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Humanism with an Apology

The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes

by G.B. Madison

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To write that postmodernism is a fiction may be an exaggeration; certainly, it has become the mythology of our distressed present. At a time when the traditional problems of knowledge, meaning and history are looked upon with that peculiar disavowal any monumental danger deserves, the inherited tradition is usually discarded or becomes vulnerable, if only as a desire.

Writing with urgency, perhaps with some apprehension if not anxiety, Madison attempts to redeem modernity from the relentless critique it has endured in recent years. Sensing the danger of a "revolutionary" movement which has the tendency to neglect tradition, Madison questions the assumptions and, ultimately, the aims of postmodernity by reminding the reader that the problems of truth, meaning and reality cannot be discarded. Postmodernity is yet another "movement," or simply an "attitude" which raises important questions and is rigorously sceptical if, at times, a little "wild." Postmodernity is, no doubt, a child of its times, reenacting, once again, the repetition of the Oedipal drama; this, after all, is the stuff of history. As such, it is hardly surprising that postmodernity would contest the authority of tradition and perhaps reveal, during its most hysterical episodes, what Nietzsche called *ressentiment*, the resentment of the past and the "it was." Unwilling to dispense with tradition, Madison undertakes to evaluate the recent history of hermeneutics, providing an assessment of the theory of interpretation in terms of the "condition" of postmodernity.

Madison's critique of Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*, certainly a text which most hermeneutists now consider extravagant in its demands, and perhaps, even irrelevant, involves a comparison with Popper's positivism; the pretensions of "establishing the bases of a science of interpretation" seem antiquated, slightly delusional. Hirsch's

methodology of interpretation requires an objective status, the age-old dream of objectivity which, strangely enough, is found, no less, in that peculiar reliance on authorial intention, as if reading, access to language, and the interpretive practices of the reader, had to be submitted to the "sovereign" intention of the author. The objective status of a text demands a universal meaning which progresses through time and may be reconstituted by a reader in the present, as if it were really there, waiting to be understood. It is not difficult to recognize a Greek problem here, a present-day Plato who is attempting to move beyond all appearances and determine the universal idea originating in the author's



intention. However, Hirsch seems either confused or inattentive to his own language, for in defining the "root problem of interpretation," he answers, in a startling manner: "to guess what the author meant." The meaning to be found in any reading is a riddle. Hirsch is anxious, no doubt, about the uncontrollable, potentially chaotic, always elusive possibility of meaning. Madison writes that "the main value of Hirsch's book lies in its deficiencies" (always generous to find a positive evaluation in intellectual blunders) and in its "misguided" attempt to ensure objectivity.

For anyone to be discouraged from pursuing the "objective" pretensions of a scientific method, as if science could become an insurance against doubt and scepticism, it is relevant to remember Nietzsche's radical hermeneutic statement: "it is perhaps just dawning on five or six minds that physics, too, is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us, if I may say so!) and not a world-explanation." Nietzsche affirms that every world-view, every attempt to define the order of the world, is made possible by limits, exclusions, by an understanding which requires order and forgetting. Freud too advised that the rejection of meaning, the scepticism which refuses truth, is more often than not a danger.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty, near the end of his life, when he had apparently rejected perception and replaced it with *flesh*, desires to go back to the "beginning," to a recommencement which attempts to remember the lost and buried monuments. Hermeneutics, of course, is the philosophy which advises against attempting the impossible: to "recommence everything," as Merleau-Ponty desires, is not another philosophical delusion, for every return is always "destined" from the beginning.

If, according to Merleau-Ponty, "language is a power of error," we may well concede that being as such is always in errancy, a notion certainly not foreign to Heidegger; however, Heidegger does not



withdraw in this error, but returns to *logos*, to the word of the Greeks, in order to discover truth as *aletheia*, as *a* (not) *lethe* (forgetting). Thus, beyond Merleau-Ponty's formulation of a "complete reconstruction" lies Heidegger's attempt to reconstruct not from the beginning, but from the very past, from the very history, which has been forgotten and concealed, including the relation of language and subjectivity which poststructuralist thinkers have never ceased to strenuously emphasize.

