or "multiplication" of voices in dialogue, as identified by Jean-Luc Nancy.¹⁰ In fact, Montaigne's gloss offers an apt description of the context in which, and the conditions out of which, today, one encounters the question of interpretation in philosophy, literary criticism, film studies, art criticism, the theories of "natural" and "social" science, jurisprudence, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, theology, and other fields. If "there are only interpretations . . . of interpretations," then the systematic pursuit of "truth"—"truth" as the *object* of inquiry—or the search for axiological, epistemological, and metaphysical foundations, will never be brought to completion. Is this not a central consequence of the hermeneutical circle, or, at the very least, of the chain of discourses and interpretations which identify and determine the "hermeneutical circle"?¹¹ The search after truth, as it were, is deferred, diverted, caught in a network of contextually bound and generated commentaries. Here we begin to see how the proposition that "there are only interpretations of interpretations" is intertwined

with and conditioned by certain classical problems. In particular, one may consider the question of reference, especially as it emanates from what Hegel calls "the desire for *absolute knowledge*."

The problem of reference arises in this context for the following reasons. The desire for/of absolute knowledge is the desire to make present the fundamental unity or ground of knowledge and understanding through the unveiling of *self-evident* first principles and truths. But there is a more significant presumption which involves reference and signification. The ideal object of this desire—"truth," metaphysical "first principles" of "self" and "God," the Kantian "thing in-itself," or Husserlian transcendental conditions—is presumed to stand outside or independent of the linguistic framework, the interpretive context in which it is "*re-presented*." Here interpretation—hermeneutics, more appropriately—intervenes; it must come to terms with certain questions regarding the status of its *object*, the representation of that object, and the relation(s) between our commentaries, "interpretations," and the object *itself*.

Does interpretation lead or extend beyond itself? Does it refer to an "external" world, a specific field of objects that stands outside the linkage of interpretations? Is there a necessary connection assumed between interpretation and its object, a "text" or *the* ("intended") meaning of a text? Does interpretation exhaust itself in its attempt to reveal *its* object? Does it exhaust its object in this attempt? In the language of semiology, we might ask, analogously, if there is a necessary connection assumed between signifier and signified.¹² If interpretation *is* connected to the world in varying ways, what conditions make this connection possible? Is language not the medium for making such links and references? If so, is language anything other than a system of signs, coherent and systematic marks for representation and communication? What would allow for any kind of reference outside the system? Or is language to be understood as an open-ended system of signs and traces that refer only to other signs and traces ad infinitum? Does not the determination of referential conditions and possibilities itself introduce the question of interpretation? Is this determination not an interpretive intervention?

As these questions indicate, interpretation, hermeneutics, and the attendant claim that "there are only interpretations . . ." are not merely conditioned by the desire for absolute knowledge and the problem of reference. The act of interpreting—always and already bound to a chain of interpretations, which is not to say a predetermined meaning or set of possible meanings—stands in complicity with the desire for absolute knowledge: interpretation works on behalf of absolute knowledge *and* it struggles to free itself from the all-encompassing framework of the desire for absolute knowledge. Interpretation, or what Montaigne calls "the need to inter-

pret," mediates, and, in effect, is mediated by this desire. As a consequence of this complicity, the act of interpreting, especially if comprehended as an act of *creating connections*, reintroduces the question of unity and harmony, that is to say, *totality*. Creating connections could be understood in accordance to Wilhelm Dilthey's notion of *Zusammenhang*,¹³ as well as Julia Kristeva's reformulation of the (Aristotelian and) Stoic conception of interpretation, where "to interpret" means "to make a connection" (p. 90). It reformulates, it translates, if you will, the question of the unity of knowledge and understanding into questions concerning the unity of sign and signified, of word and object, the harmony of language and reality, of thought and reality, of thought and action. Given this set of conditions, we might answer Montaigne's question "Do we find any end to the need of interpreting?" by asking "How could we find an end to this need when interpretation disguises itself in so many ways, when interpretation masks itself and its desire for absolute knowledge in the drive toward satiety?" How could we find an end to this need to interpret when, apparently, by its very production and introduction, interpretation defers and transforms its object, and the path it follows (or blazes) in its desire to reveal its object? Is this not a condition which perpetuates the need to interpret?

