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What is Tradition?

Gerald L. Bruns

It might be as well to ask Gadamer whose and what "tradition" he has in mind. For his theory holds only on the enormous assumption that there is indeed a single "mainstream" tradition; that all "valid" works participate in it; that history forms an unbroken continuum, free of decisive rupture, conflict, and contradiction; and that the prejudices which "we" (who?) have inherited from the "tradition" are to be cherished. It assumes, in other words, that history is a place where "we" can always and everywhere be at home; that the work of the past will always deepen—rather than, say, decimate—our present self-understanding; and that the alien is always secretly familiar. It is, in short, a grossly complacent theory of history, the projection on to the world at large of a viewpoint for which "art" means chiefly the classical monuments of the high German tradition. It has little conception of history and tradition as oppressive as well as liberating forces, areas rent by conflict and domination. History for Gadamer is not a place for struggle, discontinuity and exclusion but a continuing "chain," an ever-flowing river, almost, one might say, a club of the like-minded.¹

Terry Eagleton

I SHOULD SAY at the outset that my purpose in this paper is not to try to clarify the hermeneutical concept of tradition in the usual analytical style but rather to work through a number of dialectical reversals in which the concept seems to play itself out, as if it were trying to resist conceptualization. Anyhow I can't promise that I will be able to produce a clear idea of what tradition is. Possibly it will be enough if I can just make it harder for people to speak of tradition in the usual way, which is to say without a second thought—much the way Terry Eagleton speaks of it in the quotation that I've borrowed as my epigraph.

I. The Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns

More than thirty years since the publication of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) it still needs pointing out that the main question in hermeneutics is reflective and historical rather than formal and exegetical; that is, the question is not how do we analyze and interpret but how do we stand with respect to all that comes down to us from the past?²

In our own time we have brought this question under the rule of an analytical distinction between the hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion, that is, between interpretation as recollection or retrieval and interpretation as unmasking or emancipation from mental bondage. The one seeks to overcome the alienation of forgetfulness or of historical or cultural difference; the other seeks to produce this alienation where historical and cultural difference has been repressed in favor of institutionalized systems or doctrines that claim to speak all at once and once for all.

Faith and suspicion are sometimes figured as methodological options that one can pick up as one pleases, but in fact one does not so much choose between them as abide within their opposition and interplay. They are the way we conceptualize the old quarrel of ancients and moderns, which is essentially a quarrel about which way history moves. The modernist takes it that everything comes down to us from the future and recedes into the past, often taking its own sweet time; in fact much of what is *vergangen* or over and done with gets left behind and accumulates so that we never have enough museums or junkyards. For the modernist the museum or cultural prison is the prototype of the institution. The institution is a repression of history (or of historicity).³ Its function is to objectify or reify the past, maintain possession of it or hold it in place so that it won't disappear or grow disruptive; which is to say that its function is also exclusionary. The university is a type of museum, and so in an analogous way is the state. Also language and culture and even whole metaphysical epochs. The idea is not to get locked inside these things, lost or employed in them. Our own time has seen a proliferation of prison-house theories of language, culture, and ideology that testify to the anxiety of modernism—I mean the anxiety of a modernity that has been around for a while, what we now call the postmodern, which is just the cold recognition, after years of radical aspiration, that there is no breaking free of the systems that contain us. It is an awakening to the universal scope of the museum, whose serene aesthetic surface

now dissolves to reveal a vast labyrinthine bureaucracy and dedicated guardians of obsolescence. Imagine Descartes adjusting the mirror of the *cogito* and seeing himself as Dean of Studies after all. Call this the horror of the Same.

The classicist on the other hand thinks that things come down to us from the past and that, unless everything goes to pieces, the future will be a version of what has proven itself over time, something to live up to or shoot for. Such things as come down to us in this way are normative and binding. Here the prototype of the institution is the Temple of the Law, that is, the Church, the State, and the School. This edificial system condenses easily into the figure of the Book. The nightmare of the classicist is that the Book when opened will turn out to be *Finnegans Wake*. Call this the horror of the Other. It is a repressed fear that time moves after all in the other direction, that is, toward strangeness and difference, and that what lies ahead will be full of primitive rage and incoherence, a rocky horror picture show, Chaos and Old Night, which is what the modernist sees when he looks into the past. Indeed, we can think of classicism and modernism as attempts to escape one another's failure to understand historicity or to cope with the contingencies of historical being. The thought naturally occurs that, like most antagonists, they form a Janus-face, but the more basic point is that both are products of the same deep anxiety about historicity.

II. Petrarch versus Descartes

In antiquity the question of how we stand with respect to the past was understood chiefly, or anyhow frequently, as a problem of translation, as in the topos of the *translatio studii*, the transference of the empire of learning across boundaries of regional and linguistic difference. The metaphor of empire is important because what is transferred in the translation of the archive is not just meaning but also authority, which is to say the right to speak and to interpret, that is, the right to rule in matters of discourse, or the right to say how things are, or how they are to be written and understood. The apostolic concept of the Rule of Faith, for example, concerns the question of who can say what the store of revelation comes down to, or rather *who* it comes down to—who owns it or has a right to it, who is to be allowed to dwell in the kingdom of God and who will be the outcast or exile. Tradition here is a category of inheritance. It is a deposit of faith that requires to be preserved against false claimants on behalf of rightful heirs. It is this picture that arouses

most people against the idea of tradition. Derrida's postal-service theory of hermeneutics is a sort of parody of this idea.⁴