Madison, however, compares Merleau-Ponty's "complete reconstruction" with the "complete destruction" of postmodern thinkers, certainly an uneasy relation if one considers that every reconstruction, or, deconstruction, can never be complete but must be, as Derrida suggests, "interminably" undone. To make this comparison is to forget the most fundamental hermeneutical belief: however rigorously the thread of a return is affected, it is always cut from the same cloth. The so-called overcoming of dualism, as the suspicion of order and distinctions, of definitions and hierarchies, nevertheless cannot presume to overcome the historicity of a thought which always hands over such a task as the interrogation of modernity as such; the problem of postmodernity's self-understanding, then, is the belief in the exhaustion of modernity and the *cogito* without recognizing that the very articulation of the postmodern is made possible

as the most radical – that is, “rooted” – questions of modernity itself.

Since postmodernity has so rigorously contested the status of the subject (the self), Madison, who admits to having a pragmatic “strain,” is ultimately more than a little uncomfortable with the subject’s “disappearance.” As he firmly believes, the subject of metaphysics is not a totalizing relation; in fact, by relying on the important work of Paul Ricoeur, Madison believes that subjectivity is not necessarily doomed once metaphysics has been “deconstructed.” Ricoeur does not defend a subject who is foundational nor does he presume in the subject’s attainment of absolute self-transparency, the

his own hermeneutic position. It is obvious that Derrida’s deconstruction, as the controversial philosophy which has cost thinkers more than a few nights sleep, not to mention the reviewers of the “literary” sections of our newspapers which in making their banal comments only reveal their cocktail party stupidity, is perceived as a threat, an effrontery to so-called common sense and clarity. Madison is hardly in the company of literary reviewers and encounters the sophistication of deconstruction with integrity and intelligence. Since Madison has “an ontological commitment to meaning” based on the lived experience of the subject, he is reluctant to adopt a philosophical strategy which

Madison’s critique, however, far from being dismissive, turns to texts such as *Spurs* and indicates that Derrida’s critique of hermeneutics is unfaithful to its intent. Madison emphasizes, quite correctly, that one must make the crucial distinction between traditional and critical hermeneutics. On the other hand, Madison is unable, or unwilling, to see in Derrida’s deconstruction more than a “theoretical vandalism” which simply “destroys without providing a project beyond demonstrating the text’s undecidability.” Madison’s final hermeneutic decision is that tradition places itself in a “game” which can be revised rather than played interminably, pessimistically and nihilistically.



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continually threatens the closure of meaning. By relying on Ricoeur’s notion of the *poétique du possible*, Madison argues for the importance of the inventiveness of metaphor and centrality of the

Although Madison is committed to knowledge, meaning and history, for his part Derrida would remain cautious, refusing this still human, all too human metaphysical hope and therefore resist that “overcoming” or revolution which, more often than not, merely reinstates the very confinement and restrictions one attempted to question in the first place.

The courage of Madison’s *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity* is the commitment to preserving that perhaps unfashionable but nonetheless important task of revealing the truth that we are; better still, the truth we have not yet become. At a time when the most dreaded of all words, “humanism,” has become an object of derision, when postmodernity is intent on refusing metanarratives and providing a considerable distance between itself and the past, Madison does not simply reject or overturn in a gesture of disregard, but continues to think with and against tradition if only to take seriously the ontological imperative of understanding and interpretation. ♦

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“transcendental subject immune from history. Since Ricoeur explicitly writes that “there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs,” he cannot, obviously, presuppose a subject independent of the contingent relation to history and culture. His “hermeneutics of suspicion” stresses that the immediacy of consciousness is ultimately deceptive if not a dangerous illusion. Like the three great “masters of suspicion” (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche), Ricoeur problematized the subject and rationality only to further contribute to the “interminable” task of self-understanding despite the threat and vulnerability of neurosis, error and delusion.

Madison’s limits soon appear painfully clear, for in defining Ricoeur’s hermeneutics as deconstructive, he attempts a difficult, if not impossible, mediation. The moment Madison quotes Derrida’s often cited *il n’y a pas de hors texte* he is forced to “take sides” and to more anxiously define

imagination in order to think the situation of being in the world with the renewed hope which marks not only a principle, but also an ethos of being. Instead of placing himself in extremes, either the positivism of Hirsch or the radical deconstruction of Derrida, Madison remains faithful to the hermeneutic project inherited from Heidegger by attempting to introduce the “unthought” into the world.

Madison, not without considerable ambivalence, sympathizes “wholeheartedly” with Derrida’s deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence only to return him, as it were, back into the hermeneutic project. The accusation that Madison makes about Derrida’s deconstruction, which is unfortunate, and perhaps, too conventional to deserve serious thought, is that it leads inevitably to “philosophical nihilism.”