"Like everything metaphysical," writes Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Zettel*, "the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language."¹⁴ Like Montaigne's gloss on the Aristotelian metaphysical text and tradition, Wittgenstein's remark points directly to a general issue emanating from the question of interpretation: the congruence and compatibility of discourse (language, interpretation) and the "meaning" of human-being, thereby raising the question of understanding the discourse of others. If, in general, the condition of discourse is one where we are unable to thwart the need to interpret, then it should come as no surprise that finally, today, "after two thousand years" of submission to the axiom "the Word became flesh" (Kristeva, p. 99), we are coming to recognize the far-reaching implications of having "achieved a discourse on discourse, an interpretation of interpretation" (*ibid.*). And yet, to recognize this achievement is to acknowledge our quandary: the word, propositions, words on words, interpretations mediate and betray our understanding, our acts, the experience of interpretation.¹⁵

With the recognition of this condition, what fascinates the imagination, and what provokes the critical skills and sensibilities of our discourse today, is the *difference* of interpretation, that is to say, the conflict(s) that arise(s) in and through the attempts to offer a commentary on another text, discourse, or analysis. However, one might ask: "What hangs on this difference—the difference of interpretation?" Here the difference, the con-

flict, and the incommensurability of interpretation(s) (or Wittgensteinian "language-games") demonstrates, ironically, how the proposition "there are only interpretations . . ." cannot be granted the status of law, cannot be taken as a first principle nor as the last word. Stated otherwise: interpretation cannot be taken for granted; meaning is not a given with interpretation; its path(s) must be determined.¹⁶ The proposition is, itself, an announcement of the conditions which make interpretation possible as the interpretation of interpretation. It subverts its own claim to "truth." But this is only one concern among many, and the fascination with interpretation theory or hermeneutics does not end here, nor is it to be limited to the issues addressed in this discussion.

Today, one can imagine a contemporary Montaigne asking whether there is a book, any text, that presents *the* word, *another* gospel, a "new" testament regarding a particular subject matter or thematic complex. Is there a text, today, that espouses a certain critical perspective or theory, about which one could say it has offered the last word, about which one could assert that a consensus has been reached? At the very least, can one agree with its proclamation about how to reach consensus in order to resolve certain philosophical and political dilemmas? Is there a philosophical or political position, for example, taken toward specific questions which would bring one to the point of claiming that "there is now no more to be said about it"? By advancing any one of these claims, would we not do so both in opposition to the desire for absolute knowledge *and* in its name, both against the desire of *philo-sophia and* in its name as well?

The themes and questions identified in this all-too-provisional-and-all-too-brief exegesis of Montaigne's text are announced, suspended from a specific historical epoch and cultural and intellectual context. The issues and questions posed in Montaigne's essay, as they relate to the question of interpretation, have been translated into a foreign context and idiom, and displaced and rewritten for a purpose completely different from what may have given rise to their expression in Montaigne's *Essays*. In this regard, the displacement and translation of "Montaigne"—the proper name, the text, the questions, the interpretations, and so forth—illustrate some of the *consequences* engendered by the proposition that "there are only interpretations . . . of interpretations." "We come to what is tangible and conceivably practical," writes Charles Sanders Peirce, as the "ground" for the determination of meaning(s). Is this not what hangs on the difference of interpretation, or the difference of interpretation, to reiterate Derrida's neologism? Groundings? Foundations? Privileged sources? The practice of interpretation, or "active interpretation," is this ground. It provides its *own* condition of possibility, but one which always shifts under one's feet, and

one which is fissured and fails to secure certainty. "[T]here is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice."¹⁷

Like Montaigne's gloss of Aristotle, the reading of Montaigne's text is a reading between the lines, the insertion of disparate, different assumptions and interests between the lines of another text. If "there are only interpretations . . . ," then each gloss, each reading, becomes a textual intervention and provocation. Such a reading withdraws the "unity" of a text—here the totality of Montaigne's "thought"; it is always and already working toward other purposes, already attempting to achieve other ends. Like Montaigne's gloss, the reading of Montaigne's text, as it relates to the conditions surrounding the question of interpretation in a particular tradition of contemporary Western thought, is always selective, fragmentary, and incomplete, while remaining constitutive of its object and itself. As Michel Foucault remarks, an interpretation "always has to interpret itself . . . [it] cannot fail to return to itself" (p. 66). This is the "experience" of interpretation to which Montaigne refers: interpretation finds itself always positioned, as it comments on other "texts," to comment on itself endlessly, "always correcting itself" (*ibid.*). This is the "life of interpretation" (*ibid.*), and this "experience," this practice, this "life," constituting the complex domain of hermeneutics, is the subject for the essays included in this volume.

To advance the proposition that "there are only interpretations of interpretations," or to focus, however provisionally, on the "life of interpretation," then, is to survey one site, among many, in the field of hermeneutics whereby the question of interpretation (both as a problematic and as the subject of an interrogation) can be isolated. It is not an attempt to reduce the question of interpretation or hermeneutics to any one specific theme or set of issues. It is, however, to take account of the heterogeneity of the so-called "hermeneutic tradition."