Mainly the topos of *translatio studii* traces the *lateral* movement of the imperium from east to west, from Greece to Rome, from paganism to Christianity. It is not until Petrarch that this translative movement comes to be thought of as historical in the sense of a struggle against the alienation of temporality, or what upscale critics call "distanciation." Here the imperium is no longer something alive and in transport but is dead and buried or dispersed into fragments, and there is nothing for it but to walk among the ruins, looking for the scattered remains of a burned or looted archive. Indeed, Petrarch's letters are filled with stories of wandering back and forth in what looks for all the world like a postnuclear or postapocalyptic age: "When I was about twenty-five," he writes, "I made an excursion among the Belgians and the Swiss. When I reached Liège I heard that a good supply of books was available. I called a halt and made my companions wait until I could copy an oration of Cicero with my hand, and have another copied by a friend. Later I circulated these throughout Italy. You will be amused to hear that in that great city of the barbarians we had the greatest difficulty in finding any ink, and what we did find was yellower than saffron."⁵ Thomas Greene gives a very compelling account of Petrarch's archeological and necromantic hermeneutics that disinters the ruined empire of Rome and tries not only to reconstruct it but also to reinstitute its authority.⁶ This hermeneutical necromancy produced an uncanny result, namely a new imperium made of contemporary "buildings and statues and poems" filled with the ghosts who used to haunt the monasteries and ruins, as if translation now meant not simply the transference of an archive to yet another region of the world but rather the reincarnation of antique spirits in modern forms. So the humanist text, Greene says, calls for an act of "subreading" that awakens "the latent presence of an ancient author" (*LT* 95). The idea is to catch the spirit of Cicero (among many others) lurking in the Petrarchan text.

Yet we also find Petrarch trying to reverse this process as if to reincarnate himself in the antique world. The medium of this self-translation, Petrarch says, is the quotation. "Yes, I use a great many quotations," he says. "People say that I could use fewer. Of course I could; I might even omit them entirely. I won't deny that I might even be totally silent; and perhaps that would be the wisest thing" (*LP* 68). But such people misunderstand the nature of quotation. Quotation is not a mode of adornment that is incidental to writing. Nor is it the reinsertion of antiquity into the discourse of modernism,

as if to turn such discourse into a museum or library or some other edifice of memory. On the contrary, a text without quotation is not writing. In fact, it would not be too much to say that one quotes *in order* to write, because quotation mediates one's distance from the ongoing world of writing. It is a threshold or window. Writing is not for one's own age or even for posterity; it is emancipation from modernity. Quotation is a mode of dialogue with antiquity in which one restores oneself to the life (that is, the company) of authorship. Think of the *Inferno's* Canto IV. "I write for myself," Petrarch says, "and while I am writing I eagerly converse with our predecessors in the only way I can; and I gladly dismiss from mind the men with whom I am forced by an unkind fate to live. I exert all my mental powers to flee contemporaries and seek out the men of the past. As the sight of the former offends me, so the remembrance of the latter and their magnificent deeds and glorious names fill me with unthinkable, unspeakable joy. If this were generally known, many would be stunned to learn that I am happier with the dead than with the living" (*LP* 68). For the dead, of course, are not dead at all. They do not require to be disinterred and reanimated; rather it is the other way around: it is we who require to be unearthed from the interment of the present. The dead live in their texts, which constitute an ongoing discourse in which one's own writing can participate. One does not insert quotations into one's own text; rather, quotation is a mode of inserting one's own text into the discourse of the other, that is, into that distant and alien text which no longer makes sense to us, which is inscribed in a language we no longer understand, which belongs to a world from which we are in endless exile, and which everyone around us regards as a world well lost.

The lesson of Petrarch would be that tradition is not an empire of the dead whose ruins litter the contemporary landscape; not the bricoleur's debris. It is not something that requires to be disinterred and reinstated in a museum or on a throne. It is not *vergangen* or gone for good. Petrarch's letter in defense of quotations gives us the model of the hermeneutical concept of tradition as an ongoing conversation from which modernity (by definition) excludes itself. I say "by definition" because modernity is, in Paul de Man's phrase, a "ruthless forgetting"; that is, modernity defines itself in terms of an "epistemological break" with the merely ongoing as that which has ceased to make sense, that which speaks in tongues gone strange, that which no longer fits the conceptual schemes by means of which we want to take things in hand and make them intelligible to ourselves, bring them under our control, answerable to our programs

and justified by our projects. For the modernist, history is always in a state of ending, or, say, a repetition of crisis and exhaustion. ("Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over.") We are always in the post position, primed and impatient to start history over again in an endless recuperation of the Cartesian moment of self-fathering.⁷

The interesting thing about Petrarch, however, is that he is just as much a modernist as Descartes, that is, he sees himself in history as a solitary subject, an alien, but whereas Descartes turns his back on what comes down in tradition in order to secure the subject against subtexts or false consciousness (elevating alienation into a method), Petrarch enters into tradition in a mutual appropriation that he describes very vividly in the famous letter to Boccaccio:

