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A RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR RISSER

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I am very grateful for the sensitive and appreciative assessment Jim Risser has made of my book and very happy to offer a few words in response. As Jim points out, this exchange is part of a conversation – one that observed all the protocols of a good Gadamerian conversation – that has been going on between us since the 1980s. As our conversation has grown in age, it has also, I trust, grown in wisdom, having never lacked the grace of good will and friendship. As Jim has noticed, I made a particular effort in the book not to pose as a critic of Gadamer, a posture I have sometimes struck (as in *Radical Hermeneutics*). This reflects an evolution not only on my part but also on Derrida’s part. I number myself among the many who took the first exchange between Gadamer and Derrida back in 1981 at the Goethe Institute in Paris as two ships passing in the night. Derrida betrayed very little awareness there of what was going on in *Truth and Method*, leaving Gadamer, seemingly nonplussed by deconstruction, to worry that Derrida was undermining the very conditions of possibility of the understanding they were trying to reach and of the conversation they were trying to have.

But as Derrida’s work progressed, he made several moves that brought him into the vicinity of Gadamer. Chief among them is Derrida’s notion of “faith,” not faith in a supernatural being in the sky, but faith in the terrestrial space of a conversation, the faithfulness, the oath of fidelity, that in opening in my mouth I am attempting to speak the truth. That is a structural claim, not an empirical one. It is not to say that I or the other might not be lying and or deceiving one another, but only that any such bad faith occurs against the horizon of a good one. There is structural amity

or friendship, which need not be anything personal, which hovers like a hermeneutic angel over the conversation, which enjoins us to speak and listen in good faith. There is an invisible, inaudible prefatory clause, a hermeneutic asterisk or coefficient, attached to every sentence which commands us to speak the truth and to listen to what the other says, to read what is written, carefully, closely. I pray you, give me your ear; forgive me for taking your time. As Derrida says:

You cannot address the other, speak to the Other, without an act of faith, without testimony. What are you doing when you attest to something? You address the Other and ask, “believe me.” Even if you are lying, even in a perjury, you are addressing the Other and asking the Other to trust you. This “trust me, I am speaking to you” is of the order of faith, a faith that cannot be reduced to a theoretical statement, to a determinative judgment; it is the opening of the address to the other. So this faith is not religious, strictly speaking; at least it cannot be totally determined by a given religion.¹

This faith is also hope and love. In the *Politics of Friendship* he writes, “O my friends, be my friends, I love you, love me, I will love you, let us exchange this promise.”² This faith, hope and love are even something of a “prayer” which governs an ethics of communication and gives it, if not a religious, at least a hermeneutic solemnity. As a prayer it is neither true nor false, but a performative. It is not describing a truth or a fact of the matter but trying to make something come true, pleading for something which does not yet exist.³ Had Derrida said all this in Paris in 1981, the conversation would have been more productive, much more like their exchanges two decades later. My approach to Gadamer in this text was shaped by such considerations.

To be sure, hermeneutics and deconstruction are both historically and structurally different. From a deconstructionist point of view, a “conversation” is a discursive effect of *différance*, and from a hermeneutic point of view, deconstruction is, as Jim Risser says (and also David Tracy⁴), an “interruption” of a conversation. Deconstruction reminds us of the “difficulty” – a Leitmotif of my *Radical Hermeneutics*, taken from Kierkegaard’s Johannes Climacus – of a conversation, of the misunderstandings, of the traps, contingencies, frailties and wrong turns that a conversation can take, as well as of the openings that this very contingency and non-programmability makes possible. My claim is that these two, what in the academy we call hermeneutics and deconstruction,

1 Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited with a commentary by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 22. For more on Derrida’s distinction between faith and confessional religion, see Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” in *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, trans. Samuel Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). For a commentary on this religion, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

2 Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997), 235.

3 I developed these points more carefully in an attempt to soften the heart of Gary Madison about deconstruction in an essay entitled **Error! Main Document Only.** “Good Will and the Hermeneutics of Friendship: Gadamer, Derrida and Madison,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, 8, no. 2 (Summer, 2004): 213-25.

4 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 55-65.

should work in tandem. This is to the mutual benefit of each to the other, to keep hermeneutics on its toes and to prevent deconstruction from tripping over its feet. What I have nick-named “radical hermeneutics” is an effort to marry the two, and this is the face of objections from members of both families that any such union is nothing more than an ill-advised extra-marital affair.