Moreover, to advance this proposition, to provide this focus, is not an attempt to perpetuate or to give primacy of place to an aloof or disengaged academic debate (though one cannot prohibit this as a possible consequence). At the most rudimentary level of comprehension, interpretation—the exchange of words for words, what others might call "dialogue"—is concerned with the "world," "reality," the historical, cultural, political, economic, technological context or setting into which it is inserted, and against which it is asserted. Interpretation does not release or disengage us from the world. To the contrary, it is through interpretation that we engage the world, our surroundings; through the act of interpretation the world becomes what it *is*, a "text."¹⁸ Interpretation sets the stage for engagement: we draw the world closer to us through words and language. As with any

text, we represent its heterogeneity to ourselves and others; we demonstrate our comprehension of this world through words and language; we articulate our needs and desires, our joys and disappointments, our questions and insights, on the basis of interpretation(s).¹⁹ On the basis of this kind of engagement, these interpretive interventions, we seek and determine, again provisionally, the rules which regulate our actions. But, if our interpretive interventions and provocations lead in these directions, do they not already engage certain assumptions regarding basic categories of thought, and their attendant dichotomies—categories that regulate our efforts to comprehend action and discourse? Is the determination of these presumed categories not itself an *issue* of interpretation?

Furthermore, to advance the proposition that “there are only interpretations . . . ,” to insist upon the “experience” of interpretation as a transitory point of focus, is one way to bring into relief a complex set of issues which traverses the history of hermeneutics. The concern with interpreting the words or speech of an other, for example, in light of the duplicitous character of language, is given one of its earliest treatments by Plato’s Socrates in the *Cratylus*. Hermes, as his *name* indicates (herald and messenger of other gods, the god of science and cunning, the protector of boundaries, or so the story goes), is an interpreter, “or messenger, or thief, or liar, or bargainer; all that sort of thing has a great deal to do with language.” (408a–b).²⁰ Hermes is represented as a “contriver of tales or speeches.” That “speech signifies all things, and is always turning them round and round” (408c), as Socrates announces somewhat ironically, has little to do with Hermes himself. What is important, in this context, is not that Hermes is responsible for the duplicitous character of language and interpretation, except that he “invented language and speech.” It is more to the point to note that if Hermes is responsible, it is because he “invents” through the *use* of language. Throughout the dialogues of Plato, as Jean-Luc Nancy points out through his reading of *Ion* (p. 237), it is “the word” which mediates the experience of “all things.” *Use* creates, ordering the linguistic field which it engages and the interpretive boundaries of that field. Thus, it is the self-production, the self-effacement of language, in this case the dialogue, which twists and turns words through their use, that determines (1) *how* one understands the ideas and objects one encounters, (2) *what* one understands *about* these ideas and objects, and (3) *that* understanding is possible. Linguistic meaning is determined in and through the dialogue, itself the scene or stage on which the experience of interpretation is played out.²¹

The experience of interpretation, as Montaigne’s text insinuates, finds itself on the recognition that language, in a general and systematic fashion, and individual acts of interpretation, in particular, generate the

conditions and limits of and for the possibility of understanding. As already noted, Plato's dialogues—specifically, the *Cratylus* and *Ion*—take into account this feature of interpretation and understanding. In a concomitant fashion, Aristotle's *Peri hermēneias* (*De Interpretatione*, *On Interpretation*), a text which by *name* alone, if not by content, has become the ostensible source for many of the themes and questions addressed in the discourse of hermeneutics, argues for the “linguistic” determination of meaning.²²

On Interpretation is one of six treatises included in Aristotle's *Organon*. The *Organon*, in general, deals with issues of logic: the principles of argumentation and the techniques of proof or demonstration. Within this domain, *On Interpretation* holds an *intermediary* position among the first three of the six treatises; its subject—*hermēneia*, interpretation—mediates the concerns of *Categories*, which precedes it in the *Organon*, and the *Prior Analytics*, which follows it. Where the *Categories* articulates the classical notion of Substance (chapter 5), the differentiation of substance according to the categories of objects of thought (chapter 4), and uncombined simple terms (chapter 2), the subject of *On Interpretation* is the combination of terms in propositions, the relation of terms, and how any understanding of propositions includes the expression of “truth” or “falsity” (4 17a 1–8). The *Prior Analytics*, then, is concerned with the derivation of inference based upon a set or combination of propositions that, in the end, is expressive of the relation between thought and what it predicates (1 24b 15–20).

The subject of *On Interpretation* is decidedly linguistic, even though at the outset its problematic overlaps with that of *De Anima* (*On the Soul*) (1 16a 7–8). But for Aristotle's purposes, *hermēneia* is to be separated from rhetoric and poetry. *On Interpretation* analyzes the character of propositions: a proposition is a sentence that expresses something true or false about the world. According to Aristotle, “propositions correspond with facts” (9 19a 33–34). Other kinds of sentences or statements, such as a prayer (4 17a 4), poetry, and a question and an answer (*Poetics* 19 1456b 8–10), are subsumed by the study of rhetoric or poetics.