I have read Vergil, Horace, Livy, Cicero, not once but a thousand times, not hastily but in repose, and I have pondered them with all the powers of my mind. I ate in the morning what I would digest in the evening; I swallowed as a boy what I would ruminate upon as a man. These writings I have so thoroughly absorbed and fixed, not only in my memory but in my very marrow, these have become so much a part of myself, that even though I should never read them again they would cling in my spirit, deep-rooted in its inmost recesses. But meanwhile I may well forget the author, since by long usage and possession I may adopt them and regard them as my own, and, bewildered by their mass, I may forget whose they are and even that they are others' work. That is what I was saying, that sometimes the most familiar things deceive us the most. They recur perhaps to memory, in their wonted way, when the mind is busied and concentrated on something else, and they seem to be not merely one's own thoughts but, remarkably indeed, actually new and original. (*LP* 183)

We can call Petrarch's appropriation of tradition dialogical, that is, it is an event of mutual belonging from which it is no longer possible to extract and objectify either the monumental text or the pure thinking subject, much less a message passing between the two. Appropriation in this sense is what keeps tradition from turning into a museum. Tradition is not mere repetition but is the modern subject's mode of being historical. Here it is natural to think of Gadamer's "effective-historical consciousness" and "the fusion of horizons," where the subject is no longer a logical spectator at a passing show but belongs to a heterogeneous play of voices that calls it away from itself. "Our historical consciousness," Gadamer says, "is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. It is present only in the multifariousness of such voices: this constitutes the nature of tradition in which we want to

share and have a part" (*TM* 284). This is quite different from the monumental idea of tradition that we get from T. S. Eliot, with his pantheon or five-foot shelf whose order is periodically adjusted to make room for new members. Eliot's is still your basic museum-piece theory of tradition, which helps to explain why in *The Waste Land* each quotation or subtext is separated out into a footnote. Eliot is still the modernist driven by Descartes's jealousy of the subject, I mean the subject's desire to seal itself off or to keep its thinking pure or uncontaminated by the horizon of the other. Whereas Petrarch is open and porous and heterogeneous. His relation to tradition is not that of a link in a chain of transmission or authorship; rather, tradition is the medium of his formation as Petrarch, that is, as a historically singular individual who is never fully present in any of his incarnations or inscriptions, never properly identifiable, unlike Descartes' purely logical subject, the transcendental and monumentally self-possessed "thinking thing," or Eliot's serene or possibly anxious aesthetic monad, the pure perceptual consciousness isolated in its epiphanies, escaping memory and desire at "the intersection of the timeless moment."⁸

Of course, it is possible to see in Petrarch's conception the humanist idea of tradition as a refuge, as if tradition were not historical but transcendental, adjacent to history as an alternative to the discontinuous and fragile construction of modernities. The first circle of Dante's hell is Petrarch's heaven. Greene speaks of Petrarch's "lifelong anxiety of temporality," of the alienation that belongs not to our relationship with the past but which is rather the condition of our belongingness to a present that always withholds itself, absents itself by withdrawing into a future that never arrives but is always deferred or displaced by the unexpected. Greene remarks how for Petrarch the "ancient texts . . . were exempt from this unstable play of displacements" (*LT* 126). What compels Petrarch into the discourse of tradition is the inability to achieve the self-presence of modernity; call it the failure to become Descartes, that is, the failure to achieve philosophy, where philosophy is to be understood in its antique sense as the desire to seal oneself off from the facticity or the contingencies of historical being, that is, the desire to possess the present by framing it within a purely logical space.

But we must not imagine Petrarch in the posture of withdrawing from history into tradition; rather one should say that tradition is his mode of entering into history, that is, his mode of belonging to his own time. Petrarch fashions himself out of the conversation with tradition, even as tradition fashions itself out of Petrarch, but this mutual appropriation entails a critical event. Greene puts it

succinctly when he says that Petrarch was “the first to notice that classical antiquity was very different from his own medieval world, and the first to consider antiquity more admirable.” But this is not just a moment of nostalgia. “Petrarch,” Greene says, “took more or less alone the step an archaic society must take to reach maturity: he recognized *the possibility of a cultural alternative*. With that step he established the basis of a radical critique of his culture: not the critique that points to a subversion of declared ideals, but rather the kind that calls ideals themselves into question” (*LT* 90). It tells us something about Thomas Greene’s modernism, or his allegiance to a progressive theory of history, that he should see this as “the step an archaic society must take to reach maturity.” It’s not by any means clear that one grows more philosophical as time goes by. But what Petrarch’s recognition of cultural alterity entails is a statement about the otherness of tradition, that is, the idea that what comes down to us in tradition, what tradition preserves or rather entails, is not a deposit of familiar meanings but something strange and refractory to interpretation, resistant to the present, uncontainable in the given world in which we find ourselves at home, the world that makes sense to us and promises us a future that has a place for us. In a critical theory of tradition, tradition is not the persistence of the same; on the contrary, it is the disruption of the same by that which cannot be repressed or subsumed into a familiar category. The encounter with tradition, to borrow Gadamer’s language, is always subversive of totalization or containment. For Gadamer, this means the openness of tradition to the future, its irreducibility to the library or museum or to institutions of interpretation, its refusal of closure or of finite constructions. Tradition in this respect is infinite in Levinas’s ethical sense of the Infinity of the Other that discloses itself in conversation.⁹ In the discourse of the other there is always “the experience of something absolutely foreign . . . *a traumatism of astonishment*” (*TI* 73). One must not conflate and confuse tradition with the forms of cultural transmission that try to fix and control it. Tradition must always be distinguished from institutions of interpretation.