Jim presses me about the *radical* in radical hermeneutics, arguing that giving Gadamer a fair shake requires admitting that Gadamer is rightly to be counted among the radical. To this I would say three things. First, radical means that hermeneutics goes all the way down, to the roots, that there are no pure uninterpreted facts of the matter to be exposed by peeling away the interpretation. On this first point, Jim and I, and Gadamer and Derrida, are all agreed, and in that sense Gadamer is already doing radical hermeneutics. Secondly, it means radical openness to the other. On this point Jim Risser has convinced me that we will not get anywhere by pressing the case that one of them is more “open to the other” than the other, one more willing to put their own presuppositions at risk than the other. Every time I have made that move on Gadamer, Jim has come right back at me, just as he does here in his remarks on Gadamer’s concern with finitude and alterity. Like a great goalie in a Gadamerian net, Jim always blocks my best shots; he always comes up with something in the vast reservoir of Gadamerian texts at his disposal that proves me wrong. On this line, I have cut bait. But that tandem between them on this point is also why, when, Derrida speaks of a decision as “the decision of the other in me,” that we come upon another counter-part – along with Derrida’s “faith” -- to what Gadamer calls participation, which is a concern raised by Jim’s second question about what is the *hermeneutics* in radical hermeneutics.

Thirdly, radical means that not only conversation, which is a particular, polite, even somewhat professorial, leisured and elite model of communication, but also all the *other* modes of communication, and all the *other elements* in a language, discursive and non-discursive, disclosive and communicative, constative and performative, phonetic and graphic, syntactic and semantic, are effects of *différance*. Indeed culture itself, all its beliefs and practices, linguistic and non-linguistic, are effects of *différance*. This is to say that Derrida has a more nominalistic interpretation of cultures and traditions, a sharper sense of the contingency of the construction of what Gadamer calls *Bildung*. What Derrida approaches with the words of Saussure ringing in his ear, Gadamer approaches in and with the spirit of German Idealism and Dilthey. I think that’s a real difference, and it results in a difference in style, tonality, and applications. I myself try to work in the distance between the two.

But beyond any debate about getting Gadamer and Derrida right, important as that is, my aim in this book, as Jim points out in the beginning of his remarks, is wider. I am presenting hermeneutics to a generation growing up in the age of information and my concern is with the future. Aimed at readers who are coming to hermeneutics for the first time, and presuming no specialized academic preparation, I present hermeneutics not as an interpretive methodology but as a philosophical ontology of who we are. And who are we? We are that very question, a question

to ourselves, to cite the line from Augustine's *Confessions* which Heidegger cites as a kind of Leitmotif in *Being and Time*. We are the beings who make their being a matter of interpretation, whose being does not enjoy the steady presence of a preset meaning or the stability of fixed determination. We are the beings who must decide their being in the midst of the multiplicity, confusion and indecision of a world which, beyond postmodern, some have called "post-truth," which has even dared to dream – unless it turns out to be a nightmare – of what it calls the "post-human."

So if in the first half of the book, I introduce the great luminary figures of twentieth-century Continental hermeneutics, in the second half I try to catch hermeneutics in the act in the twenty-first century, to see it at work in contemporary institutions, in the several workplaces of the postmodern world. There I think the challenge – along with the ecological crisis, which is heightened by the vested interests of dissembling capitalists – lies in the advent of the advanced information and electronic messaging systems, which are dislodging long-standing models of conversation, friendship, and communication and dominating the interpretation of who we are. Here Hermes meets Watson. Furthermore, the astonishing vision of ultimate reality opened up by quantum physics, which displaces settled ideas of space, time and matter that reigned from Democritus to the nineteenth century Newtonians, and the no less astonishing universe opened up by contemporary cosmologists, are stealing the wonder, and the thunder, of the philosophers. In this world, religious belief has made itself increasingly unbelievable and reactionary, while the contemporary university, to paraphrase Kant, has found it necessary to deny faith in order to make room for knowledge, to deny philosophy and the humanities in order to make room for computer science and business administration.

I say this not because I want to denounce the future, but because I am convinced this *is* the future, that it has already begun. The future, as Derrida would say, is a promise/threat. The future is the coming of the event, the coming of what we cannot see coming. Humanity is undergoing a sea change, a deep mutation in our imaginary, in our understanding of ourselves, in our self-interpretation, which poses a challenge to us for which I argue, and hope, hermeneutics is cut to fit.