All propositions, according to Aristotle, simple or complex, indicate a fact or facts, by way of universal and particular affirmation or negation. Propositions are significant because they are presentations of either “mental experience” or “spoken words,” depending on whether they are expressed as spoken words or written words. “Spoken words are the symbols [representations] of mental experience and written words are the symbols [representations] of spoken words” (*On Interpretation* 1 16a 3–4). Thus, every proposition has meaning because it is the function of the *combination* and *disjunction* of symbols. As Socrates' depiction of Hermes' “invention”

of language points out, meaning is created by use, by "the limitation of convention" (2 16a 19–29). A noun or a name, a sentence or a proposition, has meaning, or is part of meaningful discourse, because it *represents, expresses* something about some-thing. The connections, the relations that exist between the symbol and that which it represents, between spoken words and mental experience, between written words and spoken words, are not natural, but the products of "convention."²³

In the idiom of Montaigne's discourse on interpretation, we can see how Aristotle's concern with understanding propositions, which are themselves "symbols," "representations," "interpretations" of facts, and as such "correspond" with facts, can be comprehended according to another proposition, "there are only interpretations . . ." The proposition makes an announcement; it announces the experience, the life of interpretation, through the interpretation of the other.

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The point here is not to gloss over the differences that distinguish the ancient texts of Plato and Aristotle from each other and the texts of Montaigne, or for that matter any of the texts selected for this volume. Indeed, if there is one moment in the experience or life of interpretation which we would hope to celebrate and to embrace, it is the *difference/différance* of interpretation (reading, writing, understanding) that makes possible the continued reiteration of terms, ideas, and concepts from one philosophical epoch to another. We are situated within certain historically and linguistically different contexts, and the repetition of terms, ideas, and concepts entails the transformation of their force and significance. To reiterate: as the epigraph from Montaigne notes, "Our opinions [interpretations] are grafted upon one another; the first serves as a stock to the second, the second to the third, and so forth." When we reinscribe these hermeneutic motifs, when we trace the paths blazed in their formulation, we interpret, we translate, these motifs according to a different set of desires and interests. And yet, "whatever and however we may try to think, we think within the sphere of tradition."²⁴ This interpretive transformation involves the displacement of old concepts; it involves leaping, as Wittgenstein says, "from one level of thought to another."²⁵ The task, then, is to record the difference(s)/*différance* of interpretation, the experience of interpretation, not by blurring the conflicts and confrontations but by affirming the differences and points of divergence and appropriation as making possible a preliminary articulation of the proposition "there are only interpretations . . . of interpretations."

Interpretation and Transformation of the Hermeneutic Context:
The Postmodernity of Interpretation

The selections and essays comprising this book provide readings which not only reinscribe certain basic hermeneutic themes, but as such effect a dissemination, a scattering, of themes across a field of diverse perspectives and orientations. In spite of the eclectic character of the essays brought together here, in their respective ways, the writers presented in this collection share certain concerns—concerns that traverse the history of hermeneutics—with the writers brought together in *The Hermeneutic Tradition*: questions surrounding the character and goals of interpretation; the effects of interpretative intervention; the representation, multiplication, and articulation of alternate voices in philosophical, political, and poetic exchange; and the desire to expose and, perhaps, to work up against the “limits” of language imposed by traditional conceptions of interpretation and understanding, all the while remaining painfully aware that limits are established through use.

To borrow an image which plays a central role in Jean-Luc Nancy’s “Sharing Voices,” it seems appropriate to say that the “authors” represented here are analogues, though no more nor less so than the “authors” included in *The Hermeneutic Tradition* in this regard, of the Greek rhapsodes described in Plato’s *Ion*. Just as the rhapsode is an interpreter of a poet, who is an interpreter—*creator*, “inventor”—of the myths regarding the gods, the authors represented in this section are interpreters of the words, the declarations, the writings, which constitute the “hermeneutic tradition.” Each provides a theatrical interpretation of some question or theme already articulated or inscribed within the tradition. Each offers an “inspired” performance, an announcement of some theme or question issued by the hermeneutic tradition—if not the “thought” and words of a “poet.” In this regard, these authors—indeed, all of us—are tethered to the tradition, as the iron rings in *Ion* are linked to one another by a magnetic force. The force of magnetism “passes through the rings, which are able to act (*poiein*) in their turn like the magnet, and attract other rings” p. 234). And yet, as Nancy notes, even though this constitutes “‘a very long series of rings suspended from one another’” (*Ion* 533 c), the rings, the voices, the interpretations of interpretation, are not “chained” to one another. They are “suspended from one another.” In this way, they remain “*unchained* (in every manner one can imagine it), and they hold together” (Nancy, p. 234).