One way to summarize this point would be to say that in Petrarch we see a critical turn from allegory to satire as a mode of coping with the historicity of being. Instead of rewriting the discourse of the other in order to remove its strangeness or to fit it into the conceptual framework of the present, Petrarch enters into this discourse in order to shake the present (or his own self) loose from the dogmatism of its self-possession. This comes out in his letter on quotations, where he says that he studies the texts of antiquity

in order “to find if my mind has been lying to me about itself” (*LP* 68). This critical moment is radically different from the methodological critique that we find in Descartes, who imagines himself able to be deceived only from the outside in, not from the inside out. Descartes repudiates all that is not intelligible in terms of his self-certainty, but Petrarch’s self-certainty is always open to question by the mediation of tradition, that is, by the discourse of the other or of what has otherwise been said. The discourse of Descartes is a discourse of world-making predicated on the exclusion of the uncontainable; the discourse of Petrarch is uncontainable from the start: “I won’t deny,” he says, “that I might [remain] totally silent; perhaps that would be the wisest thing. But in view of the world’s ills and shames it is hard to keep silent. I think I have been patient long enough in not yet trying my hand at satire, since, long before our present horrors, I find it written: ‘it is very hard not to write satires’” (*LP* 68). So far from integrating the writer into a cozy refuge, tradition sets him apart from his own age, places him in the classical position of the satirist, namely that of the wanderer, the solitary, the alien or exile, the wildman raging against his own image.

III. Allegory versus Satire

It might be worth expanding on this opposition of allegory and satire, which is a sort of premodern way of facing off the hermeneutical postures of faith and suspicion, which modernism has got backwards. It is a common enough idea now to say that all interpretation is allegorical in the sense of being a conversion of the strange into the familiar, or of the different into the same. Allegory is a mode of translation that rewrites an alien discourse in order to make it come out right according to prevailing norms of what is right.¹⁰ On its face allegory appears benevolent and accommodating. It exhibits generously what logicians call the doctrine of charity, which just means, as Donald Davidson says, that “if we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and behavior of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything at all.”¹¹ Almost always this means reading a text like the Homeric poems or Ovid or the Scriptures in such a way as to remove their scandal with respect to reason or philosophy. In fact it would not be too much to say that allegory is essentially philosophy’s (or any dominant

culture's) way of overcoming its suspicion of whatever is not itself. Allegory is philosophy's way of keeping itself pure. So Philo of Alexandria, for example, reads the Book of Genesis as being largely consistent with Hellenistic moral philosophy; that is, he assigns to the Mosaic text truth conditions that will make the text right according to the standards of what is right first put in place in Plato's academy. The Cain and Abel story meets these conditions when the conflict between the two brothers is understood as a conflict between two fundamental principles of the human soul, self-love and love of God. In any soul, human or otherwise, you can count on the one principle resenting, despising, and finally destroying the other. Call this mode of reading *Saving the Text*, which otherwise would get used for wrapping fish. It is the mode of interpretation of the institution whose task is to identify everything in terms of itself, not just (of course) academically, but in order to lay claim to it or keep it under control. Allegory is appropriative discourse with implicit claims to universality in the sense that there is, theoretically, nothing which it is required to reject as alien or just plain false. It enlarges its empire of learning by taking the strangeness at its borders as a difference of letter and spirit, the way Christianity takes Judaism, where Judaism is no longer the other but is an intelligible component of Christianity and even foundational for the theological narrative of promise and fulfillment by which Christianity understands itself. So there is nothing that is not a component of faith. The same goes for fabulous narratives vis-à-vis the philosophical spirit that redescribes whatever is offensive to reason so as to make it rational after all.

The standard idea is to identify tradition with allegory, that is, with that which converts everything into itself and fixes every alien or random particle so as to rescue it from its randomness or preserve it against its own contingency or otherness. So tradition comes to be thought of as a structure of subsumptive thinking. But this misses Petrarch's lesson about the way the encounter with tradition exposes one's self-image to alternative descriptions, producing an irrepressible satirical desire. Satire is the discourse of the Other against the Same: counter-allegory. Satire explodes the conceptual schemes or mechanical operations of the spirit by which we try to objectify and control things, including all that comes down to us from the past. Satire is unconvertible, uncontainable, uncontrollable; it rages at the gates for all the world like the voice of a madwoman. The complication here is that most of us, creatures of the seminar room, know satire chiefly in its allegorized form as a *Dunciad* where Reason savages the children of Chaos and Old Night, but we also know

(from Swift, for example) that satire always precedes and surpasses the norms that try to justify it—or, to put it bluntly, the satirist is always a little out of control, more subversive than corrective, as if Reason were become the agent of the Scurrilous Body rather than the other way around. Satire resists the institution of allegory and frequently—or, say, in its very nature—breaks out against it. The model for satire in this case would be prophetic outrage against the Temple of the Law and the scribes inside who say that prophecy is dead. If you ask where satire comes from, the answer is that it is a return of the forgotten, the pagan, the forbidden or repressed, the voice out of the past whose task is not to reveal and redeem but to torment and scourge and even to bring the house down.