The *suspension* of hermeneutic themes, then, is also a fragmentation of the hermeneutic legend. It entails the displacement of those themes, those points of connection, and the transformation of what, in effect, can

be called the "hermeneutic context"—the conditions and settings of and for the life of interpretation. Further, suspension of the hermeneutic question in the writings of Nietzsche, Foucault, Blondel, Kristeva, Derrida, Frank, Hamacher, and Nancy sets the stage for exploring what we call the "postmodernity" of interpretation.

We do not intend for the selections contained in this text to be associated or identified with the contemporary movement known as "postmodernism." Nor do we intend to offer these selections as representative of so-called "postmodern theories of interpretation" and, in doing so, oppose them to the selections constituting *The Hermeneutic Tradition*. There is an overwhelming number of art forms (architecture, film, dance, painting), theories of literary criticism, historiography, and psychoanalysis, as well as of philosophical perspectives, which fall under the rubric of "postmodernism." By drawing attention to the "postmodernity" of interpretation, we wish only to erect markers which indicate what others have called a "condition,"²⁶ an "occasion,"²⁷ an "awareness,"²⁸ or even a "turn" or "sensibility."²⁹ Referring to "postmodernity," we wish to mark out what seems to be the nascent condition of interpretation, whether one is concerned with issues of method, objectivity, ideology-critique, or the dissemination of interpretation through interpretation. To refer to the "postmodernity of interpretation" is to refer to the possibilities of hermeneutics, the possibilities of histories and traditions, the possibilities of interpretation. As such, this possibility, this condition, is "always already there"—that is to say, it is always and already a *current issue*, never limited in its effects to a specific historical moment. Passing from hand to hand, as it were, the word, "interpretation" always circulates—suspending, fragmenting, decentering, but always transforming its object and subject in the experience of interpretation. The postmodernity of interpretation indicates the ever-present possibilities of otherness, the difference(s) of sign and its object, of interpretation and the text that mark(s) the life of interpretation.

With the fragments and essays presented in this context, the themes of (textual) universality and legitimacy are suspended. The universality of the "ontology of prior understanding" and the legitimacy of ideology-critique, for example, assumes particular goals, ends which are informed by privileged categories and rules. The selections contained in this text, in general, emphasize *the act* of interpretation, *the performative* character of interpretation, where the performance is not governed or regulated by a set of preestablished, prosaic principles or categories. Instead, the questions of communication, understanding, interpretation, and representation are used, radicalized in an elliptical fashion, as Hamacher suggests in his reading of Schleiermacher (p. 200), to show how the principles or categories thought to regulate "interpretation" are put forward, sent forth in the act(s) of com-

munication (dialogue), the *event(s)* of interpretation, the production of representation. Unity, universality, and legitimation are fictive consequences of interpretation, set forth in the multiplication of interpretive strategies and devices. In this way, the hermeneutic legend is transfigured, the hermeneutical context transformed. Displacement and fragmentation, rather than the unity and harmony of either a generalized or regionalized "hermeneutics," prefigure the discourse on interpretation.

Under the domains of "traditional" and "post-Heideggerian" hermeneutics, the task is to articulate universal principles and conditions of understanding and, thus, to overcome those obstacles that hinder and prohibit understanding a "text." In short, understanding and meaningful discourse unfold concomitantly. On the one hand, with Ast certain principles are required to achieve an understanding of the "one idea" that guides a text as a whole.³⁰ Schleiermacher's general hermeneutics is designed to uncover the interpretive techniques which function universally within understanding. The task of interpretation, then, according to Schleiermacher, is "to understand the discourse just as well as and even better than its creator."³¹ On the other hand, this theme is expressed, in a similar manner, in *Truth and Method*. According to Gadamer, the "assimilation of what is said" in the tradition, "to the point that it becomes one's own," is the goal of understanding.³² In fact, the appropriation of the foreign, "that something *distant* has to be brought close, a certain strangeness overcome, a bridge built between the once and the now,"³³ is the "hermeneutical problem" broadly construed.

This desire for and of understanding, the need to know which interpretation is supposed to satisfy, is exactly what is suspended in the readings of the hermeneutic tradition presented here. It is with Friedrich Nietzsche that the challenge to the tradition of Ast, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, Betti, Habermas, and Ricoeur receives its initial proclamation. If we apply Nietzsche's comments regarding "*the origin of our concept of knowledge*," found in *The Gay Science*, the "hermeneutical problem" can be understood as the desire to *reduce* the strange to the familiar. But, for Nietzsche's purposes, what is more significant is that the desire to know is easily satisfied once it becomes a *rule*. He writes: "What is familiar means what we are used to so that we no longer marvel at it, our everyday, some *rule* in which we are stuck, anything at all in which we feel at home. Look, isn't our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover under everything strange, unusual, and questionable something that no longer disturbs us?" (p. 48) Beginning with Nietzsche, disquietude, fragmentation, and the heterogeneity of interpretation are embraced and celebrated, not so much as an end which interpretation is

to realize but as a *function* of interpretive intervention, as a predicate of the life of interpretation.