On this line of thinking a good example of the encounter with tradition would be the story of Oedipus and his discovery of the truth of what has been said about him by seers, drunks, and oracles, not to mention what his own awakened memory can tell him. I mean that from a hermeneutical standpoint the encounter with tradition is more likely to resemble satire than allegory, unmasking of the present than translation of the past. Or, as I have tried to argue elsewhere, the hermeneutical experience of what comes down to us from the past is structurally tragic rather than comic. It is an event that exposes us to our own blindness or the limits of our historicity. It extracts from us an acknowledgment of our belongingness to something different. It reverses what we had thought. It's just the sort of event that might drive us to put out our eyes.¹²

This thought requires a conception of tradition very different from the gentleman's club theory proposed by Terry Eagleton (among many others) where tradition is confused with the institutions that try to allegorize it or read it as a homogeneous master narrative in which everything is joined together in a vast program of conceptual integration. From a hermeneutic standpoint, tradition is more accurately not a structure of any sort but is just the historicity of open-ended, intersecting, competing narratives that cannot be mastered by any Great Code. My claim would be that a careful reading of Gadamer produces an antitotalist conception of tradition that bears no resemblance to the sort of thing Eagleton and others claim to see in him. We miss the heteroglossia in Gadamer's notion of tradition.¹³ Gadamer's idea is that the encounter with tradition always brings our desire for totality up short. This is why the hermeneutical question of how we stand with respect to what comes down to us from the past receives its most powerful answer in stories of epistemological crises, as when Oedipus discovers that he can no longer contain himself in his official self-interpretation as the man who

solved the riddle of the Sphinx. Not that he didn't solve such a riddle. It's just that there is also that otherness about him that cannot be confined within a finite interpretation. So the idea is to see tradition, not as the repository of official interpretations, but as that which resists the institutionalizing of interpretation and forces radical unmaskings of the kind Oedipus suffers. Tradition is seamed in just this way as a conflict of interpretations that cannot be resolved or harmonized by allegory but must rather be suffered or lived through. The suffering of such conflicts is basic to what Gadamer calls hermeneutical experience, where experience is always an experience of negation or reversal, as in "the reversal of direction that consciousness undergoes when it recognises itself in what is alien and different" (*TM* 355). Nowhere does Gadamer suggest that these conflicts are to be overcome by final (much less official) interpretations. Rather his concern is with the openness that these conflicts produce. It is only in this condition of openness that the understanding of anything can occur. So Oedipus understands himself only through the negativity of hermeneutical or tragic experience; he understands himself, one might say, *as* that which is disclosed in such experience. As if one could say that the understanding of anything is not the product of interpretation, rather it is the product of interpretation's failure to hold its ground. This is what Gadamer means when he says, in a notorious line, that we understand differently if we understand at all (*TM* 297). It is certainly what is meant by the historicity of hermeneutical experience. No method could produce the moment in which Oedipus recognizes the truth about himself. So let us think of tradition as inscribing, in its irrepressibility and irreducibility, what cannot be done away with, or that which must be faced.

IV. Judaism versus Christianity

In his recent book on *Radical Hermeneutics*, John Caputo complains that Gadamer "describes the continuity of tradition, but leaves unasked the question of whether the tradition is all that unified to begin with. He never asks to what extent the play of the tradition is a power play and its unity something that has been enforced by the powers that be. His 'tradition' is innocent of Nietzsche's suspicious eye, of Foucauldian genealogy. He does not face the question of the ruptures within tradition, its vulnerability to difference, its capacity to oppress."¹⁴ Yet this is again to think of tradition spatially and hierarchically as edifice and institution or as the accumulation

and weight of custom, whereas Gadamer's line of thinking stresses tradition as event, as a dialectical encounter that puts what we think in question and calls for the revision rather than the institution of interpretation. As such, the so-called unity of tradition cannot be thought of organically or geometrically—in fact it is very difficult to conceptualize. Indeed, a fruitful way to understand the nature of tradition would be to study such things as the relation of Judaism and Christianity. This is not the same as studying typology or salvation history or even the history of religions. Rather it means entering into this relation as into a breach or wound that can never be healed. Theologians of a hermeneutical rather than dogmatic cast would call this entering into a mystery, which is very much like entering into the conflict of interpretations. As a way into this mystery or conflict, I have found it helpful to borrow Martin Heidegger's notion of the "rift" as that Difference (*Unter-Schied*) that holds apart what it calls together. The virtue of this idea is that it is flatly antifoundational without, however, being just anarchic.¹⁵ It is antifoundational because there's nothing there on which to ground the operations of an exclusionary logic. It is not just anarchic, however, because it is a figure of commonality or mutual belonging, where what is common, what is shared, is not an identity but a difference—and, moreover, not a dialectical or systematic difference within a totality but a radical difference that is not to be overcome or subsumed in a higher order, one that calls for acknowledgement and acceptance, much the way a limit or one's own mortality calls not so much for knowledge as acknowledgment.¹⁶ What is it to share a difference or hold a difference in common? It is perhaps like sharing a history or a mode of being historical. But it is a sharing in which neither side gives up its singularity, its freedom, its otherness or self-refusal, its capacity for satire.

Heidegger introduces the "rift" (*Riss*) in his crucial essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935), where he speaks for the first time of the mysterious opposition of earth and world. "Upon the earth and in it," he says, "historical man grounds his dwelling in the world."¹⁷ The world is the human world that comes into the open or into its own in the work of art, which is a clearing in which we can enter into time and being. The earth, by contrast, is that which withholds itself from this opening of the world. The earth is characterized by reserve, concealment, and refusal. It resists every effort that we make to break into it and bring it under control. The earth is undisclosable. As Heidegger says, "it shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up" (*PLT* 47).