There is one thread which joins Nietzsche with and yet suspends his texts from the tradition of hermeneutics: " 'to understand' means merely: to be able to express something new in the language of something old and familiar" (p. 53). To the extent that the words "understand" and "knowledge" have any meaning, according to the rule of common usage, "the world" is comprehensible, "knowable" (*ibid.*). But, Nietzsche continues, "it is *interpretable* otherwise, it has no meanings behind it, but countless meanings.—'Perspectivism'" (*ibid.*). According to Nietzsche, we cannot extricate ourselves from the play of perspectives and interpretations. The classical notions of "a timeless knowing subject," "pure reason," "absolute spirituality," and "knowledge in itself" are pure fictions on which rests the security of understanding. There is "*only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'" (p. 47), but if the "world" can be interpreted in other ways, if it has "become 'infinite' for us all over again," then "we cannot reject the possibility that *it may include infinite interpretations*" (p. 49).

Furthermore, if there are no limits "to the ways in which the world can be interpreted," as Nietzsche asserts in the fragments of *The Will to Power* (section 600, p. 56 below), and if there are only interpretations produced from definite perspectives, the world ("being" or "life," as Blondel argues for Nietzsche) is always and only an "apparent" world, "not a fact but a fable and approximation" based on "a meager sum of observations" (p. 57). The "truth" of the world, then, is in a constant "state of becoming, as a falsehood changing but never getting near the: truth for—there is no 'truth'" (*ibid.*). The "truth" of the world, of life of being, the truth of our knowledge *about* the world, the truth of our understanding *of* the world, is cast as a fiction, but one which has been interpreted as something else. "Truths are illusions," writes Nietzsche in an often cited early essay, "about which one has forgotten that this is what they are" (p. 43).

For Nietzsche, to embrace the lack of certainty engendered by the possibility of infinite interpretations is not to embrace nihilism. On the contrary, it is only through interpretation that "meaning," in any sense of the word, can be introduced into the world. Meaning or truth are not *already there*; they are produced, interpreted according to a particular scheme which cannot be discarded (p. 54), a scheme which is itself the product of interpretive interventions in the world. Thus, interpretation is, according to Nietzsche, "a *process in infinitum*," an active determination and affirmation of life itself; a *sign* or symptom of "growth or decline" (p. 56).

The relationship between semiology (semeiotic) and the perspectival and interpretive character of life in Nietzsche's writings is another theme to be explored in an attempt to comprehend the life of interpretation. As a sign or symptom of a particular perspective, interpretation always and already signifies other interpretations: interpretations which, as in the case of "truth," have been forgotten, buried in the attempts to overcome other, perhaps narrower, interpretations. It is this connection between semiology and interpretation (or hermeneutics in general) which acts as a point of reference in the selections by Foucault, Blondel, and Kristeva.

In "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx," Michel Foucault addresses what he calls "some themes concerning *the techniques of interpretation.*" Foucault's concern with "techniques of interpretation" is, in effect, an interest in analyzing "two kinds of suspicions" encountered in the discourse on language. Foucault first addresses the suspicion that "language does not say exactly what it means. The meaning that one grasps, and that is immediately manifest, is perhaps in reality only a lesser meaning that shields, restrains, and despite everything transmits another meaning, the meaning 'underneath it'" (p. 59). The use of language engenders a second suspicion in that "in some way [language] overflows its properly verbal form, and there are many other things in the world that speak, and that are not language" (*ibid.*).

The identification of these two suspicions is, ostensibly, the deployment of Foucault's own interpretive technique. By associating the first suspicion with the concepts of '*allegoria*' and '*hyponōia*,' and the second suspicion with the concept of '*semāion*' [*semēion*], Foucault juxtaposes the fundamental concepts that found "anew the possibility of a hermeneutic" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and then, again, in the nineteenth century with Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. But these founding concepts and suspicions provide more than a way to comprehend the ground on which a hermeneutic is possible. They identify two contrasting tendencies in interpretive techniques which can be traced in texts like the first book of *Capital*, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Interpretation of Dreams*. According to Foucault, these texts, and the interpretive techniques used in them, are significant because "we interpret ourselves according to these techniques" and today we read Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx in accordance with them. The consequence is that we are always thrown into and return in "a perpetual play of mirrors," that is to say, interpretive representations in which we see ourselves according to an assemblage of classical conceptions of *resemblance* (p. 60).

Tracing the differences and resemblances of two specific themes in the texts of Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, that is, the transformation of the "space in which signs can be signs" and, in particular, the "incomplete-

ness of interpretation," Foucault identifies what he calls the "postulates of modern hermeneutics": "If interpretation can never be brought to an end, it is simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, because at bottom everything is already interpretation. Each sign is in itself not the thing that presents itself to interpretation, but the interpretation of other signs" (p. 64). Interpretation can only seize another interpretation which is buried within the system of discourse.