It would not be too much to say that the world is allegorical in

its movement; in its worlding, the world tries to find a place or a home for all that is. But all that is nevertheless resists this movement which calls it forward. The earth is the region or power of this resistance. In the language of Levinas, it is the uncontainable, the other, the infinite. It would not be too much to say that the earth is satirical with respect to the world precisely because its resistance is the world's limit and finitude, its situatedness or belongingness to history, its exposure to contingency. "Upon the earth and in it, historical man grounds his dwelling in the world" (*PLT* 46). But the earth is not therefore foundational in the sense of *Letztbegründung*; rather, one could think of it as subversive—not Ultimate Ground but Underground, although Heidegger himself seems to prefer the figure of moving or shifting ground, the ground that alters or withholds itself every time we try to lay claim to it as the bedrock that justifies us.

Heidegger thinks of earth and world in terms of the intimacy of antagonists rather than in terms of foundational metaphors. "The opposition of earth and world," he says, "is a striving. But we would surely all too easily falsify its nature if we were to confound striving with discord and dispute, and thus see it only as disorder and destruction. In essential striving, rather, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures. . . . In the struggle, each opponent carries the other beyond itself. . . . The more the struggle overdoes itself on its own part, the more inflexibly do the opponents let themselves go into the intimacy of simple belonging to one another" (*PLT* 49). Earth and world, Heidegger says, "are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature" (*PLT* 55). But this conflict, this rift, is not "a mere cleft ripped open; rather it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other. . . . It is a basic design, an outline sketch [*Auf-Riss*], that draws the basic features of the lighting of beings. This rift does not let opponents break apart; it brings the opposition of measure and boundary into their common outline [*Umriss*]" (*PLT* 63). Moreover, there is no harmony, no pleasure, no plenitude in this intimacy. In his first essay on "Language" (1950), Heidegger characterizes the rift as *pain*. "Pain rends," he says. "It is the rift. But it does not tear apart into disparate fragments. Pain indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet at the same time it draws everything together, gathers it to itself. Its rending, as a separating that gathers, is at the same time that drawing [*Ziehen*] which, like the pen-drawing of a plan or a sketch [*wie der Vorriss und Aufriss*], draws and joins together what is held apart in separation. Pain is the rending that divides and gathers. Pain is the joining of the rift. The joining is

the threshold. It settles the between, the middle of the two that are separated in it. Pain joins the rift of the difference. Pain is the difference [*Unter-Schied*] itself" (PLT 204).

Now what if we were to think of tradition as designed or sketched—structured—in this way, as rift rather than ground? Here it would not be enough to think of tradition as an allegorical process that integrates the other into an edifice of the same, say a vast typological master-narrative; it would also have to be thought of as a satirical process in which the other is encountered in its otherness as a radical difference, a singularity, a refusal of typology, a questioning of self-identity, a resistance to interpretation, an unsilenceable questioning. Speaking from the side of Christianity, the other in this event (namely, Judaism) is not just the indifferent alien; it is one's own other, the difference of one's belonging, that which one's self-identity can neither exclude nor contain, the conflict of interpretation in which one lives and which one cannot transcend. Do not think of it as a diacritical difference that determines one's identity systematically, that is, as belonging to a totality; it is a historical difference (call it, if you like, a deconstructive difference) that makes possible one's self-interpretation only through the bargain of calling it into question and requiring its constant modification. If one maps this Heideggerian design onto the relation of Christianity and Judaism, one does not get a typology of testaments but a mutual and painful antagonism that cannot be resolved, not even by the monumental deception of doing away with history itself, say by writing dissertations on the nonoccurrence of the Holocaust. Christianity interprets itself as a modernism by dividing time into New and Old, where the one appropriates the other, dispensing with it as part of its self-dispensation as history's new beginning, as if Judaism were mere prehistory. But in fact time is split lengthwise as a rift among adjacent histories, not hierarchically as a progression of epochs. So Judaism is not *vergangen* but confronts Christianity all along its way or all the way down as an irrepressible prophetic voice, not the voice of the precursor awaiting final interpretation but the voice of the outsider still awaiting acknowledgement. From the standpoint of interpretation, this means acknowledgement of a double-reading of the Scriptures as well as of history, a reading that calls each side into its own self-assertion but also places each side at risk, always exposing its self-image to alternative descriptions, threatening allegory with satire. This means taking the hyphen in "Judeo-Christian tradition" as a figure of dissemination, that is, as a seam, where, as Heidegger says, "The seam that binds their being toward one another is pain" (PLT 205). This pain is far from at an end. The seam itself

is plural, since Islam, for example, is also that which can neither be excluded nor contained. As we now painfully know, the Islamic world belongs dramatically to the conflict of interpretations; it cannot be interpreted away, that is, there is no coping with it allegorically. It confronts us like a satirist; it must be acknowledged.¹⁸

Thinking this way forces us to look twice at Gadamer's celebrated notion of the "fusion of horizons" (*TM* 306). Caputo, for example, says that