In this regard, Marx does not interpret history as such, or the "history of relations of production." Instead Marx interprets a "relation that . . . is already giving itself as an interpretation." It is an interpretation of relations which represents the material conditions of production as "nature." Freud does not interpret signs or symptoms of diseases; he does not discover any *thing*—"traumatism"—beneath these symptoms. Rather, he interprets interpretations; each sign, each symptom, refers to a fantasy—*itself* an interpretation—to be interpreted. And, finally, in Nietzsche's texts, interpretations are already interpretations "which have already seized one another." As already indicated in the discussion of Nietzsche, there is no "truth," there is no "transcendental signified," in Nietzsche's eyes. "Words themselves are nothing other than interpretations; throughout their history, they interpret before being signs, and in the long run they signify only because they are only essential interpretations" (p. 65): that is to say, as Nietzsche notes in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, words impose interpretations on the world.

Foucault's concern with "techniques of interpretation," then, pertains not only to how the relationship between semiology and hermeneutics is conceived; it pertains, as well, to the question of how this relationship is put into practice. On the one hand, if one believes that "there are signs, signs that exist primarily, originally, actually, like coherent, pertinent, and systematic marks," in other words, signs which refer to an arcane object, a *signified*, then one practices a hermeneutic that marks the "death of interpretation." It would be a hermeneutic that "gives up the violence, the incompleteness, the infinity of interpretations, so as to create a reign of terror where the mark rules" (p. 67). On the other hand, a hermeneutic that affirms the "life of interpretation," that is the belief that "there is nothing but interpretations," affirms the violence of life, as Nietzsche would say, the incompleteness and fragmentation of interpretation. This would be a hermeneutic that "envelopes around itself the intermediate region of madness and pure language," where interpretation never stops implicating itself.

The difference between the two suspicions is a difference discerned only in practice, a difference in technique. But this difference presupposes another difference, another interpretation: it is a question of whether signs

designate *objects* which stand outside the system of signs, or whether signs designate as their objects other interpretations, suspended within a chain of interpretations. It is this difference which leads Foucault to claim that "*hermeneutics and semiology are two ferocious enemies.*"

For Eric Blondel, in "Interpreting Texts With and Without Nietzsche," and Julia Kristeva, in "Psychoanalysis and the Polis," interpretation (the possibility of hermeneutics) and semiology are decidedly interrelated. The contentious quality of their intersection, found in Foucault's discussion, is missing in the texts of Blondel and Kristeva. Interpretation and signs are never placed in isolation from one another; the possibility of the one always carries with it the possibility of the *other*.

"Interpreting Texts With and Without Nietzsche" presents an account of the relation between interpretation and sign that demands interpretation on the basis of the very ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty, and multiplicity of the subject which it addresses—interpretation. In order to articulate the ambiguity and multiplicity of perspectives announced at the outset, Blondel presents three "portraits," three texts, three parables, which introduce the "theoretical problem of interpretation" but which also, in the end, evoke Nietzsche's conception of interpretation. Blondel claims that he will focus on two portraits, one presented in a text of Balzac's and one from a text of Proust's. But, as one will see, Blondel presents a portrait of Nietzsche, as well, in his analysis of Nietzsche's conception of interpretation.

The three portraits depict how the texts of Balzac, Proust, and Nietzsche present themselves as "interpreting texts." Here "interpreting texts" signifies both "the interpretation of texts," that is to say, a commentary on a text, and "texts which interpret," that is, a text that practices interpretation by assuming its own object to be interpretive. Blondel uses Balzac as a parable of "interpretation *on*" a text, and he uses Proust as a parable of "interpretation *in*" a text (p. 69). Nietzsche is placed in reserve, suspended for the moment as the frame through which the texts and Balzac and Proust can be read. And yet, Nietzsche is inserted always into the readings of Balzac and Proust. According to Blondel's portrait, Nietzsche's texts practice and maintain the play of both styles of interpretation.

All three portraits are "strictly *interpretive*" enterprises, simultaneously descriptive and intuitive. First Blondel focuses on an excerpt from Balzac's *Father Goriot* in which the character Vautrin is introduced. According to Blondel, Balzac attempts to provide a portrait which describes Vautrin's character, nature, and personality. It is a portrait that "wishes to reach the truth," desires to reveal the truth of (a) being by outlining "the concept of human being." In order to achieve this end, Balzac's attempt can only proceed on the basis of signs. The truth of Vautrin's character, his

being, is revealed in the interpretation of signs. As such, the portrait is forever incomplete and wanting, always ambiguous. As it attempts to decode signs, the portrait "obscurer" its subject or object, all the while appearing to be certain of its task. Blondel claims that Balzac's portrait of Vautrin is "a non-portrait," "an anti-portrait," a "non-descriptive portrait." It is a "mask." Despite what appears to be the well-defined character of Vautrin, the portrait "reveals and insists upon its conjectural and interpretive character." Desiring to present Vautrin, the portrait "dismantles its own interpretive apparatus." We learn from Balzac, according to Blondel, that "we cannot trust any appearances, any signs, in truth not even *this* discourse which wishes to be truthful" (p. 72).