Gadamer understood everything that was healing and restorative about Heidegger's notion of retrieval but . . . he lacked the heart for Heidegger's more radical side. He produced an impressive philosophy of the "tradition" and of the dynamics of its transmission. His concern was always with the horizons, with their mutual nourishment and interaction, with a certain wedding or joining of the horizons such that each draws strength from the other and all in the service of the present. He understood what Heidegger had to say about the truth of Being and the experience of the work of art, but he had no interest in the more deeply critical side of Heidegger which had inspired Heidegger's talk of destruction and overcoming. (*RH* 96)

This certainly summarizes the general view, which sees hermeneutics as a program of cultural unification or the totalization of horizons. But Gadamer had directed his thinking against the Kantian idea of the subject that reflects itself out of its own historicity.¹⁹ "Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own" (*TM* 306). This self-identity, however, can only be preserved by sealing the subject off from the horizon of tradition, and this means the repression of what cannot be contained within its self-definition. Self-possession cannot survive the encounter with what comes down to us from the past. In this encounter the subject discovers itself as "only something laid over a continuing tradition"; it is not just itself but also that which it finds strange and unintelligible in its own terms. Gadamer formulates this in the language of Hegel—the subject "immediately recombines with what it has foreground itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires" (*TM* 306)—but what this means is that one is always in a fundamental dilemma with respect to tradition, that is, one is always in a condition of crisis in which one must either try the harder to enclose oneself in one's own self-certainty (the way of philosophy), or one must revise oneself and maintain oneself in revision because one can never exclude the other from one's self-understanding (the way of hermeneutics). From a her-

meneutic standpoint, the idea of the fusion of horizons is very different from a totalist scheme of integration in which all differences and singularities are to be effaced. For why else, Gadamer asks, would “we speak of the fusion of horizons and not simply of the formation of the one horizon, whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition?” (*TM* 306). The fact is there is never any possibility of a “one horizon” grounded in a synthesis of the many. We must not be misled by the perspectival metaphor of horizon. The fusion of horizons is not a unification of perspectives; on the contrary. “Every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the [traditional] text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but consciously bringing it out” (*TM* 306). The fusion of horizons is not an allegorical process; its structure is intrinsically satirical. In the fusion of horizons I am always exposed to what refuses me—always, in short, the naked emperor.

This is what Gadamer means when, in *Truth and Method*, he says that the end of hermeneutical experience is not meaning or knowledge but openness (*TM* 361–62), where openness, however, does not mean simply open-mindedness or tolerance for another’s views, the mutual indulgence of liberal pluralists, but rather acknowledgment of what is alien and refractory to one’s categories. It means acknowledging the being of what refuses to fit or refuses to be known, that which says “no” to me. What is it to face what refuses my language and my allegories? How do we stand with respect to such refusal? According to Emmanuel Levinas, the uncontainability, that is, the transcendence or infinity of the other, is the beginning of the ethical.

The Other who can sovereignly say *no* to me is exposed to the point of the sword or the revolver’s bullet, and the whole unshakeable firmness of his “for itself” with that intransigent *no* he opposes is obliterated because the sword or the bullet has touched the ventricles or auricles of his heart. In the contexture of the world he is a quasi-nothing. But he can oppose to me a struggle, that is, oppose to the force that strikes him not a force of resistance, but the very *unforeseeableness* of his reaction. He thus opposes to me not a greater force, an energy assessable and consequently presenting itself as though it were part of a whole, but the very transcendence of his being by relation to that whole; not some superlative of power, but precisely the infinity of his transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial expression, is the first word: “you shall not commit murder.” The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in

the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent. There is here a relation not with a very great resistance but with something absolutely *other*: the resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance. (*TI* 198–99)

I could break off my reflections with this quotation, even though I am very far from having reduced my subject to clarity and self-consistency. I began with a fundamental hermeneutical question: How do we stand with respect to all that comes down to us from the past? It appears now that we cannot address this question purely in terms of cognition, as if tradition were simply an object calling for attention and asking not to be abandoned. Now we have this thought to chew on, that what comes down to us from the past says “no” to us, is not obsolete but refractory and resistant, excessive with respect to interpretation, satirical with respect to our allegories, and so it will not serve as foundation and testimony, background or thesis, indeed it will not serve at all except to draw us out of ourselves, leaving us, Oedipus-like, exposed and possibly horrified at our own image.

V. The Authority of the Claim versus the Authority of Rule

I want to conclude, however, with another thought, which here I can only mention. Any reflection on the nature of tradition entails a corresponding need to work through the nature of authority. If we take the line of thinking I have tried to follow—turning the imperial or museum-piece theory of tradition on its head—how are we to understand the nature of authority? Gadamer speaks of rehabilitating authority as well as tradition on the idea that what comes down to us from the past is binding on us in some way. In what way? The quotation from Levinas helps us to distinguish between two sorts of authority. There is on the one hand the authority of rule in which we are coerced along a certain path. In our own time we have dreamed of a nonideological place or region of discourse and action that is free from coercion, and this means freedom from authority, where authority means essentially the (mostly unjustified) exercise of power or force. Tradition, Caputo says in the passage cited earlier, is a “power play and its unity something that has been enforced by the powers that be.” Yet from the standpoint of hermeneutics there is, on the other hand, a

difference between being under a rule or under someone's power or control and being under a claim. The authority of the claim is not imperialist. It cannot be institutionalized, that is, it is not a claim whose power lies in its self-justification—the only claim which philosophy recognizes. Hermeneutics, however, acknowledges another sort of claim which does not require to be backed up by force or domination, whether by argument or superior numbers. This is a claim which does not demand obedience but rather openness, acknowledgment, and acceptance of what is singular and otherwise. I take it that it is a claim of this sort that Cavell and Levinas, in their different ways, are trying to understand. I think of satire as being the social medium of such a claim, and tradition the place where it is registered.

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NOTES

1 Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), pp. 72–73.

2 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, 1989), esp. pp. 277–307; hereafter cited in text as *TM*.

3 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), p. 43.

4 See Jacques Derrida, "Sending: On Representation," tr. Peter Caws and Mary Ann Caws, *Social Research*, 49 (1982), 295–326; and *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1987). Derrida's idea, if I understand it, is that tradition is a sort of institutionalizing of representation, where representation is all "repetition and return" ("Sending," 308). So tradition is a mode of transmission, say of messages, and hermeneutics is simply the deciphering of these messages, that is, part of the system of repetition and return. Tradition in this sense would be the theoretical opposite of dissemination. But from the standpoint of philosophical hermeneutics tradition is probably closer to dissemination than Derrida imagines. Anyhow that's part of the upshot of the present essay.

5 Petrarch, *Letters from Petrarch*, tr. Morris Bishop (Bloomington, 1966), pp. 295–96; hereafter cited in text as *LP*.

6 Thomas Greene, "Petrarch and the Humanist Hermeneutic," in his *The Light of Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, 1982), p. 92; hereafter cited in text as *LT*.

7 See Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in his *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis, 1983), pp. 142–65. Modernity in the sense used here is very far from being a period concept or a concept of style; that is, it is not an aesthetic category (as when people speak of "High Modernism") but has rather to do with the conception of rationality inaugurated by Descartes and characterized by notions of conceptualization and control. The questionableness of this conception is one of the things that comes out in hermeneutics. See Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *Time and Being*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (New York, 1972), pp. 55–73.

Jürgen Habermas speaks of "aesthetic modernity" as a product of romanticism and the development of an avant garde outlook that self-consciously breaks with whatever has gone before it; but this view strikes me as unhistorical in the extreme. I cannot see how the concept of modernity can be clarified without reference to Descartes and the exercise of methodical suspicion toward tradition. See Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project?" tr. Seyla Ben-Habib, in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 141–56. The essay first appeared under the title "Modernity versus Postmodernity," in *New German Critique*, 22 (1981), 3–17.

8 T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Collected Poems 1909–62* (London, 1963), p. 215.

9 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, ed. Henry J. Koren, tr. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, 1969), pp. 48–52; hereafter cited in text as *TI*.

10 See my discussion in "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Frank Kermode and Robert Alter (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 625–46.

11 Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), p. 137.

12 Gerald L. Bruns, "On the Tragedy of Hermeneutical Experience," *Research in Phenomenology*, 18 (1988), 191–201.

13 Something closer to Gadamer's view is given by Alasdair MacIntyre in "Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist*, 60 (1977), 453–72. MacIntyre writes:

[The] connection between narrative and tradition has hitherto gone almost unnoticed, perhaps because tradition has usually been taken seriously only by conservative social theorists. Yet those features of tradition which emerge as important when the connection between tradition and narrative is understood are ones which conservative theorists are unlikely to attend to. For what constitutes a tradition is a conflict of interpretations of that tradition, a conflict which itself has a history susceptible of rival interpretations. If I am a Jew, I have to recognize that the tradition of Judaism is partly constituted by a continuous argument over what it means to be a Jew. Suppose I am an American: the tradition is one partly constituted by continuous argument over what it means to be an American and partly by a continuous argument over what it means to have rejected tradition. If I am an historian, I must acknowledge that the tradition of historiography is partly, but centrally, constituted by arguments about what history is and ought to be, from Hume and Gibbon to Namier and Edward Thompson. . . .

A tradition then not only embodies the narrative of an argument, but is only to be recovered by an argumentative retelling of that narrative which will itself be in conflict with other argumentative retellings. Every tradition therefore is always in danger of lapsing into incoherence and when a tradition does so lapse it sometimes can only be recovered by a revolutionary reconstitution. (460–61)

14 John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, 1987), p. 112; hereafter cited in text as *RH*.

15 The "between" between the deconstructive and the anarchic is explored ingeniously by Rainer Schürmann, in his *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (1982), tr. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington, 1987).

16 Here I borrow Stanley Cavell's notion of acknowledgment. See "Knowing and Acknowledging" and, more important, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 238–66 and 267–353; and *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York, 1979), Part IV: "Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance."

17 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p. 46; hereafter cited in text as *PLT*.

18 Theologically this acknowledgment might take the form of a Christology that addressed in an unblinking way the Jewishness of Christ, which is, one might say, the irrepressibly satirical dimension of the Incarnation. See Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (New York, 1974), and *The Gospel of Jesus the Jew* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1981). See Rosemary Reuther, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York, 1978), and *Anti-Semitism in Early Christianity: Vol. 1: Paul and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Richardson and David Granskou; *Vol. 2: Separation and Polemic*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Waterloo, Ont., 1986).

19 See Immanuel Kant, *Was ist Aufklärung?* (What is Enlightenment?) (Göttingen, 1967).