Next, Blondel offers a reading of Proust's description of Madame Swann taken from *Remembrance of Things Past*. Whereas Balzac, according to Blondel, leaves the ambiguity and interpretive character of a portrait to be surmised or understood, though never explicitly stated, Proust thematizes these characteristics. For Proust, the portrait involves both the "practice" of interpretation as well as the "placement in the abyss of this practice." Conscious of itself, "interpretation . . . takes for its object interpreting itself" (*ibid.*). In this portrait of Madame Swann, Proust presents a set of observations which focus upon "(a) simple and brute reality . . . ; (b) the interpretation of exterior signs . . . ; and (c) factual reality. . . ." This account brings to light (1) reality's ambiguity, (2) how interpretation is always precarious, illusory, and subject to error, and (3) how reality must be "committed" to interpretation because of its inherently "enigmatic character" (p. 74). According to Blondel, Proust's text, his portrait of Madame Swann, is a reflection on the concept of the sign. Reality, then, is an "ensemble of signs," and our knowledge of this reality is radically contingent and can only be interpretive knowledge, never explicative or objective knowledge.

In the portraits offered by Balzac and Proust, Blondel emphasizes the ambiguity of signs and the context in which they are inscribed. Both characters are masks of themselves: Vautrin is also known as Jacques Collin, a convict, and Madame Swann is known otherwise, in another set of circumstances that intrude upon her life as Swann's wife, as Odette de Crécy, the prostitute. In Balzac's text, the portrait unravels a riddle created by interpretation, whereas in the Proust text, interpretation is explicitly thematized. In each case, the "object" of the portrait is ambiguous by nature and status. It can only "give/conceal" itself, writes Blondel, and always at the "risk of an interpretation." "The risk of interpretation, then, creates the relations with the riddle, the mystery, soothsaying" (p. 75).

To say that reality, or being, is an "ensemble of signs" and must be interpreted as such is to invoke a fundamental theme in Nietzsche's concep-

tion of interpretation: "interpretation is simultaneously other than and the same as the text." Blondel's portrait of Nietzsche's texts, as texts which comment on *and* interpret in a text, emphasizes this theme. The object of interpretation is being; thus, being *is as* it is interpreted. In the Nietzschean text, according to Blondel, being remains enigmatic and unthinkable, unfathomable, except by the interpretation of signs. In that case, "Being is not; it designates, it signifies" some-*thing* other than what it is (p. 80). Moreover, interpretation must be understood as a philological metaphor of *ontological* significance, according to which "the world is a text" and "being is deciphered." Interpretation, for Nietzsche, is being, and "being is interpretation." In these terms, Blondel notes exactly how interpretation makes "being *be . . .*" through "a movement of metaphoric displacement" in which *it*—interpretation *and* being—is always caught by and slips away from apprehension.

Focusing on the "political" dimension of interpretation, Julia Kristeva maintains that in comparison to "Marxism in the United States" and "post-Heideggerian 'deconstructivism'," it is psychoanalysis, à la Freud, which offers the only "theoretical breakthrough" capable of mobilizing radical thought. The "decentering" of the "speaking-subject" by psychoanalysis leads to "the very foundations of language" (p. 89)—that is to say, it leads directly to the birth of interpretation in the sign-signified relation. How psychoanalysis, or what Kristeva terms "analytic interpretation," moves in this direction is the organizing motif of "Psychoanalysis and the Polis."

Presented initially at a conference on the "Politics of Interpretation," Kristeva's text accepts the premise that "there are political implications inherent in the act of interpretation itself, whatever meaning that interpretation bestows" (p. 90). Like Nietzsche, like Foucault, and like Blondel (among others), Kristeva argues that every act of interpretation introduces, assumes, a certain perspective or position from which meaning is conferred upon an object which is always an enigma. But it is *how* the object is identified, according to which specific conception of interpretation the object is determined, that interests Kristeva.

Every act of interpretation arises out of the "desire to give meaning" to the world. According to Kristeva, the *desire* to give meaning—always an indication of a lack—receives its most acute expression with the interpretive act which desires to give "political meaning" to something. According to Kristeva, the desire to give meaning is not an innocent desire or attitude. It is given through the need of the speaking-subject "to reassure himself of his image and his identity faced with an object," to position him- or herself in relation to the *other*. Without this confrontation between "subject" and "object," the speaking-subject lacks identity and placement in the world.